

Not Your Dad's BB Gun

By Don Oldenburg
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When George W. Bush was 16 or so, the frogs in the pond outside his boyhood home in Midland, Tex., weren't the only targets the future president shot at with his trusty BB gun.

"He said, 'I'm going to count to 10, and you run all the way down the hall,' " the president's little brother, Neil Bush, recalled at a Utah Republican Party dinner in Provo two years ago, according to the Deseret News.

Big brother drawing a bead on the backsides of siblings Neil and Jeb must have left a mark because Neil also told the story to a class of Richmond second-graders. "I was running as fast as I can with my little lightweight summer pj's on, and then '7, 8, 9, 10!' Boom! I felt it on my right [butt] cheek," the Richmond.com news reported his recounting.

But those were simpler times. And BB guns aren't what they used to be -- not most of them. As indicated by the recent spate of BB gun sniping in Northern Virginia and the report this month from the American Academy of Pediatrics attributing about 21,000 injuries annually to BB guns and other air guns, America's Norman Rockwell-like nostalgia for the seemingly benign BB gun may be off target.

"What we think of as BB guns is a lot different than what we're looking at today," says Kraig Troxell, spokesman for the Loudoun County Sheriff's Office. "Some of these firearms are sold at traditional toy stores, but they aren't toys."

Loudoun County last week charged four teenage boys with malicious wounding after a BB gun was fired into a crowd of 20 teenagers on Halloween night in Sterling. Using a BB rifle equipped with a scope and powered by compressed carbon dioxide propulsion, they hit four teenagers, including a 14-year-old girl who was struck "less than an inch from her eye," law enforcement officials say.

The attack came within weeks of other area incidents that are giving BB guns a bad name: A 10-year-old boy was struck in the head while playing in his Alexandria yard, a 27-year-old Woodbridge woman was fired on from a van, a Nokesville man was shot in the eye and more than a dozen car windshields and businesses' windows were shot out in Manassas and Arlington.

"It's hard to speculate what was going through their minds -- whether it was a prank that turned out not to be funny at all," says Troxell.

He is uncertain why BB gun shootings seem to have spiked in the area recently. "I think a lot of people don't realize the harm that [BB guns] can cause."

That may be because of public perception lingering from when BB guns were thought of as no more harmful than "frogging" a buddy with a knuckle punch to the biceps or throwing an elbow rebounding a basketball. In the '40s, '50s, even '60s, they were a rite of passage, held in the same esteem as a good pocketknife.

"In my town, everybody had a BB gun and everybody shot everybody," says noted environmental activist Paul Watson, who grew up four decades ago in the small Canadian coastal town of St. Andrews in New Brunswick. "We used to play 'Cowboys and Indians' with real BB guns and bows and arrows."

Like George W. Bush, Watson once sighted down the barrel of his Daisy BB gun at somebody's buttocks and pulled the trigger. "Except for that boy, I never shot any living thing," he says, explaining that he was 12 at the time and the other boy was about to shoot a bird. Watson fired first, bruised the boy's rear and saved the bird. "A BB in the butt isn't a fatal shot," he says, but "I'm surprised we actually survived childhood."

Humorist Jean Shepherd's "A Christmas Story," a short story and movie classic about growing up in the '40s, is practically a boy's paean to BB guns. The only thing on 10-year-old Ralphie Parker's Christmas list is a Daisy "Red Ryder" -- the carbine-action, 200-shot lightning loader, range-model air rifle with a shock-proof, high-adventure combination trail compass and sundial built into the stock. It is, Shepherd proclaimed, "the Holy Grail of Christmas gifts."

Ralphie's epic quest to convince his parents, teachers and Santa that he should get a BB gun runs up against the inevitable refrain: "You'll shoot your eye out!" But back then it had the ring of motherly caution, like "Don't put your mouth on the public water fountain."

"You just weren't a boy unless you had a BB gun," says California air-gun collector Robert Beeman, "king of air guns," who has what's considered the world's largest collection -- 3,000 pieces ranging from an Austrian smokeless .46-caliber repeating military air gun from the 1700s to today's most powerful air guns. "Now you are much more likely to find a kid with a game console than with a real, functioning BB gun. You even mention a BB gun in a social setting and the conversation stops and people look at you."

Today it's a different world. The American Academy of Pediatrics' report said of the 21,000 air-gun-inflicted injuries each year -- which includes all degrees of injury, penetrating and nonpenetrating -- 4 percent require hospitalization. Between 1990 and 2000, air guns caused an average of four deaths each year, most to children younger than 15. The report came two weeks after a 13-year-old South Carolina boy accidentally killed an 8-year-old friend when the BB penetrated his chest and struck his heart.

"Many of us remember having had BB guns and didn't associate them with serious injury and death," says Danielle Laraque, a physician and professor of pediatrics at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York and

lead author of the study. But today, she says, "these nonpowder guns are not toys. It is important to say that because they are marketed at times as toys and carried in department stores and toy stores."

Virginia D. Nethercutt isn't your typical advocate for alerting the public about the dangers of BB guns. She grew up the daughter of a Green Beret who served in Vietnam. She and her husband are proud members of the National Rifle Association, do not support gun control and are avid hunters (he bagged a nine-point buck two weeks ago).

"We used to have BB gun fights, and it was nothing," says the Havelock, N.C., mother, recalling her childhood years and her lever-action Daisy BB gun.

But when her daughter, Kayla, was 9, a 16-year-old neighbor shot at her with a high-powered BB gun from 150 yards away. The pellet ricocheted off the pavement and lodged four inches deep in the girl's thigh. The state court convicted the boy of assault with a deadly weapon and intent to commit bodily harm.

"We were shocked because they tested the gun and it had the muzzle velocity of a .22, and a .22 has a mile range," says Nethercutt, whose daughter, now 17, recovered except for discomfort in her leg when playing sports. "We didn't know that BB guns were that powerful and we're avid gun people. Most people don't realize it. Parents need to know this."

The BB gun legacy changed from Ralphie's comical quest to the troubled Donnie Darko shooting the stuffing out of Smurfs with the advent of adult-grade air guns.

"The industry didn't sneak this over on everybody. Their sales pitch was that these guns are powerful," says Beeman, who was at the forefront of that market expansion, turning a modest mail-order air-gun company into the international business Beeman Precision Airguns.

In the early '70s, Beeman says, Daisy split the air-gun market by creating a new line of adult air guns that were considerably more powerful than its youth guns.

The Youth Line guns, which Daisy recommended for kids 12 and older with adult supervision, fire BBs or pellets at a velocity of less than 350 feet per second, he says. Ralphie's Red Ryder, Daisy's second-best seller, was 280 to 350 fps. The "hardest hitting" of Daisy's traditional BB guns, Beeman says, was the Model 25 -- 25 million sold in 58 variations from 1914 to 1979 -- which fired in the 400 fps range.

"Around 350 feet per second is a figure you want to keep in mind," says Beeman. "At 300 to 400 fps, that's where penetration occurs in a human skin. Below 350 fps, it is generally considered capable of only limited harm. Above 350 is considered very harmful or lethal. You go into the skull probably at around 500."

The Power Line guns, recommended for ages 16 and older with adult supervision, often more than doubled the Youth Line velocities. "Those are the ones that are being pointed at by the consumer advocates who say

there's a risk," says Beeman.

Most of the powerful adult air guns don't look much like the youth models, says Beeman. The Condor -- which came out in March, is made by AirForce and sells for about \$600 -- looks like a black stealth weapon. It shoots a 14.3-grain lead pellet at 1,250 fps for the first five shots and 1,200 fps for the next 15 -- promoted as faster than any air rifle on the market.

Like most gun advocates, Beeman believes proper instruction is the most important step toward safe handling of any firearm -- including a BB gun. He credits Daisy for spending millions of dollars to train millions of youngsters in the safe handling of guns, and says the NRA has also tried to improve BB gun safety.

In fact, listening to the white-bearded Beeman, one might mistake him for Ralphie's BB-gun-delivering Santa of old. He doesn't hesitate to make the case that BB guns -- the ones made for youngsters, that is -- aren't really any more dangerous than the Red Ryder Ralphie had on his list.

But there's that safety issue. The incidents. The pediatrics report. "You'll shoot your eye out."

"You can get a big case against the danger of bubble gum," Beeman says. He's loaded with statistics to counter the pediatrics report and indicate that bicycles and skateboards, even coins that are shoved into ears and up noses, result in far more injuries than BB guns.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission estimates that in 2003, there were 550,000 to 600,000 injuries associated with bicycles and 97,640 injuries from skateboards that required emergency room treatment, compared with 19,504 for air guns -- including the high-powered air guns.

Laraque points out that there are more bikes and skateboards in use. However, she adds, "one doesn't negate the other. This report is in line with reports on anything that causes injuries."

Beeman persists: "When we talk about 21,000 kids were injured, we have to stand back and say, what did that injury mean? Was it a finger cut or did it go into his brain?"

He says the pediatrics statistics even count as a "BB accident" when someone sticks a BB in his ear. "What I'm saying is, for every several billion BBs produced, there is only one injury recorded," says Beeman. "BB guns and air guns are probably among the safest recreational objects around."

Tell that to Neil Bush. Although the White House did not respond to a request that the president recall his BB gun-brandishing days, in hindsight, the president's brother did tell those Richmond school kids that shooting siblings and other people with BBs is "a really stupid thing."

Ralphie's quest for a BB gun in the cult film "A Christmas Story" speaks to the nostalgia society has for the toy. "BB guns and air guns are probably among the safest recreational objects around," says Robert Beeman,

known as the "king of air guns." He owns what's considered the world's largest collection of air guns -- 3,000 pieces. Below, Beeman in his gun vault.

 **Comments**