

## PAST-TIME BREAK-TIME PASTIMES

In the late 50s, around the time when rock 'n' roll first made itself heard in the school, three major pastimes gained break-time ascendancy and held the male pupils in thrall.

Chronologically, Kingtip, known generally as Kingy, was the first to be established. Any number of players gathered on the football pitch and huddled in a circle with a tennis ball to decide who was "It". Whoever was "It" collected the ball and chased after any of the others to throw the ball at any one of them and hit them anywhere except on the head or the fists. When "It" had struck someone, there were then two "Its" and thereafter they were not allowed to run if they had the ball; they had to remain stationery and pass the ball to the other "It" or strike other players to gain more "Its". The game progressed until the last free player was "It" and many of the kids showed astonishing athleticism in dodging or punching away the ball (permitted) until finally being hit.

Next came two collections of aircraft photo cards, with data on the reverse sides. Post Toasties, a rival of Corn Flakes), produced a glossy rectangular set of 50 and Will's Gold Flake (sweet) cigarette packets included a large square set of 40, both sets having notes on the reverse side. Given the length of time it takes to get through a packet of flakes, entire families were dragooned into consuming the stuff daily until the Post Toasties set was complete, and it took a lot more than 50 packets to do it. The Gold Flake collection was just the same; you couldn't guarantee to get the set in 40 attempts, so there was serious horse-trading all through break-times. Eventually everyone seemed to have them all except for the same missing card . . . finally the word broke that someone had obtained it from a packet bought at Wason stores, 'way down Kilindini Road near the elephant tusks.

The shopkeeper must have wondered what epidemic was in force as his stock of Gold Flake was obliterated in a couple of days, and a few more sets were completed. I think the missing card was the Rolls-Royce Flying Bedstead, but I'm not sure. In both sets, some of the cards were rarities (possibly a cunning ruse by the manufacturers).

Then came the biggest craze to engulf the boys . . . nyabs. For the uninitiated, nyabs was the MEPS name for marbles, and in the worldwide history of school crazes this one was probably No 1. The traditional game of marbles entails having a ring containing target marbles, which each player has to hit out of the circle with his own personal marble, which also had to leave the circle, otherwise it became a captive marble, a target for everyone. But the MEPS crew didn't play that game.

The MEPS game involved a small cup-sized hole in the ground. You all started from behind a line typically a couple of metres away (metres? in 1958?) and when you got your marble into the hole you could flick it from there to hit one of your opponents' marbles and keep it. That all sounds simple enough, but a number of diversionary variations soon emerged, which you could bring in to play if you shouted the right word(s) first. Prominent amongst these were (a) the temporary replacement of your nyab with a tiny ball-bearing, and (b) using your finger to draw a line in the dust (sounds suspiciously like modern-day management patter) to divert the person at the hole firing at your marble. To be allowed to use such measures you had to shout the required code-word before your opponent, so this peaceful game was remarkably vocal.

The game developed various offshoots, and one entrepreneurial lad turned up with a plank featuring a row of semi-circular target holes along one edge. The plank was stood on edge with the holed edge on the ground, and a line drawn in the earth (ahem) at a specified distance. Marked above each hole was the number of nyabs a contestant would win if he got his nyab through that target (I think the contestant had to specify which target he was aiming for). The entrepreneur won the great majority of the marbles shot at the targets, and as a result the operation soon went out of business.

Two sidelines to the nyabs saga:

1. The playground was rapidly dotted with multiple sizes of marble-hole and soon resembled a bad case of acne, while grass became a relatively scarce commodity around the classroom blocks, although that little clump of bamboo remained defiant.
2. The ability to exchange your nyab for a ball-bearing put a premium on small ball-bearings, which acquired a high exchange value. A rumour sprang up that there were lots of ball-bearings lying around the shipyard at the Mombasa side of the Likoni ferry. One day, while his parents were in the queue for the ferry, the author of this article left the car to seek the smallest ones he could find, and became so engrossed in his search that he failed to notice the departure of the ferry. His parents similarly failed to notice the absence of their son until the ferry was well out in the channel, and the author thus became the first person ever to have the ferry return to the Mombasa ramp to recover him.

Now I come to the difficult bit, namely the girls' pastimes ~ we really need one of the participants to enlighten us fully on this, as all I can give is a brief summary.

Originally, number one was clearly various forms of skipping, either solo or on a see-how-many-you-can-get-on-one-rope basis. This was accompanied by strange chants such as "Uncle Charlie went to France to teach the ladies how to dance", which I remember hearing as I had an Uncle Charlie back in UK. I was reminded of it in the mid-60s, when Shirley Ellis had a hit with The Clapping Song:

Three-six-nine, the goose drank wine, the monkey chewed tobacco on the street-car line

The line broke, the monkey got choked, and they all went to heaven in a little row-boat

Needless to say, that didn't make it into my record collection, but strange lyrics like that seem to stick in the mind just as easily as "Take me for a trip upon your magic swirling ship".

Break-time past-time number two for the girls was netball, but that seemed to be a minority sport.

Then came jacks . . . jacks??? They were little metal things like miniature versions of those starburst spikes that armies leave on the road to prevent enemy vehicles from pursuing them. But these were blunt ones, and the player had to throw them on the ground, then throw up a rubber ball and collect a specified number of jacks and catch the ball after only one bounce. First one jack at a time, then two then three until they finally had to scoop up all the jacks (how many would that be?) in one bounce of the ball. Dexterity was the key, and the boys weren't up to it.

To this day, jacks is the only activity known to keep primary school girls quiet. Amazing.