

# The Yo-Yo: Its Rise and

It may be little more than a spinning  
disk on a string . . .



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. . . but the yo-yo  
has proven its  
popularity with  
kids of all ages,  
from ancient  
Greece to the  
United States.



# Fall



by David F. Crosby

**T**he wooden disk fell and then climbed back up a string—and people on the busy street corners in Santa Barbara, California, were transfixed. During the winter of 1927 everyone from wide-eyed children to men in business suits stopped to watch as Pedro Flores showed off his abilities with a yo-yo, swinging the toy in wide loops, letting it “sleep” as it spun at the end of the string, then waking it up with a jerk. But Flores couldn’t spend much time demonstrating his skill. The 29-year-old immigrant from the Philippines was a bellboy on break,

**Left: Yo-yo expert Johnny Farmer shows his skill as he handles four at a time during a demonstration in 1961. Above: Pedro Flores sparked the yo-yo craze in the United States. His marketing slogan was, “If it isn’t Flores, it isn’t a yo-yo.” Donald F. Duncan used a similar slogan after he bought the yo-yo trademark from Flores.**

and he had luggage to carry and tips to collect. However, the reaction to his performances got him thinking, and though all but hard-core yo-yo enthusiasts have forgotten him, Pedro Flores would go on to spark a yo-yo craze in the United States that continues to this day.

The plaything that Flores used to fascinate the crowds in Santa Barbara was nothing new. It was one of mankind’s oldest toys. As long ago as 500 B.C. the ancient Greeks were depicting yo-yos on urns. They called the toy the “disk” and liked to decorate the metal, wood, and terra cotta playthings with pictures of their gods.

The disk reached the Philippines in the 1500s, where it became known as the yo-yo, which means “come back” in the native Tagalog language. The yo-yo soon became the Filipino national pastime, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the Philippines had produced some of the world’s best yo-yo players.

By the eighteenth century, the yo-yo had made its way to

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BELOW: METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART. RIGHT: GIRAUDON/ART RESOURCE, NY



Europe. The French labeled it the *incroyable* (incredible), and many French aristocrats and their children enjoyed playing with the toy. It earned a new name during the French Revolution, when Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety waged war against the upper classes, and the guillotine began to separate French nobles from their heads. Many aristocrats fled the country and the *incroyable* soon became known as the *l'emigrette*, or "emigrant."

From France the yo-yo traveled across the Channel and sparked a craze among England's upper classes, which dubbed the toy the *bandalore*. The Duke of Wellington, the British victor at the Battle of Waterloo in

1815, amused himself with the *bandalore*, and British royalty also enjoyed playing with the toy. The Prince of Wales, the future George IV, often whirled the *bandalore* for recreation, establishing a fashion throughout England and creating another name for the plaything—the "Prince of Wales Toy."

Americans began playing with *bandalores* during the 1860s. In 1866 James L. Haven and Charles Hettrick of Cincinnati, Ohio, obtained the first United States patent for a toy they called an "improved construction of the toy, commonly called a *bandalore*." A flurry of new patents followed as inventors tinkered with everything from the attachment of the string to the rim weight.

Yet nothing matched the effects of Flores' live demonstrations and the simple name change. As the crowds

Far, left: The Greeks added elaborate artwork to their versions of the yo-yo. Left: The son of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette of France plays with a yo-yo. The prince's parents lost their heads during the French Revolution, when the toy became known in France as *l'emigrette*.

watching his yo-yo demonstrations grew, the bellboy realized he had discovered a great business opportunity. "I do not expect to make a million dollars, I just want to be working for myself," he said. "I have been working for other people for practically all my life and I don't like it." He approached several wealthy Filipinos for financial assistance, but they turned him down.

Undeterred, in early 1928 Flores founded the Flores Yo-Yo Company in Santa Barbara, and he launched his new venture by hand-carving a dozen yo-yos and selling them to neighborhood children. By November of that year, he had won the support of two American financiers, James Lewis and Daniel Stone of Los Angeles, allowing him to begin machine manufacture of the yo-yos and to sell them for prices ranging from 15 cents to \$1.50. Within a year Flores owned three factories and employed some 600 people.

Flores continued the strategy he had used to attract attention for his yo-yos when he was a bellhop. He inaugurated yo-yo spinning contests in late 1928, and by early 1929 he had sparked the first yo-yo craze in the United States. Theaters became popular locations for Flores' endurance yo-yo contests, events where players competed to see who could perform yo-yo tricks the longest without making a mistake. After hours of competition, many of these contests ended as stubborn ties, and the company drew straws to determine the winner. Other contestants might compete to see who could make the greatest number of perfect spins in five minutes.

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*Mirabeau Chef d'une Légion.  
de l'armée noire et, pour ce grand uniforme.*

**This caricature of André Boniface Louis Mirabeau shows the French military leader holding a yo-yo, while his troops practice in the background.**

Successful entrepreneur Donald F. Duncan watched a yo-yo demonstration and was so impressed with the toy that he bought Flores' company in 1930. At 38, Duncan was a savvy marketer who had founded the Good Humor ice cream franchise and created a parking meter that is still used today. Duncan put Flores back to work running yo-yo demonstrations, while he used William Randolph Hearst's newspapers to promote yo-yo contests. In order to compete, a contestant first had to sell three subscriptions to a Hearst newspaper; in return Hearst gave Duncan free advertising. Duncan also shifted the contests away from endurance and toward tests of skill. Under Duncan, any contest ties were decided by which contestant could complete the most loop-the-loops—a basic yo-yo trick.

Aware of the marketing and public relations opportunities offered by yo-yo demonstrations and exhibitions, Flores hired a cadre of Filipino men who had learned the art of yo-yoing as children in their homeland. He gave

them Duncan yo-yos and sent them on tours across the United States to delight audiences with tricks like Rock the Baby (where a "sleeper" rocks back and forth in a string cradle), Shooting Star (a one-handed string trick), and Walk the Dog (where the yo-yo runs along the floor to be picked up again at the end of the run). Duncan's marketing genius and Flores' exhibitions sparked a yo-yo fad all across the country.

For a time, Duncan shifted manufacturing of the yo-yo to Baurle Brothers, a wood-turning company in Chicago. Casting about for a factory close to a good supply of wood, in 1946 Duncan moved his manufacturing plant to Luck, Wisconsin, a city that became known as the "Yo-Yo Capital of the World." The new factory consumed about a million board feet of maple wood a year and could turn out 3,600 yo-yos an hour.

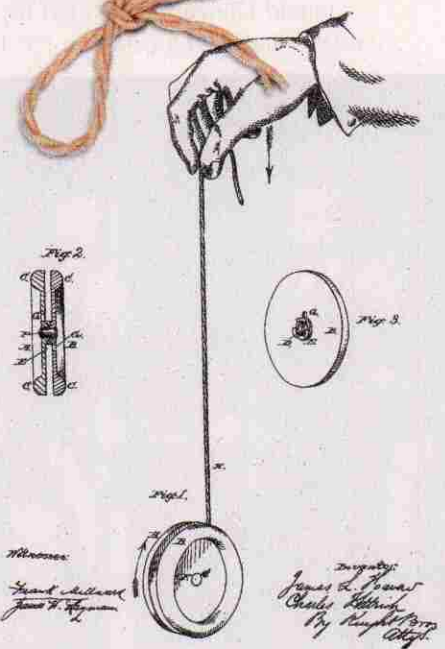
Success breeds competitors, and Duncan soon had plenty. Even Flores briefly began making yo-yos again in 1954 through the Flores Corporation of America. As Duncan had purchased the yo-yo trademark from Flores, he forced rivals to use other names, such as "returning top" and "whirl-a-gig," to market their toys.

Duncan retired from yo-yo making in 1957 and handed the reins of Donald F. Duncan, Inc., to his sons, Donald Jr., and Jack. Three years later the company introduced the plastic yo-yo and sales skyrocketed. In 1962 alone, Duncan sold 45 million yo-yos and still could not keep up with demand. Success came with a cost, however. As the company fought to maintain its market position, television advertising expenses, overtime wages, and material costs mounted, as did the legal expenses for battles over the yo-yo trademark. Despite high demand for the prod-

**Above, center: Americans James L. Haven and Charles Hettrick obtained Patent No. 59,745 in 1866 for a toy they called an improved bandalore.**



YO-YOS: DR. LUCKY MEISENHEIMER; CENTER: U.S. PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE



uct, these economic drains led to profit declines. And in 1965, the Federal Court of Appeals ruled that the term yo-yo had become a common expression and invalidated Duncan's trademark. Later that year, Donald F. Duncan, Inc., filed for bankruptcy and auctioned off its equipment. Flambeau Plastics Corporation, which had supplied Duncan with its plastic yo-yos, purchased the Duncan brand in 1968 and continues to manufacture Duncan yo-yos to this day.

Donald Duncan, Jr., started his own yo-yo company, Duncraft, in 1974. In a

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twist of fate, his old company's new owners complained that the name of this new business violated its trademark. To keep the lawyers at bay, Duncan Jr., changed his company's name to Duracraft, and in 1987 he renamed the successful company Playmaxx. In December 2001, Flambeau-owned Duncan Toys Company purchased Playmaxx.

Like other popular toys, yo-yos inspire a legion of collectors who spend their time and money in search of collectible yo-yos and memorabilia. While most yo-yo aficionados don't view their yo-yos as an investment (few old yo-yos demand much money), some collectible yo-yos can command huge prices. For example, a yo-yo that

**Left: Country star Roy Acuff teaches President Richard Nixon a yo-yo trick on stage at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry in 1974. Below: As part of the Toys in Space project, astronaut S. David Griggs demonstrates how a yo-yo performs in weightless conditions aboard the space shuttle *Discovery*.**



DR. LUCKY MEISENHEIMER COLLECTION

President Richard Nixon autographed and gave to country music artist Roy Acuff at the Grand Ole Opry in 1974 later sold at auction for \$16,029.

Despite its wide popularity on earth, the yo-yo had yet to make its mark in space, until a yo-yo flew aboard the space shuttle *Discovery* as part of the Toys in Space project in 1985. While in orbit, the shuttle astronauts discovered they could release a yo-yo at slow speeds in microgravity and that the toy would move gracefully along the string but refused to "sleep" without the pull of gravity. Another yo-yo flew aboard the shuttle *Atlantis* in 1992, and the astronauts shot a video demonstrating zero-g techniques.

Despite its ups and downs throughout history, the yo-yo has proved to be more than just a fad. Today the yo-yo shares space in the National Toy Hall of Fame in Salem, Oregon, with Lincoln Logs, Play-Doh, and Mr. Potato Head. The ancient toy retains its appeal and attracts collectors, competitors, and young people after more than 2,500 years of play. ✪

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