

Conkers

John K. Nixon

Recently I was astonished to read a newspaper article referring to the World Conker Championships to be held in October in Ashton, England. I found myself transported back several decades to my childhood in England when conker fights were a popular autumn diversion for English schoolboys. What I had always assumed to be a peculiar eccentricity of the English has apparently attracted devotees in other European countries and perhaps beyond.

For the uninitiated, the conker is the shiny brown seed the size of a golf ball inside the fruit of a horse chestnut tree. These are collected by school children, and a hole bored through the centre, typically with a kitchen skewer. A piece of string about a foot long is threaded through the hole, a large knot tied at one end and the conker suspended from the free end of the string. Two combatants take turns swinging their conker at the opponent's suspended nut with the first conker to disintegrate being the loser.

In the playground of my English boys-only prep school, during recess between autumn-term classes, boys between the ages of 7 and 12, clad in identical uniforms with short grey flannel pants, grey shirts and green and white striped ties, would generally divide into three groups. One group would split into pairs and would engage in well-organized conker fights complete with a ritualistic set of rules. Each conker came to the bout with a pedigree based on the number of victories claimed, with the victorious nut being dubbed a "fiver" or a "tenner", etc. Some conker heroes would proudly parade their "thirtier" or "forty-fiver", but these were frequently regarded with suspicion by the purists. Many of these veteran conkers had been doctored in some way, often hardened by pickling in preservative or by baking in an oven – the steroids of the conker circuit, as it were. Although the practice littered the schoolyard with debris from shattered chestnuts,



conker fights were tolerated, even encouraged, by the school authorities. They at least provided an outlet for all that bottled up pubescent testosterone which, in the absence of small girls to terrorize, would likely have resulted in mayhem between squabbling schoolboys.

A second group would be found huddled in small gatherings in corners of the yard. These were the neophyte entrepreneurs who engaged in 'swapping'. This activity involved barter trade transactions in which the chief currency was marbles and cigarette cards. The latter, found in cigarette packets, usually featured cars, animals, birds or pictures of sports heroes. Transactions followed unwritten rules with a mutually recognized valuation system. Occasionally unusual, even exotic items appeared, which generated sometimes-heated debate as to how many marbles or cigarette cards they were worth. I recall distinctly trading my favourite two marbles for a genuine German army iron cross (without the ribbon). Later I swapped the latter for a few cigarette cards, two of which featured sportsmen with the unlikely Shakespearean names of Joe Hardstaff (cricketer) and Nat Lofthouse (soccer player). The remaining boys indulged

in ad hoc and loosely organized games of tag or hide-and-seek.

In recalling the above, it seems to me that some valuable lessons can be learned from the schoolyard of my youth. Why not introduce conker fights to the battlegrounds of the Middle East? Hotheads, both Israelis and Palestinians, can vent their frustrations by pounding the opponents' nuts to smithereens, all under the watchful eye of UN peacekeepers. Conquest will give way to Conkerfest. Before we know it, the streets of Ramallah and Tel Aviv will no longer be paved with building rubble and body parts, but with fragments of pulverized chestnuts. The lowly conker will be transformed into a true weapon of mass distraction!

In the background the peace negotiating teams can get down to serious business, trading their marbles for cigarette cards, so to speak. That leaves the remaining Arab countries, the

Europeans and Americans to indulge in endless games of disorganized tag. Meanwhile the armament industries can shut down their polluting factories and, in a move that will greatly strengthen the Kyoto Accord, devote their resources to planting and nurturing forests of flowering horse chestnut trees. All those out-of-work arms dealers can be employed to source, market and distribute the conker crop to the combatants. Unemployed UN weapons inspectors can be recruited to verify that all conkers satisfy the UN-mandated quality requirements and that baking and pickling do not go undetected.

Finally, all those tanks, helicopter gunships, Katushya rockets and bomb body harnesses can be consigned to the scrap heap. After all, you don't need a sledgehammer to crack a nut!

John K. Nixon is a much appreciated frequent contributor to Humanist Perspectives.

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