

Straight Shooters

VFW hosted a national marble tournament from 1947 to 1962, which helped World War II veterans re-integrate into society and taught boys life lessons

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When Misael Zaragoza competed in the VFW National Marble Tournament in 1957, it changed his life. He not only garnered the national title that year — defeating 43 other boys — but his career path was set.

One of the activities that Zaragoza and his fellow competitors participated in that year was a tour of Boeing's Seattle, Wash., facility. While there, Zaragoza saw young engineers wearing white shirts and ties, walking around with clipboards. His marbles coach then explained how there are different types of engineers.

“Right there and then, I thought to myself, ‘I want to be one of those guys wearing a white shirt and tie,’” said Zaragoza, who served two tours during the Vietnam War between 1961 and 1967 aboard the USS Fort Marion, USS Page County and USS Luzerne County.

Zaragoza went on to earn a bachelor's degree in civil engineering from San Diego State University. He worked for General Dynamics for 30 years, earned a master's degree at 69 years old and now is an apostolic bishop who supervises 42 churches in southern California.

‘Playing for Keeps’

Scott McBride, a marbles historian, tells Zaragoza's story — and others — in his book, *The Kings of the Rings: Stories from the VFW National Marble Tournaments 1947-1962*. McBride, who began collecting marbles when he was 5 years old, visited Boys Town, Neb., six years ago and discovered newspaper clippings about the first VFW National Marble Tournament.

Six months later, McBride located and interviewed Ray Warren, the first tournament winner, who was in his 80s at the time. As McBride prepared to share Warren's story with a marble collector's group, he learned that Warren had died.

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“After presenting his story, I kind of realized we were going to lose these stories,” McBride said. “What was the impact of the game of marbles, the tournaments, that kind of stuff.”

In addition to the book, McBride co-curated an exhibit at the National Museum of Toys and Miniatures in Kansas City, Mo., called Playing for Keeps: The VFW Marble Tournaments, 1947-1962.

He has volunteered at the museum since the 1990s and has had pieces from his marble collection displayed there over the years.

He worked with Laura Taylor, the museum’s curator of interpretation, for six months to create the exhibit, which includes items from McBride’s collection, as well as items from VFW marble tournament winners.

Learning Life Strategies

Ronald Lengbehn, the 1949 South Dakota Marble Tournament Champion, said he enjoyed playing marbles as a child. And playing for keeps.

“My father built a big bird bath out of the marbles I had won,” Lengbehn said.

Jack Blatchford, the 1958 Kansas Marble Tournament Champion, won his school’s tournament, which sent him on a winning streak that catapulted him into the 1958 VFW National Marble Tournament in Tucson, Ariz. At the city tournament, Blatchford won a Schwinn bicycle.

“I got to ride it home [to] the farm,” Blatchford said. “That was the first time I ever got to do that from the city to the farm, going across the old bridges.”

His prize for winning the Kansas championship was a transistor radio.

“It was the very first of anything we’d seen like that,” Blatchford said.

But what he most enjoyed about playing marbles was playing for keeps.

“I had two big five-gallon buckets of marbles,” Blatchford said.

For Zaragoza, the enjoyment of the game came from creating a strategy.

“How are you going to knock out seven marbles of 13 to win that game... [and] not only knock one marble out, where can I have my shooter end to knock the next one out?” Zaragoza said.

Competing at the National Level

Lengbehn, a former VFW member who served with the Air Force in Saudi Arabia and the

Philippines in 1957, said what stuck with him the most from the 1949 national tournament was how “quickly” he lost.

“I played the kid who ended up winning the tournament on the first game,” Lengbehn said, “and I missed my beginning shot by just a tad, and he got up and ran them, so I was out.”

And while there was a “little pressure,” Lengbehn said he “immensely” enjoyed the competition.

“We went from South Dakota to Pittsburgh [for] the tournament, then we watched the whole tournament,” Lengbehn said. “We watched this paraplegic kid. He never missed a shot. Then we extended the trip and went to Niagara Falls and saw all the sights out there in the East.”

During the national tournament, which Blatchford won, participants stayed in the barracks at Davis Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson.

“We got to see the attack dogs work and the Air Force guys come around when we were playing marbles,” said Blatchford, who served from 1966-72 in the Kansas National Guard as a heavy anti-armor weapons infantryman. He did not deploy overseas.

For Zaragoza, the atmosphere at the national tournament was exciting. It also was the first time he had ever flown in a plane and introduced him to new friends.

“I got to meet young kids from different states that I was not accustomed to,” Zaragoza said.

VFW Tournament Welcomed All

Though a reason for ending the tournament was “never really stated clearly,” McBride said the combination of the expense, losing a co-sponsor in Hortex (maker of Billy the Kid jeans), a nationwide focus on team sports and waning interest led to its conclusion.

But McBride said VFW’s tournament was different in its inclusiveness.

“For the most part, the VFW was a unique tournament because it was very open to everybody,” said McBride, who lives in the Kansas City, Mo., area. “There were all kinds of ethnicities allowed to play in the tournament. There was another national tournament going on that, in the ’40s, was still a segregated tournament.”

Zaragoza, a Latino, said his father taught him to never let the environment he was in cause him to react negatively.

“That gave me a determination, that even though I was in a different environment, I could compete with anybody here,” Zaragoza said. “I should not look at myself as a second-class

citizen, or [that] I cannot compete with anybody.”

Zaragoza, who faced off against another Hispanic child in the finals, was interested in more than becoming a national marbles champion.

“If I’m determined to do something, and I practice, and I dedicate myself to it, it can be done,” Zaragoza said. “Not only can I win a trophy, I can be an example to my brothers.”

This article is featured in the 2018 June/July issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor, VFW magazine. Photo courtesy of Hall of History Collection, Boys Town, Neb.