

# Of Cell Phone Throwing and Air Guitar Contests

Fun sports are crazier and funnier than ever – especially in Finland

By Clemens Matuschek

The spectators around the sports field cheered in excitement as Ville Piippo stepped onto the winner's podium. He not only won the World Championships in his home country of Finland, but even set a new world record: 82.55 meters. Still, it is not too likely he will ever win Olympic Gold – Ville Piippo is the current champion in Cell Phone Throwing.

Once a year, more than 100 contestants get together on a grassy field outside the tiny, beautifully located city of Savonlinna in southeastern Finland, about 35 miles from the Russian border. Surrounded by a small but enthusiastic crowd seated on folding chairs and picnic blankets, and by several curious TV camera teams, the participants gather to find out who can throw an old mobile phone the farthest. On August 27, 2005, the sixth edition of this tournament will take place, involving winners from national tournaments from all over the world. Apart from sheer distance, the contest also includes a “Freestyle” discipline that honors aesthetically elegant and creative throwing techniques. The winner – guess what – gets a cell phone.

But why would one invent or take part in a cell phone throwing contest?

Andreas Ratsch, a 24-year old student who is participating in the German national contest this summer, has a simple answer: “Sometimes, you get so annoyed by cell phones – either they don't work or they're constantly ringing – that you just want to smash one against a wall or throw it really far away. But preferably somebody else's.”

According to organization committee member Christine Lund, the idea was born in 2000 out of the very special relationship that Finns have with their phones: “Finland is known as the home country of the mobile phone, and Finns have always been very fashion-conscious about their phones, eager to get a new one and dump the old one.” The Championships embody the combined essential of both reasons; and according to the official website’ “express a spiritual freedom from being available all the time.” Still, the main aspect is fun. Andreas has signed up as a team together with some old school friends “in order to have an excuse to have a party, no matter how far the phone flies.”

It is somewhat typical that cell phone throwing is a Finnish invention. The small country – in terms of population (5.2 million) and size it resembles Arizona – in the far northeastern corner of Europe is known, even famous for a certain level of craziness. Apart from tossing cell phones, for example, some Finnish people find pleasure and entertainment in playing soccer on swampy grounds. Invented by skiers who were looking for especially challenging leg training, Swamp Soccer became popular when “Swamp Baron” Jyrki Väänänen started organizing tournaments in 1998. His “Swamp Arena” consists of 15 soft and wet pitches located in Hyrynsalmi in Northern Finland. In 2003, more than 20,000 people visited the matches, cheering at goalies who constantly have to move in order not to sink, defenders who sometimes really have to dig for the ball, and strikers who should really not try a diver. It’s a tough game – the organizers’ webpage recommends: “Remember to take care of your insurance coverage!”

Yet another strange contest is “Wife Carrying,” which attracts some 11,000 spectators to the small town of Sonkajärvi every year who get to witness how participants carry their wives (or any woman) along a track that is about 250 meters long and includes obstacles like fallen trees and water ponds. The contest is said to date back to a brigand in the 1800s who forced his men to prove their strength by carrying their women cross country – which made somewhat sense as a kind of practical job interview since stealing women from neighboring villages was common practice.

Nowadays, of course, the contest is more about humor. In fact, the rulebook explicitly requires all participants to have fun. And the first prize is the equivalent of the carried wife’s weight in beer. Andreas is already thinking about signing up: “at a push, I’ll just carry my mother.”

Probably the most famous and spectacular fun contest is the yearly “Air Guitar Championship” that is being held in Oulu, central Finland, since 1996. The winner is awarded not only with worldwide fame and glory but also with a handmade Flying Finn guitar worth 2,500 Euros and an amplifier donated and signed by former *Queen* guitarist Brian May. National Champions from all over the world will participate, handling their invisible instruments with graceful virtuosity in stage shows that excite more than 10,000 fans.

“You are judged on a scale from 4 to 6,” explains last year’s winner MiRi “Sonyk-Rok” Park in an interview with Conan O’Brian. “There are three categories: Technical merit, originality/stage presence, and ‘airness.’ It’s the extent to which you’re no longer air guitaring, you transcend it over, and it becomes an art form all of its own.” That’s exactly how Kriston Rucker, organizer of the US Air Guitar Championships, explains the difference between a good and a bad air guitar player: “A good air guitar player can make thousands of people forget that he or she doesn’t have an instrument.” Rucker stresses the diversity of the participants: “All kinds of people participate. Kids and middle-aged men. Boys and girls. Pretty much everybody in America plays air guitar at some point during their childhood – unless they are sheltered and only listen to classical music. For some it’s a joke. For others it’s an obsession.” The latter seems to apply to MiRi Park, a break dancer and journalist from New York, who put a lot of work into her performance of *Van Halen’s* ‘Hot for Teacher:’ “I studied the tablature so I can make the right moves – with some liberties.”

Again, the idea of inventing an Air Guitar Contest seems to fit the picture of a nation that honors the members of the hard rock cello quartet Apocalyptica as national heroes after they became famous for covering Metallica songs. Where does this tendency towards quirky yet original ideas come from?

It might be out of sheer boredom. Since Finland is located far to the north, winter means a 6-month lasting twilight. The lack of sun may be a cause for Europe’s highest suicide rate according to WHO statistics, as well as repeatedly reported alcohol problems. It might also result in a very special form of creativity.

Kriston Rucker has another explanation: “Finns are just smarter than most. Finland has the best education system in the world.” He thinks air guitaring is not so much about extravagance, “the Finns just were smart enough to treat this as a serious event.” Perhaps it just means that the meaning of ‘extravagant’ is becoming less and less extravagant these days.

Extravagant or not, most of these fun sports have one big advantage: a lax training regimen (unless you’re an obsessed air guitar player). When asked how he prepares himself for the great day of the German cell phone throwing contest, Andreas has a simple answer: “I get up, go there, and throw it.”

Apart from Finland, some other nations can proudly state having made major contributions to the field of crazy sports. For example, also the United Kingdom is known for cultivating spleens: One day, Phillip Shaw from Leicester was facing a pile of shirts to iron but at the same time would have preferred to go rock climbing – pure escapism. When he decided to complete his annoying task while enjoying his favorite hobby, a new trend sport called *Extreme Ironing* was born; a sport that, according to his inventor, “combines the thrills of an extreme outdoor activity with the satisfaction of a well pressed shirt.” Ever since this initial idea, extreme ironers have been trying to find new, challenging locations. People ironed their clothes on New York’s Times Square, in Guatemalan Maya temples, in Death Valley, California, on the Mount Everest glaciers at 5.5 km altitude, or on the sea bottom of New Zealand. The goal is not always a perfectly ironed shirt (after all, the use of electricity is not mandatory), but fun through lived craziness.

In the USA, the latest trend sport is called Sport Stacking. Basically, it means stacking 12 plastic cups to pyramids of predefined shape and height as quickly as possible. The current World Sports Stacking Association’s record holder for the so-called “Cycle stack” is Emily Fox, a 12th-grader at ThunderRidge High School in Highlands Ranch, CO. Building and taking down 6 pyramids of various sizes in predetermined sequences took her exactly 7.43 seconds at the 2002 Rocky Mountain Cup Stacking Championships, about the time it took you to read this sentence. Stacking plastic cups is said to develop hand-eye coordination, ambidexterity, quickness and concentration. Still, the main reason to do it is fun – the fact that the cups resemble the ones you might know from parties tells a lot about the supposed origin of this sports.