

UPS AND DOWNS OF A YO-YO CHAMP

Perrysburg man in national contest today

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Rob Kitts is an old man in a young man's game. Never mind that he's only 22 and never mind that the game is yo-yo.

A player who in 2006 won an award for amassing more points at regional contests than anyone else, Mr. Kitts realizes how hard it's become to compete with today's new young crop of competitive yo-yoers. (Yes, there are competitive - even full-time, professional - yo-yo performers.)

"The guys that are in their primes are the kids who are in high school," the Perrysburg man said. "They're insane."

Still, Mr. Kitts is ready to take them on at today's National Yo-Yo Contest in Chico, Calif. He qualified for the competition, which concludes tomorrow, by taking part in a July regional event in Plymouth, Mich.

The trick has been finding enough time to practice now that he works helping to make Jeep Wranglers in Toledo.

"I've had a job and been working extreme amounts of hours," he said. "When I was in my prime, I used to practice three to four hours a day."

That's why Mr. Kitts gave up competing for about a year, although he continued judging. Now he's back, having practiced each night after work from 2 to 5 a.m. for this contest.

The results are spectacular. He can yo-yo around his neck and between his legs. He can make the yo-yo roll up his arm at will and do loop-the-loops. And that's the easy part of his three-minute choreographed routine that he performs while rocking out to a song by Atari Teenage Riot.

"Basically, everything that can be done with a yo-yo, I'll be doing," he said.

VIDEOS

[See Rob Kitts practicing his routine](#)

Like many yo-yo pros, Mr. Kitts got his start as a youngster. He was about 8 when his parents bought him a wooden yo-yo and video by Tom Smothers, whose comedy act includes tricks as the Yo-Yo Man. He learned 10 basic tricks, took some lessons from a store at the mall, and then started experimenting.

"I just started up making my own tricks up," he said.

From there, Mr. Kitts, who has amassed a collection of 5,000 yo-yos, made his way to the yo-yo competitive circuit, where he gained a sponsorship by manufacturer Yomega and a reputation as a flashy performer. In 2003, he won the Most Inspirational Player award.

"He's a fabulous entertainer," said "Dazzling Dave" Schulte, president of the American Yo-Yo Association, a players organization that is 200 members strong. "He's exciting to watch."

For an ancient pastime - there are descriptions from Greece dating back as far as 500 B.C. and China is believed to have invented them even earlier - yo-yos have evolved into a thoroughly modern sport. No longer satisfied to just "Walk the Dog," contestants have thought up jaw-dropping tricks worthy of the X Games era.

They can drop a "Spirit Bomb." They "Split the Atom." They do the "Double Gerbil" and "Buddha's Revenge."



The National Yo-Yo Contest starts today.

Some stunts are so cool they don't have names.

"It's an extreme sport that you can carry in your pocket," explained Bob Malowney, director of the National Yo-Yo Contest, held near the National Yo-Yo Museum since 1993.

Nearly 100 of the country's best yo-yoers will join Mr. Kitts at the competition in five different categories. He qualified for the preliminary rounds of two categories, one involving a single yo-yo and another with two simultaneously. He gets one minute in the prelims to do whatever he likes, three minutes if he makes it to the finals.

An overwhelming majority of the competitors will be male. The best tend to be in their early 20s but the high schoolers are close to coming into dominance, Mr. Malowney said.

All of the contestants will be aided by recent technological advances: ball bearings and precision engineering that allow a yo-yo to spin for minutes, not just seconds. These high-tech improvements have helped propel them to legendary levels of popularity, making it easier for more kids to learn how to use them and at a higher level. A bevy of how-to videos on the Internet helps a new generation master more difficult tricks in less time than predecessors too.

"It's become a skilled sport rather than a childhood toy," Mr. Malowney said.

To any potential yo-yo pro out there, Mr. Schulte, of Minnesota, has simple advice.

"Start with a good quality yo-yo," he said. "These days junk yo-yos are prevalent everywhere. ... Nobody can use a \$2 yo-yo well."

Mr. Schulte suggests going to a specialty hobby store or searching online for a starter yo-yo that costs in the range of \$7 to \$20. It should be durable and able to be unscrewed. Some models used by the highest level competitors can sell for more than \$100.

"The sport is changing every single day," he said. "Every day there are new tricks coming out that get harder and harder and harder," he said.

Yes, you read that right. He said "sport." If you watch someone like Mr. Kitts perform, you'll probably agree.

"The two-handed stuff is very athletic," Mr. Kitts said. "I sweat when I do that."

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