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# Combustion Engines

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## Combustion Engines

TREVOR ZUIDEMA

All us kids at Tremont Christian Elementary maw down our food. When it comes to eating I'm slow, more of a cud chewer by nature, but I suck down my tuna sandwich and chocolate milk because today is Wednesday. During Wednesday recess we play intermurals and this month it's dodgeball. If you don't know what dodgeball is let me tell you. It's pretty simple. There are two teams and each one stays on their half of the basketball court. And have you ever

seen those red boing-boing balls that girls play four square with? Well there are five of those out there and what you do is hit the other people below the waist to get them out. But say you throw a ball at me and I catch it, then you're out. The team that knocks all the others out wins.

Those are the rules but we just like the game because we get to really wail on each other. When else can you huck a boing-boing ball at a kid who isn't looking and not get in trouble for it? I mean, if I belted someone on the playground Mr. Vandellen, the principal, would probably make me clean toilets for a week's worth of recesses. But in dodgeball you get patted on the back for hitting someone and *they* are the ones who have to sit down. I like that about dodgeball. Say I got another C minus on my spelling or the kids decide to pick on me that day. Well, there's nothing that feels better than walloping some kid square in the nuts. You know what they say, three's a crowd. A very *painful* crowd.

In all our intermurals the boys are given a handicap so the class with the most guys doesn't win every time. But for dodgeball, Mother Nature built the handicap right in.

The Old Hag has quite a sense of humor putting our sensitive, naughty bits right out in front, in direct line of whirring boing-boing balls. I have another handicap because I wear glasses. All four eyes have to take their two glass eyes off for dodgeball. Mr. Hooker, our teacher here in fourth grade, said that there was a boy once who got hit in the face and his glasses shattered and he went blind. I wanted to tell Mr. Hooker that they don't make glasses out of glass anymore. They're made out of plastic so it doesn't shatter, it cracks. My mom put insurance on my glasses so if they break I can just get new ones for free. I wanted to tell him that stuff but I didn't. I try not to make a ruckus. There are plenty of other kids who do that much better than I ever could. But I have to admit it's really scary to be the target of screaming balls when the whole world is fuzzy.

And so I get picked off pretty easy and today is no exception. My friend Damon, who's on the other team, hits my ankle as I reach for a ball. The game keeps going and more and more kids go down. They're like a bunch of toads trying to cross the freeway. It's like Frogger.

And now it's down to three toads, Damon on one side and Barb and Lisa on our side. I wonder how Lisa managed to stay up. She weighs about seven and a half pounds and that's with her swirly hair, which has to weigh at least three. Lisa hides behind Barb like a scared, jittery gerbil and Barb has a ball in her hands, protecting her vitals. Damon has the other four balls on his side all lined up and ready for reloading. He reminds me of Clint Eastwood in that movie dad let me watch but told me not to tell mom.

Suddenly Damon whips his ball at Barb and she ducks and dives really quick. The ball misses her but hits little Lisa in the knees. She flips up like a tossed salad and hits the tile floor like a moldy tomato. It's not pretty. Heather, the team's good Samaritan, drags Lisa out of the way. Barb grabs the ball that splattered Lisa and comes at Damon with one under each arm looking like she has huge, red, rubber boobs. Damon chucks one right down her cleavage and sends the boobs flying. He reloads, pump fakes. Barb, naked to the in-coming, boobless, flinches and that's when

he nails her. Just like that, they're the winners and we're the losers.

We stagger back to our classroom, bruised and bloody and Mr. Hooker reads us an Uncle Remus story. Some of us are sweating while the girls are "glistening." I'm a real sweater by nature. I don't know why. I must have wide pores or something. I put my palms on the formica desk and pull them back and underneath are baby foot blotches of wet, like blow on a cold window. I draw in the sweat while Mr. Hooker's country road voice rolls under the tires of Uncle Remus' story. I tune out and in. "Don't throw me in dat dare briar patch, Briar Wolf," said Briar Rabbit. "Do what'cha will, jus' don't throw me in dare."

My stomach ribbits and I pinch my butt cheeks together to keep from farting. Not only did I have to scarf down my lunch, but I spent the recess running for my life. I think those are the two essentials for combustion engines. I'm learning about them from the college book that my uncle helped write. I can't understand the words so well but I love to look at the pictures and imagine all the parts moving. Valves going open and close, sparkplugs going sparky, making booms, bobs of pistons, crankshaft cranking. I imagine I'm a gear spinning mad around. I imagine I'm a piston. The blammo to my brain blows me back but my feet are welded to the crankshaft, so it pushes me up to get another kapow to the old noggin.

Boy I'm glad I'm not a piston. Those guys have it rough. But I bet you could get used to being blasted if it happened everyday all the time, like the boy who delivers our paper. He's my age, has glasses too and I think his mother's retarded. She follows him up and down our street pushing a shopping cart filled with papers. Her left eye is always bloodshot and the skin on her face looks gray and cracked, like dried up clay. She yells at her kid down our street. "C'mere! Don't do that! What do you think you're doin'! Hurry up!" And the whole time he just walks quiet from one house to the other, head down, throwing papers on porches. He's a piston person. The street is the crankshaft and his mom's explosions push him up and down the porch steps.

I asked my mom if the boy's mom was retarded and she said that it wasn't polite to call people retarded and that I should call them devele-something--disfabled or special. I asked if when she said I was her special little man if she meant that I was retarded. She said no, that's different. I didn't tell her, but I'm glad mom isn't retarded because I wouldn't want her to yell at me all the time. She yells at me sometimes but it's usually too late because I feel bad way before she shouts.

Mr. Hooker's almost whispering. Lots of kids around me are dreaming their desks are pillows and maybe sleeping. You can tell when someone is snoozing because they breathe real slow and sometimes they twitch. Ahead of me, Barb jerks herself awake. She looks around to see if anyone noticed and she thinks she's clear but I saw her.

Barbara is a pretty big girl. I know it's not polite to say that out loud but it's the truth. She's just as big as me and the other boys. One time, out on the playground, Jason was picking on her for something, I don't know what. She wasn't too happy about it, of course. But instead of shrinking away like I would have done, she stepped right up and belted him one in the gut. He dropped and clutched his middle, like if he didn't hold tight his intestines would all come spilling out like a string of sausages.

Barb sneezes and some kids say, "God bless you." Every Sunday I repeat with the grownups, "Thou shalt not take the Lord's name in vain. Jealous is He who take His name in vain." I'm not sure what "vain" means but I know that we're not supposed to say "God!" when we're really surprised like the public schoolers do. Justin, the class bully, got jealous of my basketball once and took it from me. I don't want God taking anything away from me like mom, dad or even my sis, I guess. So that's why I don't say anything when people achoo.

Barb sneezes again and before anyone can make God jealous she lets one rip. It sounds like tearing thick paper only more liquidy. All of a sudden, the whole class kabooms with laughs. I'm the closest to her bum rumble so I sprint to the back of the room along with all the kids who used to sit below Barb's equator. And just like engine valves, the kids

in her northern hemisphere clear out and the sour gas rolls in a wave up to Mr. Hooker. He's trying to act real adult and not ha-ha but the kid in him gets to the surface first. He jiggles with giggles. His face turns tomatoey and the little vein on the side of his temple (the one that popped out when he caught Jason and Dan playing ninja throwing stars with scissors) is doing a-rum-pa-pa-pums.

Kevin and Matt open the window, hang their heads out and make noises like they're blowing their cookies. I do it too because hey, it's fun, who cares? Like I said, there's plenty of kids who can make a bigger ruckus than I ever could.