

It's Hard to Keep a Good Yo-Yo Down

WHEN HERCULES WAS a child in ancient Greece, he might have used one of these to go "Around the World" without ever leaving home. Later, when King George IV was a boy, he could "Walk the Dog" around the palace without going outside. And when the astronauts on the space shuttle *Discovery* ventured into outer space, they took this toy to see if it could "Sleep."

So what is this thing that is thousands of years old and still played with by people today? A yo-yo! And each of these activities is a trick you can do with one. This spinning spool of fun has been one of the most popular toys in history. Still, not many people know much about its background.



About 2,500 years ago, Greek children played with the first known yo-yos. And from Greece the yo-yo did indeed go "Around the World." Ancient yo-yos have been found everywhere, including China and India. In the Philippines the yo-yo was used not as a toy but as a hunter's weapon. Filipino hunters would hide up in trees and use yo-yo-styled rocks to hunt passing animals. If the hunter missed the animal, the string would bring the rock back up quickly while the hunter waited for the next animal to appear.

As the yo-yo continued its up-and-down travels all over the world, its name changed with every new language. On the ends of the strings in France spun the *emigrette*. In Spain they listened to the soft hum of the *de Coblenz*. Still other people in England liked twirling the *bandalore* or the *quiz*. But whatever it was called, the yo-yo really became popular around 1791. It was then that the Prince of Wales, who was later crowned King George IV, began whirling his quiz. When others in the royal court saw the future king playing with a yo-yo, they quickly began playing, too. Soon every prince and princess was playing with beautiful yo-yos made of gold and ivory, thus setting off a national craze. Everyone—from common shoemakers to wealthy aristocrats—played with their yo-yos as a way to relax.

Relaxation became an important reason for owning a yo-yo. Drawings as early as the 1780s showed French soldiers playing with yo-yos. In 1815, at the Battle of Waterloo, General Napoleon and his army relaxed with their *emigrettes* before battle. In addition, during these same years, doctors began giving yo-yos to their patients in hopes that relaxation would hasten recovery from illness. Even criminals on their way to executions were given yo-yos to pass the time.

Yo-yos also helped pass the time on the long trip to America. It was 1866 when the toy, still called a *bandalore*, began spinning on our shores. In 1916 a magazine called the *Scientific American Supplement* published an article about Filipino toys and in it described the *bandalore*, but named it a "yo-yo," a Filipino term that means "come-come" or "to return."

Now that this toy had a new name, it needed a new design.



In 1928 a man named Donald Duncan produced colorful plastic yo-yos. He then sent out a team of yo-yo experts to amaze America with incredible tricks. Children's eyes widened and chins dropped while they watched tricks called "Rock the Cradle" and "Walk the Dog" for the very first time. Soon every child had to have a yo-yo, and by 1962 Duncan's company had sold forty-five million yo-yos, making it once again one of the most popular toys in the world.

Tricks with a Yo-Yo

Walk the Dog ▶

Throw the yo-yo down hard, then keep your hand still while the yo-yo "Sleeps." Lower your yo-yo to the floor, and it will walk out in front of you.



◀ *Around the World*

Throw the yo-yo out and swing your arm around in a clockwise circle so the yo-yo makes a complete circle. The yo-yo will "Sleep" the entire trip around.


Rock the Cradle ▶

Throw a fast "Sleeper." Grab the string halfway down with your left hand. With your right hand reach down and pinch the string halfway between your left hand and the yo-yo. Bring your left hand down under the yo-yo to make the cradle, and rock the yo-yo back and forth.



More recently yo-yos even became popular toys out of this world. In 1985 astronauts on the space shuttle *Discovery* took yo-yos with them into space to examine the effects of zero gravity on the yo-yo. They found that without gravity, a yo-yo had to be thrown downward hard just to get it to slowly glide down the string. Once at the end of the string, it could not "Sleep" without the downward pull of gravity, so it would very slowly come back up. The astronauts spent hours trying to do tricks with their yo-yos. Imagine how much fun they had trying to go "Around the World" while really going around the world!

Back on Earth and here in the present, yo-yos are just as popular as ever. Though their styles may have changed over the years, they are still close to what King George was twirling after dinner two hundred years ago.

So the next time someone tells you to "put down that yo-yo," remind him or her that it is not just a yo-yo. It is a lesson in ancient Greek activities, an education in hunting and twentieth-century American history, and definitely a toy of kings. 

Cricket, August 2002, Volume 29, Number 8. Copyright 2002, Carus Publishing Company.

Cricket and Ladybug and Everybuggy!

