

Gaga ball becoming the great playground equalizer



Madison Elementary School 5th graders including play a game of Gaga Ball during recess at the Wheaton school on Sept. 24, 2015. The game is a "kinder, gentler" version of dodge ball.

Joan Cary Chicago Tribune

Gaga ball — think kinder, gentler form of dodgeball — a big hit on the playgrounds.

When the doors open for recess at Madison Elementary School in Wheaton, kids and more kids charge straight to the school's gaga pits and jump inside.

"Ga-ga, ga-ga," they chant as the ball is dropped in the center of the pit and the game of gaga begins. Other classmates quickly gather around to cheer and wait their chance to join in.

The old-but-new-to-some game of gaga — what some call a kinder and gentler form of dodgeball — is being chosen over traditional games on a number of playgrounds these days. And parents, educators, camp counselors and other grown-ups — and kids too — say the spread of gaga fever is a good thing.

They call the game of gaga "the great playground equalizer." It doesn't require a strong throwing arm, fast legs or superb hand-eye coordination. Almost anybody can play.

"It puts everybody on an even playing field. Your jocks, your Lego kids, your readers — everybody's even in gaga ball," said Madison physical education teacher Joe Cortesi, who helped the school put two pits on the playground in spring this year.

The name "gaga" to some may initially conjure images of a female singer. But the gaga at playgrounds and camps is actually a decades-old game. Many believe it originated in Israel. Gaga means "touch, touch" in Hebrew. It was being played at some Jewish summer camps in the U.S. by the early 1970s, but the game's popularity is much greater nowadays and growing.



Madison Elementary School student Luke Grout explains how to play Gaga ball on Sept. 24, 2015. A lightweight ball is dropped in the center of a pit. A player then slaps the ball, trying to hit others on or below the knee to eliminate them from the pit. (Antonio Perez, Chicago Tribune)

In 2010, Cliff Silverman, of Libertyville, played gaga at a daddy-daughter camp and saw how it appealed to both girls and dads. He began designing gaga hardware and items used to make a gaga pit and play the game. He now sells his items at trade shows and through his website (gagaballpits.com).

"When I first started taking this to trade shows for summer camps, maybe 15 percent knew what gaga was," Silverman said. "I had to get people in the pit and teach them. Now I go to these same shows and only 15 percent don't know what it is."

Gaga is played inside a hexagon or octagon pit about 15 to 25 feet wide with walls generally 24 to 30 inches high and built on any surface: blacktop, grass, sand, wood chips or carpet. The number of players at the start of the game varies.

Players start with one hand touching a wall. A lightweight ball — like those used for kickball — is dropped in the center. Then someone slaps the ball underhand, attempting to hit the other players on or below the knee to eliminate them from the pit.

The last player in the pit wins, but the game is more complicated than that. Players cannot hold or throw the ball. If someone hits the ball out of the pit without it touching a person, they're out. If someone outside the pit catches that ball, he or she is back in. So being outside the pit doesn't completely exclude you from the game.

"It's kinda like dodgeball. I like gaga ball a lot better," said Madison fifth-grader Rian Klabunde. "I just feel like it's not that competitive, and it's really just a fun way to hang out. Dodgeball is a little bit more competitive, and I don't really like that."

The rules, the soft ball that's used and the confined space help keep the action safe and less subjected to athletic prowess than other traditional games.

"Skill-level difference can make or break the fun in a game like soccer or basketball," Silverman said. "But being athletic and quick doesn't ensure you're going to be a winner in this game."

Cortesi applied for a [PTA](#) grant to get Madison a pit after witnessing the popularity of the game at neighboring Bower Elementary in Warrenville. Parents and students helped him construct the first pit from wood and Silverman's steel brackets during spring break.

"It was a mega massive hit," recalls Cortesi. "The lines were crazy during recess and so we decided to build a second one. It's great for getting kids out and away from TV and video games. And it's pretty cool when you see middle schoolers and high schoolers coming over to play together after school. All you need is a pit and a soft ball."

Isaac Brubaker, day and overnight director at Camp Henry Horner, a Jewish Council for Youth Services camp in Ingleside, said the camp had gaga in one of the spare cabins at summer camp and the pit was always full of kids.

"The gaga cabin always smelled like sweat. It's a fast-pace game," he said. "So we moved it outside. There are always kids playing a pickup game."

The game isn't flashy. Without kids in it, the pit looks like a pen.

"It doesn't typically catch a kid's eye," said Jackie Keane, executive director at the High Ridge YMCA in Chicago. "It wasn't until we got a couple kids to get inside. Then it drew more and more kids. All different ages can play, and kids of all different skill sets."

Although parents might find their child comes home with a scraped knee or hand, there are few complaints about the game other than that kids can get really dirty.

Evanston dad Dan Israelite says his gaga-obsessed sons have "gaga knuckles," roughed up knuckles from scraping the ground as they slap the ball. The Israelite boys — Isaac, 9, and Desi, 7 — learned about gaga while spending time at McGaw YMCA's Camp Echo in Fremont, Mich.

"They can play for hours and hours," Israelite said. "It's amazing how popular it is and how it stays this way. It has not lost an ounce of popularity. It's the go-to game."

"This is the best part. All of the kids who aren't in the pit stand around and then go flying over the railing to get back in the next game when one ends. It's like ants over a piece of candy. ... We've watched our kids play a lot of organized sports. It's not always the best sportsmanship being shown. But this is just fun. There is very little screaming and yelling that's not positive."

Isaac Israelite loves the game and wishes he could play more often.

"It's really awesome how everyone can play," said Isaac, a fourth-grader at Lincoln Elementary in Evanston, who also participates in organized football and basketball. "All you need is to be old enough to know what to do.

"Boys and girls play" he said. "I know girls who are better than me."

Isaac's school doesn't have a gaga pit, but he said a friend of his who used to sit out of recess "the whole time" went to Camp Echo where Isaac invited him to play gaga ball. "He started playing and he really liked it," he said.

Although there are basic rules, schools and camps may vary them according to the setting or age of the participants. For example, Madison School only allows 24 students in the pit at one time.

Lauren Gilbert, 10, of Lake Villa, who was introduced to gaga ball two years ago at a summer camp at the Gurnee Park District, where her mother is a marketing manager, plays a version of the game with her friends called "continuous." If you get hit below the knee you're out, but when the person who hit you gets hit by someone else, you're back in. To Isaac Israelite, that version is known as "reincarnation."

"I like that both boys and girls can play and everybody is included," said Lauren of gaga ball. "It's easy to learn the rules and it doesn't require much skill. Everybody just plays."

Leaders at Camp Echo offered nighttime gaga for a recent teen group. They wrapped the players in glow-in-the-dark sticks and played at 10 p.m., said summer camps director Sarah Cort, who finds the pits usually packed with players.

Gaga's popularity is not just in the Midwest. Two Manhattan moms opened The Gaga Center, which they claim is New York City's first and only indoor gaga arena, in February 2012.

Marcy Singer called Alissa Schmelkin and said her sons were barraging her with stories about gaga when they came home from day camp.

"What's this gaga?" she asked Schmelkin, who was hearing the same from her sons.

Now The Gaga Center, with three indoor pits, is sold out every weekend, with costs ranging from \$20 to \$35 an hour, Schmelkin said. They have after-school programs and are constantly booking birthday parties as well as team-building and corporate events.

Said Schmelkin: "It's not just for kids."

She and Singer recently opened a second location, in Scarsdale, N.Y., and would like to expand to cities like Chicago, she said.

"There are lots of kids getting tons of instruction in sports — how to hold the bat, which way to move ... fine-tuning motor skills. This is just the opposite," Schmelkin said. "They can just go in and with little instruction, play and have fun."

Silverman says his most popular kit is octagonal and has 30-inch-high walls. It costs about \$520 plus the cost of wood, about \$230, he said. The pits can be designed for wheelchair accessibility and made for indoors or out, for permanent placement or to be mobile.

Tim Callahan, principal at Madison, recently watched fifth-graders playing during recess and listened while some provided sports commentary and supported their friends.

"One of the most positive things about it is that we had the boys and girls who were often disengaged during recess," Callahan said. "We don't have that as much anymore."

He added: "You don't have to be particularly skilled or athletic to play this. It levels the playing field for everybody."

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