

The Truth About Punkin' Chunkin'

(short story by Carolyn Orban)

I'm not sure when I first discovered the white-knuckled, nail-biting suspense of the illustrious sport of Punkin' Chunkin,' but it was long enough ago for me to go from incredulity that people were actually doing this for recreation to admitting that I was genuinely hooked. The first time I watched was on a Thanksgiving night, as I sat digesting turkey and all the trimmings, too full to reach for the remote and too intrigued at the prospect of grown men (and women!) bashing innocent gourds to smithereens not to stay tuned. Punkin' Chunkin'? This I gotta see.

Punkin' Chunkin' is easy to understand. Unlike many other sports, where men run around on a field or court, throwing or hitting a ball or puck with the aid of hands, sticks, bats, or clubs, following a series of incomprehensible rules and dubious umpire or referee calls, if you chunk your punkin' the furthest and it doesn't explode before impact, you win. What could be simpler? Nevertheless, the sport proved a good deal more elaborate than the semi-literate name implies.

It turns out that entire teams of people spend the better part of the year in garages and back yards, fields, barns, and warehouses, investing large quantities of time, skill, and money to build the biggest, baddest, most efficient punkin' chunkin' machine they can imagine. They then come from all over the known country to pit their contraption against the competition. And a good deal of both science and invention go into their creations. Some of the entry categories include catapult, trebuchet, centrifugal force, human power, and air cannon, the goal, of course, being to chunk your punkin' the furthest in your category while hopefully keeping your machine intact for the next round. The science even extends to what type of punkins' are the best to chunk. Bigger isn't necessarily better at punkin' chunkin,' as the gourd has to stay together until it hits the ground to qualify. White is often preferable to orange, as they hold up better under duress.

Watching a catapult hurl a bright white or orange sphere across a vast field is amusing, exciting, and amazing. It isn't so much seeing who will win. It is seeing if the precarious-looking contraption will even work. Will it fling the punkin' into the distance or drop it next to its chagrined inventor in little punkin' pieces? Even the names of the teams are part of the entertainment, which such teams as American Chunker, Second Amendment Too, and Bad to the Bone setting records and returning year after year to challenge their opponents. Listening to the stories of how long and hard the participants have worked throughout the year to build and fine tune their machines, their babies, tugs at one's heart strings. Surely these stalwart troopers are as worthy of our admiration as any NFL star who plays a game for money. Chunkin' is a sport I can understand – ready, aim, fire – and truly enjoy.

Watching the serious chunkers compete for distance and ingenuity once made a fitting ending to a food-laden holiday evening, and I began to look forward to watching punkin' chunkin' the way some folks seek out football.

While there are other competitions around the country, the main event, the World Championship Punkin' Chunkin' competition, was held every November in Delaware, and that is where the official world records were set. [1] All went well until 2014, when Punkin' Chunkin' wasn't on TV until the weekend *after* Thanksgiving. I still made sure I was in front of the television to watch. Even the crowds at the event, with their punkin' themed clothing and hats, were entertaining. But something had changed. In addition to showing the actual contest, there were other events that had little to do with punkin' chunkin' beyond using the same machines. Someone chucked an old washing machine, while another tried to lift and throw a car, which resulted in the destruction of their invention. They chucked punkins' through the side of an abandoned trailer and then blew it up. "What gives?" I asked. "What does this have to do with Punkin' Chunkin'? It's gotten too big," I thought to myself. "It's so successful they want to improve it, and they're ruining it instead.

Alas! Punkin' Chunkin' was indeed ruined, but not for the reasons I thought. This year I waited in vain for the TV commercials that would let me know when and where I could see the noble contest. At last I went searching on the Internet for my sport of sports and learned the devastating news.

There *was* no Punkin' Chunkin' last year. The odd TV show I had seen was a compilation of footage from previous years and other fill-in material. No wonder it was so different, with so little chunkin' and so much nonsense. And there was no contest this year either. Punkin' Chunkin' – at least the really big, official championship – may be over for good.

Apparently a few years ago a young man riding an ATV across the punkin'-strewn field where the gourds are chucked was seriously injured. Even though it happened in Delaware, he later followed the South Florida custom and sued the Punkin' Chunkin' Association and the farmer who lent his field for the contest venue. After that, the farmer declined the use of his property for the next year, and the Association has been unable to find either a new location or an insurance company willing to insure the event. It would seem the combination of huge, homemade machines with lots of moving parts, flying pumpkins, ATV's, and, no doubt, at least some small measure of alcoholic beverages, seems a bit too risky a venture for the suit-and-tie executives in the insurance industry.

If only I could make them understand. If only I could get them to see how important this sport is. In an era where half the people in the country seem to take themselves too seriously trying to get rich, and the other half are obliviously staring into tiny screens while real life goes on around them unheeded, we need a sport like Punkin' Chunkin' to show us what is important. We need to be able to chuckle in amusement at the sheer outlandishness of this competition, to get out in the punkin' field and get our vicarious hands dirty with real earth and exploded pumpkin innards. It is events just such as this that have made America great, and to lose such a sport would truly be a tragedy!

Then again, anybody for some broccoli monocoli or watercress chess?

[1] The longest chunk ever recorded at the World Championship is 4,694.68 feet. The Guinness Book of World Records shows an even longer distance of 5,545.43 feet achieved at another contest in Utah.