

RECHARGED

Electric football makes a comeback fueled by grown-ups who played the game as kids

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As an 8-year-old, Greg Hardmon found electric football to be an amazing, if sometimes mystifying, game.

He'd set up his players, flip the switch, and hope for the best.

The metal board would vibrate and players would shuffle around - some bumping into each other repeatedly, others wandering around aimlessly. And maybe, just maybe, one would move downfield like he should.

Now, 30 years later, Mr. Hardmon still thinks it's a pretty amazing game. Maybe more amazing than ever.

"It's actually like playing chess," the West Toledo man said. "It's very strategic in how you play."



Phil Gilliam, left, and Greg Hardmon playing with Mr. Hardmon's electric football game in West Toledo. (BLADE PHOTOS/ANDY MORRISON)

Mr. Hardmon is part of a generation of players that has rediscovered the joys of electric football, a game that's been around since 1947 but has been forgotten by many and left to collect dust.

No longer. While most people have turned their eyes to Miami in anticipation of Sunday's Super Bowl XLI, die-hard electric football aficionados traveled last weekend to Jacksonville, host of the 13th annual Electric Football Super Bowl.

For those looking to play closer to home, there's a local league including Mr. Hardmon and other coaches. (That's what people who play electric football are called, naturally.)

At age 50, Phil Gilliam, of Point Place, is the grandfather of the Great Lakes Electric Football League, which gathers for games at a bowling alley in Taylor, Mich., during the traditional football season.

MULTIMEDIA **Audio slideshow on electric football.**

"I like the competition and I like the camaraderie of the players," he said.

He certainly approves of some of the changes that have made the game easier to control since he

played as a youngster. Now there are bases on the players allowing him to dictate with reliability how players move and turn and - usually - where they end up.

There's still that flexible-armed quarterback that you use to fling a little felt football at receivers - hit them and it's a catch - but now coaches can simulate zone defenses with magnets on figures and alter plastic bases to make players faster.

"The game's come a long way," said Michael Landsman, 70, president of the company that makes the game, Miggle Toys Inc.

The Super Bowl version of the game retails for \$69.95. A complete, customized set of players, painted and sporting your favorite team's decals, can cost a few hundred dollars. They're sold in specialty stores, but many coaches simply look to the Internet.

More than 40 million of the games have been sold in the last 60 years, and Mr. Landsman thinks it offers modern

users a wholesome contrast to violent, oversexed video games.

"This is just good, clean fun," he said by phone from Illinois, where the company is based. "It's a social game. You play it with other people."

People return to the game as adults for varying reasons. For Robert L. Moody III, who got one every Christmas for a while as a kid, it was a way to keep close to football after injuries made it difficult for him to take the field himself.

A former football player at Scott High School, he saw a career in the NFL derailed when he was hurt during training camp with the Atlanta Falcons. He played for the Southern Michigan Timberwolves in the Mid-Continental Football League - where he met Mr. Hardmon as a teammate - and was injured again.

"I'm just a football player at heart," said Mr. Moody, 40, of Sylvania. "This gave me a chance to come back into the game. I can enjoy all the things I love about football."

Now, he approaches the game with a quiet seriousness. He plays with one of his sons and scrimmages with Mr. Hardmon and other friends, testing players and strategies.

"You really have to be into the mental side," he said. "You can't just line things up and go straight ahead. You go in there with a game plan."

Some coaches go to great lengths to do that, even going so far as to get scouting reports on the team they're playing.



Players on bases sport NFL team uniforms. A full set of players can cost a few hundred dollars.



Robert L. Moody III studies the defense. 'I'm just a football player at heart,' he says.

Steroids are a concern here too. Players are weighed sometimes to make sure they're not heavier than they should be, because that would give them an advantage pushing around lighter players.

Mr. Moody signed up for the league immediately when he found out about it.

"I had no idea that it was this big," he said. "I couldn't believe that grown men were acting like kids again."

Mr. Hardmon, who has won and lost a Super Bowl in the local electric football league, relishes the hours he spends playing the game and fine-tuning his team.

"I have probably the best set of wide receivers there is," he said. "It makes it very hard for people to cover."

He proved true to his word during a recent demonstration with Mr. Moody, when his wide receiver reeled in a 60-yard touchdown pass.

As the receiver shuffled into the end zone for the score, the poor defender - some things never change - wandered out of bounds, far away from the action, hopelessly ramming into the edge of the board.

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