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Cup Stacking: A Sport Whose Growth Runneth Over

By DAVE SEMINARAMARCH 31, 2016

Joey Cooksey competed in the 3-6-3 event at a regional cup stacking tournament on March 5 in Portland, Ore. She was judged by Nick Meyer, right. Credit Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

William Orrell is the best in the world in his sport. A 17-year-old from North Carolina, Orrell is [ranked No. 1](#) and is the reigning junior Olympic and world champion. He has a [popular YouTube channel](#), a [product line](#) named after him, and legions of admiring fans in dozens of countries.

He has gained all this notoriety by stacking cups in small pyramids at a mind-boggling clip.

“A lot of people don’t think it is a sport,” said Orrell, who will defend his world title at the [World Sport Stacking Championships](#), which begin Saturday in Speichersdorf, Germany. “But why is stacking cups any less important than putting a ball in a hole or through a hoop?”

A casual game that started with Dixie cups at a Boys & Girls Club in Oceanside, Calif., more than 30 years ago is evolving into a fast-growing sport that is part of the physical education curriculum at thousands of American schools. More than two dozen nations will field teams at the world championships, and stacking is growing fastest in Asia, where children as young as 10, like fifth-ranked [Chan Keng Ian](#), are helping to globalize the sport.

Stacking has been an [A.A.U. Junior Olympics](#) event since 2012, alongside swimming, karate, and track and field but also baton twirling and jump rope. School districts like stacking because it is low liability and anyone can play, even children with physical or mental disabilities.

Wayne Godinet, a Samoan-American from Oceanside, is widely credited with turning cup stacking into a sport. He was a director at the Boys & Girls Club, and, one day back in 1981, he took a stack of Dixie cups and told the children to stack them in a pyramid, then run and touch a wall, come back and stack them again.

Photo



Seven-year-old Brady Mason practiced before competing in Portland. Credit Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

“I knew we were on to something immediately,” said Godinet, now a community activist. “The kids loved it, so we started making pyramids, introducing relays. It took off.”

Godinet said that he wanted to turn the game into a sport because he recognized that children who were small or were not athletically inclined had low self-esteem.

“This was a sport that leveled the playing field,” he said.

Godinet received a [patent](#) in 1986 for a cup stacking kit he sold for \$6, and by 1990, there were [cup stacking programs](#) in schools and clubs in 37 states.

In 1990, one of Godinet’s protégés, 9-year-old Matt Adame, appeared on “The Tonight Show” with Johnny Carson. Bob Fox, then a physical education teacher in Highlands Ranch, Colo., saw the show and then attended one of Godinet’s tournaments. Fox later held one of his own. When more than 250 children turned up, he recognized the sport’s potential.

In 1998, he founded Speed Stacks Inc., which now has 98 percent share of the market for cup sets, which usually [cost](#) around \$25 to \$60.

Through Speed Stacks, the activity gained a more formal structure, with an emphasis on speed, and became a big business.

Photo



At 2 years old, Isabelle Burns was the youngest competitor at a regional cup stacking tournament in Portland, Ore. She was judged by Saydee Cooksey, right. Credit Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

Don Teel and Larry Goers, who are now co-owners of Speed Stacks, are also the co-directors of the sport's best-known governing body, the [World Sport Stacking Association](#), which they founded in 2001. The company said that it sold three million cup sets in the last five years and that the sport was now played in 56 countries and more than 27,000 American schools. The association hosts 150 to 175 tournaments per year.

Stackers compete in [three individual events](#): the 3-3-3, three stacks of three cups each; 3-6-3, three stacks of three, six and three cups; and the cycle, a sequence of three formations. There are also doubles events and relays. Cups must be stacked up and then taken down in a specific order, and they cannot wobble or fall off the mat. At most tournaments, the overall winners are crowned by adding the stackers' fastest times in each of the three individual disciplines.

Godinet's company stopped producing cup sets years ago, but he said he was not upset that Speed Stacks developed his idea into a lucrative business.

"I'm O.K. with that because this sport has transformed the lives of so many kids," he said.

Trey Griffith is one such child. When Jimmy Griffith learned that his son, [Trey](#), was on the autism spectrum, he feared that he would never be able to bond with his son over a common love of sports.

But a few years after discovering a set of cups in the back of his sister's closet, Trey, 12, has become one of the best sport stackers in the world. And his father has found a way to connect with him, competing together in parent-child competitions.

Jimmy Griffith said that there are a number of world-class stackers, including Jesse Horn, a Missouri teen who calls himself [Mr. Stacking Dude](#), who are on the autism spectrum.

Photo



Kiera Merrigan, 8, traveled with her family from Redmond, Wash., to compete at the event in Portland. Credit Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

Trey's mother, Carmen, who also stacks, said their motto was, "Families who stack together, stay together." She said stacking had helped her son make friendships and gain confidence.

He has found his tribe at tournaments and by stacking with children from around the world on the video chat site ooVoo.

"Stackers are the smart kids, the really nice kids," Carmen Griffith said. "It's an incredibly nurturing, supportive community."

The sport is dominated by tweens and teenagers, but adults stack competitively, too. Mark Sykes, the

coach of the American team at the world championships, will be competing at the event for the sixth time, but he said he knew he had no chance to beat stackers like 14-year-old Josh Hainsel, who is ranked second and recently won the national championship.

On a drizzly Saturday in March, the clattering din of cups being stacked echoed across a high school gymnasium in southwest Portland, Ore., where 80 competitors had gathered for a regional sport stacking championship event. All but a handful of the athletes were children, some as young as 2.

The top stackers, including three members of the United States national team — Ezekiel McDowell, 19, Gabby Rivera, 14, and Joey Cooksey, 17 — warmed up at a table in the corner of the gym. Cameron Wapner, an 18-year-old from Simi Valley, Calif., said that at one time, he owned 88 cup sets.

Photo



For his ninth birthday, Jonah Lamas, right, traveled with his family to the regional tournament. Credit Amanda Lucier for The New York Times

“We’re the weird kids who sit in the back of the class, listening to music,” Cooksey said.

As competition unfolded across multiple age divisions and five events, the atmosphere was competitive but supportive. When cups wobbled off the stacking map or onto the floor, earning the competitor a scratch, or failed attempt, rivals offered words of encouragement and consolation. No one threw cups or cursed, and there was no obnoxious parenting.

While this tribe may be united in its love of stacking, some question whether Speed Stacks has too much control over the sport.

Godinet said that he appreciated what the company had done to expand the sport but that he thought that stacking would benefit from having an independent governing body.

Only cups made by Speed Stacks, which are made in China, can be used in World Sport Stacking Association tournaments.

“It’s a little like if Spaulding ran the N.B.A.,” said Jeremi Mattern, who made the 2013 documentary “[Stacker](#),” which chronicled the 2011 World Sport Stacking Championships, won by 10-year-old [William Polly](#).

At the Portland event, Wapner referred to a set of cups he pulled from his bag as “contraband” because they were made by the German company [Flash Cups](#).

According to its [website](#), the owners of Flash Cups founded the International Sport Stacking Federation in 2006 in order to “circumvent” the Speed Stacks monopoly and create “brand independent” tournaments.

“Writing rules where only its equipment makes for a sanctioned competition is a problem if it really wants to be a sport,” said Dionne Koller, the director of the University of Baltimore’s Center for Sport and the Law.

Speed Stacks also has cup lines named after Polly and Orrell, but their parents said the competitors received no royalties from the sale of their product lines. They also do not win prize money and must pay their own way to competitions like the world championships.

“There is no TV or media revenue associated with sport stacking, so royalties are not able to be paid for any endorsed products,” Goers said in an email. “We provide endorsers with free equipment, but mostly they get the bragging rights that come with having their name on a product line that stackers worldwide use.”

As the sport evolves, will its child stars lose interest if bragging rights, fun and camaraderie are their only incentives to keep playing?

When making “Stacker,” Mattern observed that once children entered junior high and high school, they developed other interests and had less time to devote to stacking. Polly, a two-time world champion and three-time national champion who held many of the sport’s records before Orrell bested them, is already in semiretirement at 15.

“I’ve done everything I think I can do in the sport,” he said.

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