



## Do You Dare?

We have had quite a bit of snow here in Ome this past winter, perhaps more than in any other winter since I moved to Japan more than twenty years ago. People from more northerly parts of the country would laugh at my phrase 'quite a bit of snow', because compared to what they receive every year our snowfall isn't so impressive, but my neighbours and I still got plenty of exercise shovelling it all off the roadways and sidewalks.

Even as I write this, snow still lies on the ground outside my workshop, something I have never seen here in March. The sun in early spring is quite weak, but it still has enough power to melt some of this snow, turning it into a patchy slushy mess on the ground. And the sight of this slush carries me all the way across the years and distance back to an elementary school playground in Canada. The deep snowbanks of the prairie winter gave way to just such a slushy mess every spring, and for little boys in those days, that was the signal to bring out our marbles!

I kept my marbles in a purple cloth drawstring bag - the kind that certain brands of whisky are sold in. Once marble season had begun I would take this to school with me every day, and during recess and lunchtime, would engage in 'combat' with the other boys out in the schoolyard.

We had any number of different ways to play, some with simple rules, some more complex, but the basic idea was of course to capture your opponent's marbles while minimizing the chances of losing your own. The most common game was the simplest - a fairly large circle was scratched in the ground, and all the players each tossed a marble into it. We then took turns shooting from outside the circle, and any marble we hit could be retrieved, of course along with our shooter. If we missed, our shooter stayed there for somebody else to aim at. When the school bell rang, we all jumped in to retrieve our 'own' marbles, and then ran back to the classroom, where the teacher could easily tell what we had been doing, simply by looking at our soaking wet knees!

The marbles themselves came in many types. Most of the contents of my bag were the standard glass type with a swirl pattern inside, and these were considered pretty expendable: losing some of them was no big deal. But each of us had a number of more 'special' marbles too, of various types: some were a milky translucent colour, some completely transparent, and some were even made from metal - the 'steelies'.

All these special marbles were of course considered much more 'valuable' than the plain types, and were used for games with much more risk - but with chance of high rewards. One of the boys would place a valuable marble on the ground inside a circle, as a prize target. The rest of us would then take turns shooting at it, trying to nudge it bit by bit towards the rim of the circle. Our shooters would remain on the ground and become part of the 'prize'. If one of us succeeded in pushing the target marble out of the circle, we won everything. If we failed to do so before the recess bell rang, the owner of the prize marble kept all our shooters. It was high stakes gambling, and not for everybody.

Thinking back about these games now from my vantage point in the future, I suppose that a person who had been observing our marble games could probably have predicted quite accurately what sort of adults we would become. After all, we all know the old saying ... 'He who dares, wins!'

But I also know another saying - and when I quote this you will be able to guess what kind of marble player I was ... "Slow and steady wins the race!"

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