

# Battle Royal

Deep in the heart of the Derbyshire dales, there survives a medieval sport where almost anything goes except murder. MH visits the town of Ashbourne where, each year, townsfolk take to the streets to do violent battle in the traditional game of Royal Shrovetide Football

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## RALLY THE TROOPS

01 Players gather in a car park and sing the National Anthem. Soon after, 'throw up' marks the start of the annual brawl between those north and south of the Henmore Brook



# The man at the front didn't see the fist until it was too late.

It wasn't aimed at him, it was more a flailing, chancing glance. "Sorry mate," shouts a voice from the crowd. "But could you move out of the fucking way?" Before either man can take offence, a warning cry rings out and the hundreds-strong crowd turns as one. Somewhere ahead is the briefest glimpse of what looks like an oversized football. It's enough to turn Ashbourne's high street into a cyclone of charging men, fighting, shoving and barging their way toward the game ball. A shaven-headed man has another player in a headlock against the boarded up windows of Costa Coffee. The sign above Lou Lou's lingerie shop has been knocked clean off in the crush. "Where's the ball, where's the ball?" someone yells. "It's under the bus," shouts another, gesturing toward a single-decker in danger of being lost in the melee. "Push toward the river lads... we've got to get it in the river."

As long as anyone can remember, residents of Ashbourne – a sleepy market town in the Derbyshire Dales with a population of 8377 – have taken to the streets each Shrove Tuesday and Ash Wednesday for the annual game of Royal Shrovetide Football. It's no ordinary football match: there are no referees, no overpriced tickets or overpaid players – organisers won't even confiscate the top of your bottle of Fanta. This is a game of blood, guts and inter-town rivalry, forged along the mud-paths of medieval Britain. An Easter egg hunt, with a single oversized cork football the object of pursuit, the only prize a bloody nose

and a pat on the back in the pub.

"We've played the game almost every year since the 1600s, though similar games were played across the country as far back as the Middle Ages," Ian Bates, Ashbourne's 83-year-old mayor and 45-year Shrovetide veteran tells us. Bates hung up his Shrovetide boots aged 60, but remains a key figure, steeped in Shrovetide law. "They say it originated when a severed head was tossed into the crowd after an execution."

Thankfully, there are no severed heads today, only a single ball and two teams – the Up'ards, born north of the town's dissecting waterway, and the Down'ards, born south of the river – who try to "goal" the ball by banging it three times against one of two stone plinths set three miles apart. Goals accumulate throughout the day, with play ending when the first goal after 5pm is scored.

It's often claimed the only rule of this ancient match is that you're not allowed to murder. Certainly that still holds true; but even Ashbourne has had to adapt to the complexities of modern life. You can no longer carry the ball in a "motorised vehicle" either.

"I cannot emphasise enough how important Shrovetide is to Ashbourne," Bates continues. "I remember back in the '60s, a young Down'ard wanted to score so he could keep the ball, and decided it'd be easier to score an own goal. There were members of his family that died decades later still refusing to speak to him."

Clearly, passions run deep – even if very few people outside the small town have heard of the sport.



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## FIGHTING TALK

Thirty minutes before 'throw up', *MH* makes camp in Down'ard stronghold The Wheel Inn, where team captain Brendan Harwood stands on a low wall before 100 eager comrades. His speech is of Churchillian proportions.

"Over these two days we are a band of brothers," he bellows. "We may not have the numbers they've got, but we have the heart. We'll smash them through the car parks, we'll smash them through the fields and we'll smash them through the rivers. Plus, we haven't won in six years, so let's smash the smiles off those Up'ards' faces."

Players cheer and punch the air. They're a mixed bunch, mostly made up of men aged 18 to 50. Many wear rugby tops or running gear, though eyebrows are raised at a few 'out-of-towners' wearing stag-do get ups in a corner.

Today the Down'ards are outnumbered, with 300 Up'ards – including Ashbourne RUFC – waiting to take on the 100 underdogs. Luckily, the Down'ards aren't afraid to get physical, should the situation call for it. "I've got friends who are Up'ards, sure," says Mark Harrison, 52, "But I'd think nothing of belting



## BRAWL FOR ONE

02 Down'ard 'Salty' claimed to have "nearly drowned some fucker" when the ball went in the river, before locating his wife who was watching his whisky  
03-04 Scrambles on Ashbourne high street take no prisoners, and as such, properties have learned to take appropriate precautions



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“It’s often claimed the only rule is that you’re not allowed to murder”

**FULL STREAM AHEAD**

05-06 The Down’ards’ best chance of ‘goaling’ is to get the ball to the river that divides the two sides, offering a clear run on goal. It takes a committed Ashbournian to jump in the Henbrook on a brisk February afternoon.



**LET BATTLE COMMENCE**

them, whether he’s my butcher or my brother-in-law. If someone comes toward me with the ball, I don’t see the point in tussling with them for it. It’s easier to just hit him and take it.”

It’s a brutal game, but – miraculously – among the concussions and broken bones, there has been only one recorded death, from a heart attack. And despite Harrison’s bravado, should a Down’ard stumble on the battlefield, an Up’ard will be there to pick him up.

As with all physically demanding activities, a solid training regime pays dividends. Outside the pub, engineer Ben Liverman, 35, is stretching his quads. “I’ve been training for today since September,” he says. “Me and a bunch of Down’ard lads started with light, four or five-mile runs. Then as the day got closer, we mixed it up between relay work up hills, walk-jog-sprints between lampposts and sprinting with medicine balls. It’s not a vanity thing; I train for Shrovetide because I want to be the best.”

Of course, like any sport combining strength with stamina, food is fuel – and nobody takes this more seriously than 29-year-old engineer Alistair Eastwood. “At about half 10 this morning I had a meal of bacon wrapped in sausage meat with cheese, a naan bread and a stir fry,” he says. “I need to carb up and load up – this could go on until 10pm.”

By 1.55pm hundreds have gathered in a neutral car park to sing *God Save the Queen*. Then, to a deafening roar, the ball is thrown into the crowd, vanishing into a mass of flailing hands, heads and feet. It’s at least an hour before we see it again.

In a way, Shrovetide is like the world’s biggest game of pinball. The ball is hardly ever kicked but mostly held in a scrum – known as ‘the hug’ – which bounces about the town at random as each team pushes toward its goal.

“It’s the most unpredictable game you’ll see,” says Dr Toby Betteridge, a 25-year veteran of the game who emigrated to New Zealand five years ago but returns every year to take part. Despite the chaos, tactics are important, with the Down’ards focused on getting the ball into the river early on. “Not everyone likes getting in the river at this time of year and it can give us a clear run on goal,” Betteridge says. “It’s also good to get the hug onto streets that lead downhill to your goal – nobody wants to push a hug uphill. You might also try to sneak the ball out through the legs while creating a diversion like throwing a fake ball in the air for people to chase.”

By 3pm, the hug has stood in stalemate, swinging between Wigley’s Shoes and WH Smith, for an hour. Finally, the Down’ards make headway, forcing the crush past Nigel’s Top Quality Butcher toward the river. Half an hour later, Adam Craner a 28-year-old Waitrose worker built like a small van, trudges over the bridge, his beard dripping. We ask him where the ball’s gone. “It’s in the pub,” he says, as if that were completely normal. “There’s



**ONWARDS AND UP'ARDS**  
 07-10 The game has been played from at least 1667, and the tradition shows no sign of abating. As well as *God Save the Queen*, the game has its own anthem sung at a pre-game ceremony, the chorus of which goes "Tis a glorious game, deny it who can, that tries the pluck of an Englishman"

“Shrovetide is a souvenir from a time when a man’s world was his town”

really only one way for it to go now and that’s over the beer-garden wall into the river. But it’ll be getting pretty tasty in there now. There’ll be punches and kicks thrown and some very choice words said.”  
 Sure enough, the ball is in the river. Then it’s not. Someone’s thrown it over the bridge back onto the street. There’s pandemonium as scores of young men sprint past, trying to work out where it’s gone. “I nearly drowned some fucker in the river just now,” grumbles a soaked through Down’ard with a mohawk. “It got fruity in that water. Now, where’s my wife, she’s got my bottle of whisky.”

**MUD AND GUTS**  
 As darkness falls, word begins to spread that despite the Down’ards’ lion-share of possession, the Up’ards have broken away in the fields just out of town. Before long we hear they’ve scored, which – because it’s after 5pm – means the game is over. The Up’ards have won 1-0.  
 Back in The Wheel, the mood is sombre. “This hurts more than seeing your football team lose a Champions League final,” says Craner, plastic pint glass in hand. “We had them on the ropes all day but they got lucky. Sometimes it just comes down to the bounce of the ball.”  
 But despite the mud, the bruises, the drunk and exhausted men staggering

about in the twilight, there’s still another day to right wrongs. Shrovetide is an eccentric sport that couldn’t feel more medieval if Ridley Scott directed the film. But it’s more than just a brawl with a ball. It’s a souvenir from a time when a man’s world was his town, when the most brutal men became sporting legends. Today, in Asbourne at least, not much has changed.  
 “What keeps us going?” Livermann asks. “The belief that we can win; that anyone can be a hero. The Up’ards are laughing now, but we’ll have our day, be that tomorrow, next year or 10 years from now. Shrovetide will never die.”