

Horseshoes

A familiar clanging sound stirs a new round of neighborliness.

Last summer I carried a sledgehammer to my backyard, drove two (24-inch-tall) steel stakes into the ground, and became my father. Well, not actually him, of course, but a lot more like him than I ever expected.

When I was little, my pop ruled as Horseshoe King of Lake Chaweva, the little patch of then-rural heaven where I grew up near Charleston, West Virginia. He earned that status not through any particular prowess at tossing the shoes, but because he put in the pits that drew our neighborhood together on many a lazy summer evening.

In a tall grove of shagbark hickories shading sloped lake-side property, he leveled a 40-foot lane, cobbled together a square sandbox at each end, and pounded in his stakes. He strung electric lines from our house and mounted floodlights high up on the tree trunks. He built benches on the uphill side so people could sit and watch but left the downhill area for those willing to risk bruised ankles (as horseshoes sometimes got away). Using leftover house paint, he color-coded sets of U-shaped shoes and hung them on big nails for all to enjoy.

For years, those pits served as a popular gathering spot. Coolers, barbecue grills, picnic blankets, and radios showed up. Married couples and parent-child teams took on each other in pairs' matches. Singles linked up over round-robin tournaments. Teenagers filled in when the adults took breaks. Younger kids splashed in the lake well into the cricket-serenaded twilight, occasionally called on to wade among the cattails and recover errant horseshoes.

In my mind, this is what the good old days look, sound, and feel like.

Forty years later, to my astonishment, it took only a pair of stakes and an initial round of clanging one Saturday morning to begin re-creating something at least similar to that time. I'd almost forgotten that wonderful ringing tone, echoing like an invitation through the woods—this time tall Southern pines in suburban Birmingham. Next-door neighbors leaned over the fence to see what was going on and eventually came through the gate to join in.

Before long, others from around our subdivision popped in to satisfy their curiosity and toss a few shoes—just for old-time's sake. Kids waiting their turns rediscovered our rope swing and tree fort, and they laid out an impromptu whiffle ball field to pass the time. Cookouts followed, and

we kept several glass jugs of thirst-quenching sun tea brewing on the deck at all times. Loosely organized tournaments marked any long weekend. A lot of just plain hanging out (and putting off lawn mowing) resulted.

Over the years, I've played the occasional round of horseshoes while traveling in Tennessee, Oklahoma, Mississippi, and elsewhere around the South. I've found it to be a welcome icebreaker among relative strangers at, say, a work-related retreat or a distant cousin-in-law's wedding. Now, with my backyard gatherings well into a second summer season, I feel that in some small way I may have inherited a slice of my father's title. I might never be the Horseshoe King my pop was, but by bringing my own neighborhood a little closer, I like to think I've walked a ways in his shoes.

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