

Dart technology advancing in leaps, bounds, player says

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Seems reasonable. As one theory suggests, off-duty archers and soldiers in the Middle Ages passed downtime by throwing arrows into the side of ale kegs, while knocking back a tall one, eventually introducing a scoring system rewarding the accuracy of throws and to keep things interesting.

If any of the many theories rooting the game in the Middle Ages are accepted, then darts is indeed one of the older parlour games. And, despite some modifications, the basic concept has remained constant.

No one is making apologies for the fact the sport is readily identifiable with the bar and pub crowd. Besides, yet another theory puts the birthplace of the sport in British pubs of the 18th and 19th centuries, no doubt as the meat and filler holding together barley sandwiches.

"There is a lot of that but darts has really come up out of the basement," conceded Dressler. "It's not just the poolhall setting any more. You're seeing a lot families do it more frequently."

"It's a very sociable sport and one that is pretty easy to get the hang of quickly. It's the only sport in which you can go full out and not get hurt. There is a certain mindset among darts people. It has its own little sub-culture."

It's also a relatively inexpensive sport. The beginner in many of us likely recalls tossing a set of \$5 darts at a paper or wooden board hanging on a basement wall.

Judging by the briefcase of accessories Dressler has at the ready, there are umpteen potential modifications that can be applied to a dart.

Comprised of three or four separate pieces — an optional flight protector, flight, the shaft and the barrel, which is the business end of the dart — most modifications are related to feel and touch by individual players and related to trajectory, flight patterns, shafts and throwing technique.

"Like golf, dart technology has shot forth in leaps and bounds," said Dressler.

Aurora resident Gary Glidden authored, *180 Tips for the Dart Nut*, a pocket-sized guide to the finer points of the sport based on his own experiences.

"I guess part of the attraction is that it's pretty casual. There's no dress code. You definitely don't need to put on a collar," says Glidden, a former Ontario juniors champion, who aimed his book four years ago toward the novice player. "It's very inexpensive and you can walk into a bar and play without having to pay for 18 holes or anything like that."

After a bit of a fade in popularity in the 1980s, darts is on the rebound again, noted Glidden.

"There are more people coming back to it," he said. "I wouldn't say it's booming, but it did have a real downturn for a while. I'd say it's healthy."

Except, maybe, for that little brother of yours who managed to get the point. Ouch.



STAFF PHOTOS/MIKE BARRETT

Staff writer Anne Howland kicks it up a notch with her instructors Katie Dewan (left), Keady Hartley and Sarah Nelson during a clogging lesson at the Thornton Arena.

Clogging tests reporter's relationship with feet

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willing dance partners.

Feeling as if I'd never walked upright on Earth, I slapped one foot clumsily on the floor, then waved it foolishly in the air, trying to remember what to do next and with which of my five feet.

"Come on, tell them how happy you are to be here," I hissed mentally at my cracked and dirty running shoes. "Double-toe, step and the basic; it's not hard. Look at Joan."

Flip-flop, hop and a stumble. My feet were a foreign entity, way down there on the floor. Discouraged, I sensed the curious glances of Ms Beaton's dozen or so students, busy donning their jingling shoes and forming two parallel lines. With gentle pity, Ms Beaton seated me, went to the front of the room and asked her beginner class — pig-tailed children, sleek young women and jovial middle-aged adults — to take the floor.

Clogging can be performed to any music with a strong beat, even hip hop and techno-pop. Ms Beaton's first selection was a moderately paced country tune. Dancing individually, although couples can clog, the dancers let their feet fly, upper bodies erect, eyes smiling. The noise was fantastic as they turned, slid, stepped and stomped to the music.

As I puzzled over, how Ms. Beaton taught with her back to

the class, I tuned in to the strange words she was shouting through her headset mike.

"Samantha!" she boomed.

Wow, I guess she can see what they're up to.

"Simone!"

Oops, another one in trouble.

"Cotton-eyed Joe!"

Surely not?

"Outhouse!"

This was getting weird.

'You put on these shoes and you go bananas; you turn into a different person.'

Turns out clogging has a "vocabulary" of thousands of steps cooked up by who knows who over the years. With the darndest monikers, often in honour of the creator's dog or similar prized possession, the steps combine to create a clogging routine.

The class I was watching had mastered 20 to 25 steps since September and was being put through its paces as the music sped up into the pop tune Never Let You Go. Waves of released stress were palpable as the cloggers came to a big-stomp finish.

"You put on these shoes and you go bananas; you turn into a different person," breathed Pat McDonald, of Aurora who, along with friend Charlene Ross of

Newmarket, travels to Thornton for continued "therapy".

After swigging some water, shedding a few layers and pumping up the air conditioning, the class was back on its magical, musical feet. I knew things were serious when I heard the first strains of Flashdance's What A Feeling.

The cardio rate soared, the floor shook and the happiness quotient peaked. Ms Beaton, an 11-year clogging veteran, sat and watched her well-rehearsed group with pride. She also teaches intermediate students, but said advanced clogging is reserved for the very young, the only ones able to turn their feet into a living blur.

"It would kill us," she said, half-joking.

After 90 minutes, the class was reaching its climax. With a rousing rendition of Old Time Rock 'n' Roll blasting, the cloggers let 'er rip, pulling out a mountain goat, rocking chair, turkey and any other steps they'd learned and some besides.

I couldn't stop grinning. Then I felt it. Way down there on the floor, my toes tapped, my legs twitched and my feet wanted nothing more than to jump up and join in, even if they didn't speak the language.

What a feeling.

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