

Paintball players insist the game is for fun, not pain

By Lisa Twiestmeyer
Staff Reporter

A white flag hangs motionless from a gnarled branch deep in the serenity of the woods.

Sunlight splatters through the dense growth of trees and brush onto the rough terrain of the forest floor. Birds create a clamor that seems deafening in the tense silence.

A twig snaps.

"You can smell 'em, they're so close," a man dressed in camouflage whispers in a low voice, crouching invisibly in the weeds.

"I see 'em in the bushes up there," says another man, his weapon poised.

Suddenly, two masked, olive-drab figures spring from the growth a few yards ahead and run.

"You got a line on any of them?"

"It's not a clear shot!"

The second man aims his weapon and fires it through the trees at one of the retreating figures.

"Hit!" the figure yells, and freezes as a blue liquid runs from a spot on his arm.

"You got one, Lar!"

An unknowing observer may have assumed the 15 men were preparing for battle, or at least a military exercise.

Their activities on that August morning in the woods near Conestoga Lake southwest of Lincoln required physical stamina, marksmanship and strategic planning. But war, or anything military, they said, was the farthest thing from their minds.

The men were enjoying a game of Capture the Flag as part of a sometimes controversial sport rapidly growing in popularity across the country -- paintball.

Paintball is a sport some would call a war game involving battle-type strategies and a weapon. Players fire air guns that shoot gelatin capsules filled with water-soluble paint at the "enemy" during games of strategy such as Capture the Flag or Ambush.

The sport and the appearance of the players may conjure up suspicious images of paramilitary training to many. But appearances are deceiving, the players contest, and they are quick to rebut any connections people see between paintball and "the real thing."

"If a military guy comes out here looking for realism, he's not going to have it," says Jon Cleal, 32, operations manager at All-Makes Office Equipment Co. and organizer of the Lincoln group of paintball players.

Jessica Sparks, a member of the board of directors for the International Paintball Players Association, said the first paintball game was played in New Hampshire in 1981.

Three people, a stockbroker, a writer and a ski-shop owner, came up with the idea to get a group together to see who would be better at capturing flags in the woods. They fired paint guns that were used for marking cattle and trees, she said.

The sport has grown to 675,000 annual participants nationwide, Sparks said. The association estimates 3 million people have played the sport in 21 countries, she said, and many corporations have organized their own teams.

Cleal said he played paintball for the first time six or seven years ago with friends in Chicago. The game already was big in metropolitan areas and on the coasts, he said, but no one in Nebraska was playing.

About two years ago, he said, he heard of a group in Omaha who had tried the sport. He and a friend then decided to buy some equipment and start a team in Lincoln.

By word of mouth, news of the sport spread to their friends and colleagues. Now 15 to 20 men gather each time the group gets together for a game, he said.

At a recent get-together about a week ago, the men began with two half-hour games of Capture the Flag.

In that game, players divide into two teams and set up "forts" on opposite sides of the woods, which measure about 150 by 300 yards. The teams try to capture their opponents' team's flag from its fort and return it to their home fort without getting hit.

After a lunch break, they began Ambush, similar to hide-and-seek. In Ambush, a few players hide in the woods and the rest try to flush them out. The game ends when either the "hiders" or "seekers" all have been hit.

Some of the men who participated that day were full-fledged paintball enthusiasts, who play at least twice a month. Others were playing for the first time. But no matter what their experience level, all agreed that the game is just that -- a game.

"Some people say it's paramilitary but it isn't," Cleal said. "It's like a sport. It might look paramilitary, but that's not the atmosphere."

Most of the players said they enjoy paintball simply for the physical activity, like any other sport. Bruce Kolb, 28, a bindery operator at Foote and Davies in Lincoln, said paintball is a sport that gives him the chance to exercise and relieve stress.

Kolb compared paintball to rugby.

"You've both got a goal, but instead of tackling, you get hit with a paintball. . . I never have a military mindset."

"It's like a game of hide and seek and tag for grown-ups," said Larry Kerrigan, 29, a graduate student in geography at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "Half the fun is dressing up."

While the dressing up may be fun, some players admit that the camouflage, military type outfits and masks the players wear sometimes make people wary of the sport.

A man near Rulo once bought a franchise to sell paintball equipment and organize a team, Cleal said. After two killings



Left: Clockwise from left: Bruce Kolb, Jon Cleal, Scott Workman, and Scott Keel display some of the various weapons used in Paintball.
Center: Sam Rupp stuffs weeds in his fatigues for added camouflage. One player told Rupp he looked like a welder from Cambodia.
Below right: Two team members scurry through the woods during a game of capture the flag. Participants are required to wear eye, ear and face protection.
Photos by William Lauer

there in 1985 believed to be associated with an ultra-conservative group which believes it is responsible for law enforcement, people began to associate the paintball players in their camouflage uniforms with that group.

"As soon as that happened, he sold his stuff and went out of business," Cleal said.



Sparks said the association is aware that some people don't understand what's going on when they see a group of people dressed in camouflage running around with weapons in the woods.

To combat this, she said, the association has begun organizing arena games that spectators can watch, much like football.

"That takes it out of the camouflage and the woods," Sparks said.

The association also is forming a code of conduct for paintball players, she said, to encourage safety and to give the public a positive image of the game.

"It's a game, a game of tag," she said. "The first time I got tagged by a paintball, I remember thinking 'Oh boy, I'm glad this isn't real.' To say they (the players) glorify any actual killing, we know it's not true. We like it because it's a game."

Cleal said he stresses that players avoid military terminology while playing. He discourages violent words like "shoot" or "kill" during the games, and tells players to say "hit" or "marked" instead.

Safety also is important, Cleal said. He requires all players to follow strict rules while playing, including wearing goggles, ear protection, masks, padding and having all skin covered. He will not allow anyone under age 18 to play without a parent or guardian present, he said.

Cleal said he also requires that if anyone who is not part of the game is spotted in the woods, the players must stop the game immediately.

With the proper clothing and protection, a player will not even feel when he has been hit, Cleal said, but a hit on bare skin feels

similar to a snap by a rubber band.

"I spend about 20 minutes briefing everyone on the safety regulations and equipment," Cleal said. "There is really no safety danger and we've never had any injuries or problems."

Mike Kolb, Bruce Kolb's cousin, who organizes the Lincoln team with Cleal, said the lack of physical contact makes paintball a less violent sport than most others.

"I've played a lot of working man's flag football," said Kolb, 34, who works for the Lincoln Fire Department. "In this game tempers don't flare. It's absolutely taboo to run up and touch someone. There is no physical contact."

Paintball Sports, a magazine for paintball enthusiasts, published sports injury statistics from the National Safety Council in its September issue. The statistics show that according to yearly injuries per 1,000 participants, paintball is the safest sport out of the 27 sports rated -- safer than bowling and fishing.

Kolb said, paintball reminds him of his younger days. "Sometimes I feel old, but I get out there, and it's kind of like being a kid again. We've just got bigger toys. You know, they say, the only difference between men and boys is the price of their toys."

And some players take their toys quite seriously. The standard single-shot Splat Master gun, which Cleal leases to players for \$5 a day, costs about \$90. But many players have invested in more expensive, high-tech models.

For example, Kolb owns a fully automatic SMG 60 model, which he said cost about \$350.

Many of the gun owners justify buying expensive models because they no longer buy regular guns. In fact, several of the players who were once avid hunters said they virtually have given up hunting.

"I get out there, get a lot of exercise, get to know a lot of different people, and when I leave, I haven't hurt anyone," Kolb said.

Sam Rupp, a quality control inspector at ISCO who has played paintball for two years, agreed.

"Lots of us used to hunt, and now we do this," said Rupp, 29. "Now when there's nice weather . . . I think of paintball instead of hunting."

Cleal said he wants more hunters to try paintball, and also would like to see more college students try it. Eventually, he said, he would like to see paintball become an intramural sport on campus.

Two UNL students tried paintball for the first time that morning, and were enthusiastic about playing again.

David Sipherd, a senior majoring in business administration, and Dennis Champoux, a junior advertising major, said they want to play again and would consider buying their own guns.

"This is cheap entertainment," Champoux said. "Five dollars for a whole day is reasonable."

Cleal said that although Nebraska has probably the smallest group of paintball players in the country, he is confident the numbers will grow if more Nebraskans hear about it and try it. "Nebraska is kind of a last frontier for paintball," he said, "but we'll get it."

