

# Ring-Side Shooters

By Douglas McCombs, Curator

**Doug Opperman, four-time  
Pittsburgh City Marble Champion  
(1937-40), prepares to shoot.**

Gift of Douglas Opperman

**1995 Girl's National Marbles  
Tournament champion Stephanie Zlokas.**

Philadelphia Inquirer



Over the years, Pittsburgh has lost some important reminders of its past. Gone are the steel mills, Hornes department store, most of its trolleys, and new episodes of Mister Roger's Neighborhood. But one thing Pittsburgh hasn't lost is its marbles.

There's something alluring about watching the swirling colors of glass and agate marbles, of hearing the clacking sound of one small sphere hitting another, and feeling the cool smoothness between one's fingertips. The game of marbles has enticed Western Pennsylvania kids to knuckle down to serious competition in streets, playgrounds, and back alleys since the middle of the 19th century, and possibly much earlier.



**Pittsburgh marble  
players, c. 1937**



Gift of Douglas Opperman

The game is played within a ring 10 feet in diameter. Mibsters, or marbles players, try to knock 13 marbles out of the ring with a shooter marble, which must remain inside the ring after the shot has been played. The best players perfect a backspin to keep the shooter from straying outside the ring. Concentration is essential for success.

By the early 20th century, urban reformers and educators began to understand that playgrounds and outdoor recreation taught children positive values and simultaneously offered fresh air and exercise. Marbles garnered more respect from adults who helped to transform the game into a competitive sport for the nation's youth. Pittsburgh shared in that development. During the 1920s, Warrington Park in the Beltzhoover section of Pittsburgh became the battleground for the city's earliest marbles tournaments, organized by *The Pittsburgh Press*. The tournament later moved to the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House in the Hill District.

On a national level, marbles was likewise gaining recognition as a true sport, able to attract young players from across the nation. The Scripps-Howard newspaper chain sponsored the first National Marbles Tournament held in Atlantic City, N.J., in 1923. Champions from 40 city tournaments met in early summer to compete against one another, ultimately deciding the first national champion. That honor went to Harlin McCoy from Columbus, Ohio. Four years later, Joseph Medvidovich of Clairton, the 13-year-old son of Croatian parents, initiated Western Pennsylvania's long line of national marbles champions.

Walter Lease, Jr., can be credited for producing the great marbles players of Allegheny County. The North Catholic High School math teacher and World War II veteran taught dozens of National Marbles Tournament competitors and helped build the marbles ring

on St. Michael Street on Pittsburgh's South Side, the training camp for many area champions. His last pupil to take the crown in Wildwood was Stephanie Zlokas. Walter died just days before the event, yet despite her sadness, Stephanie persevered.

Pittsburgh is also home to another great mib king (that's "marbles champion" in ring-side parlance). North Side native Douglas Opperman took several city championships in the late 1930s and competed at the National Marbles Tournament in New Jersey. In 1940, he was invited to participate in another championship, the Marble King Tournament, held at the World's Fair in New York. The event was sponsored by businessman Berry Pink, a co-owner of Peltier Glass in Paden City, W.V., manufacturer of Marble King glass marbles. Pink's promotions boosted the sale of glass marbles nearly 5,000 percent throughout the early 1930s. Doug Opperman used his highly developed backspin technique to capture the Marble King title, setting another mark of distinction for Western Pennsylvania.

With such a long and distinguished history, Western Pennsylvania can proudly claim its stellar position in the sport of marbles. While champions remain young, the youthful pastime has matured. And hopefully, the cry "knuckle down" will continue to gather crowds and produce winners for decades to come. 🌟

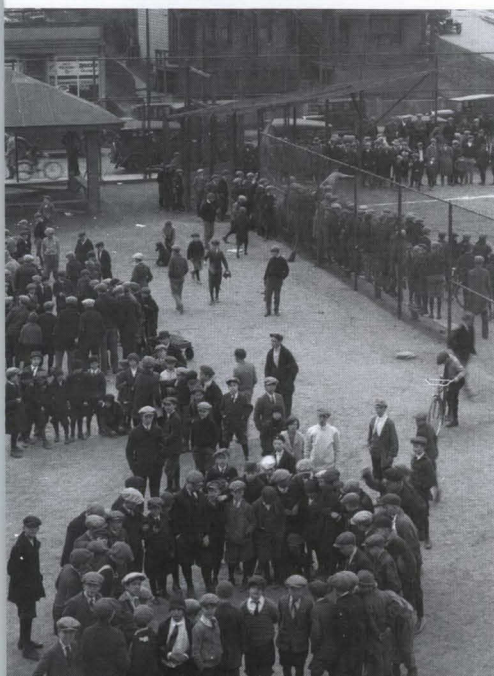
**Allegheny County** has had more winners than any other county, adding most recently **Carly Miller**, the 2004 Girl's National Marbles Tournament champion. Other local champs include:

**BOYS:**

**Joseph Medvidovich** (1927)  
**Richard Ryabik** (1943)  
**Benjamin Ryabik** (1946)  
**Don Sklar** (1947)  
**Ray Jones** (1955)  
**Mark O'Mahoney** (1962)  
**Melvin Garland** (1966)  
**Ray Morgano** (1970)  
**Larry Kokos** (1974)  
**Richard Usner** (1975)  
**Walt Morgano** (1977)  
**Greg Yakich** (1984)  
**Nicky Piatek** (1989)  
**David McGee** (1993)

**GIRLS:**

**Peggy Mullen** (1962)  
**Jacqueline Izaj** (1965)  
**Pat Yurkovich** (1967)  
**Maureen Regan** (1969)  
**Karen Yurkovich** (1970)  
**Kathy Pazkowski** (1972)  
**Susan Regan** (1974)  
**Judy Bosiljevac** (1976)  
**Diane Bertosh** (1978)  
**Shannon Capasso** (1988)  
**Kim Shuttleworth** (1994)  
**Stephanie Zlokas** (1995)



Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection, Archives Service Center, University of Pittsburgh

**The first round of a marble tournament in  
Pittsburgh's Warrington Park, April 26, 1926.**