

PYRAMID[®]



Issue 3/3 January '09

VENTURING INTO THE BADLANDS

POST-APOCALYPSE

DEATHBALL

by Peter Dell'Orto
and Sean Punch

SURVIVOR'S MOON

by Paul Drye

NAME THAT APOCALYPSE

by Nicholas Lovell

OMNISCIENT EYE x2!

by Geoffrey Brent;
Roger Burton West
and John Dallman

ZIPPEMART

by Matt Riggsby

THE DAY THE WORLD BROKE

by J. Edward Tremlett

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

DEATHBALL

BY PETER DELL'ORTO AND SEAN PUNCH

Gar stood on the field, one arm around his striker stick and the other on his hip as he surveyed the opposition: Dregs, mostly – but potential contenders. The locals were big fans of the game. They'd somehow scraped together enough beefy farm boys, ape-armed mutants, and crazed bikers to field a team. They even had **uniforms**, sewn together from precious scraps of synthetics left over from before the Big One.

Gar had seen it all before . . . he was a veteran. He'd played in the big leagues, but he'd grown too old to keep up. Now here he was, touring the wastelands, fighting for scraps of old tech and precious canned foods.

He inspected his team. His defenders were ready; they'd finished strapping on their armor and sharpening their elbow spikes. His fellow striker, Wolf, flashed her sick pre-game grin, barely visible under the battered football helmet from the 20th. Both of his motorstrikers were revving their engines, blades on wheel hubs gleaming in the sun. Finally, their carrier emerged: Over 200 pounds of green-skinned, three-eyed mutant, ready to take the ball through any opposition.

Ball? Well, tank. The ref grunted as he dropped the dangerously corroded but **full** propane cylinder mid-field for the first scramble. The winner would keep the precious fuel – if it didn't explode and kill both teams. Gar was old enough to remember when “blowout” meant a one-sided win, not a bloody draw.

The crowd's chant grew louder and louder: “Deathball! Deathball! Deathball!”

The ref quickly fled the field.

It had begun.

The objective of Deathball is to get the “tank” through the mouth of the “goal.” How you get it there, and what happens to anyone between you and the goal, is somewhat less important . . .

THE FIELD

Deathball is played on a rough field or pitch. Depending on the town, this might be a decaying football stadium, rugby pitch, or soccer field; in the badlands, it could even be a sunken pit. There are no universal standards. Traveling players rarely know the local “ground rules,” so a good team learns to adapt, and he tries to recruit at least one member who *knows* the circuit – in game terms, somebody with both Area Knowledge (League Circuit) and Current Affairs (Sports) – even if he's old and slow.

Size and Shape

Most fields are rectangles from 100 to 160 yards long and between 50 and 100 yards wide. But not all! Circles, hexagons, and octagons abound. Indoor games sometimes use burned-out factories with multiple levels connected by ramps or stairs, steep drops on all sides, and the goals on the *top* floor.

Falls: Assume 5-yard industrial stories in indoor play. Falling velocity is 10, 15, or 18 yards/second for one, two, or three stories, should an unfortunate deathballer take a swan dive. See *Falling*, p. B431.

Conditions

Nothing in the rules (such as they are) specifies field quality. Possibilities include:

Bad Footing: The pitch might be uneven or muddy (+1 movement point per hex, -2 to attacks and DX-based skill rolls, and -1 to defenses), or both (*double* these penalties!).

Potholes: Crossing the edge of a shallow pit (either way) costs +1 movement point and requires a DX or Driving roll, at the speed penalty for current Move, to avoid a fall or a wipeout. Jumping the pit is possible, if it's no wider than jumping distance (p. B352) or vehicle Move. This demands a DX or Jumping roll on foot, or a Driving roll on a bike, with a distance penalty equal to width. Failure means a fall or a wipeout in the pit. See p. B550 for speed and distance penalties.

Tiger Pits: These *must* be jumped, as above! Failure, or being shoved or tossed into the pit, means falling damage (p. B431); assume a falling velocity of 10 yards/second. Damage becomes *impaling* for spiked pits. Scaling or mantling out takes five seconds and a Climbing roll.

Boundaries

A field's edges might be surrounded by harmless lines of old paint, but other options are:

Banked Earth: Tall, vertical, hard-packed earth walls, designed to resist climbing (if anyone tries, it takes 2-3 *minutes* and a Climbing-3 roll). They count as hard, immovable objects in collisions; see p. B431.

Barbed Wire: Wooden barricades or steel fence laced with razor wire. These have a lot of give and count as soft in collisions, but collision damage – including that due to knockback

Sure, the world after the fall may be bleak, but kids still need to play; that's how they learn. Scenes of active children can be a good contrast to the dark world.

– and damage from smashing or grinding enemies into the wire is at +1 *per die*, and can initiate bleeding (p. B420). As well, the barbs carry rotting grue from past matches; players who are cut but survive must roll HT-2 to avoid infection (p. B444) after the match.

Pointed Stakes: The inward-pointing “pike wall” is a real crowd-pleaser! A player about to collide with it gets a Dodge roll. Success means a collision with whatever lies beyond (usually a wall). Failure means collision damage is *impaling*. Roll for infection as for barbed wire.

Land Mines: In war-torn post-apocalypse settings, millions of unexploded mines may be sitting around in ancient battlefields. Why let them go to waste? These will be marked with brightly colored flags. Assume one mine per hex. A player forced onto a mine gets a Dodge roll. Failure explodes the mine, which is bad for the victim *and* anyone nearby: 5d [4d] cr ex. Old mines might be faulty; the GM can assign a “detonation roll” between 6 and 15 or less on 3d.

The Goals

At either end of the field is a goal: typically two posts, but this varies as much as the field. All that’s certain is that the goal is a yard wide and about a yard high. It might be marked by something dangerous, such as:

Electrified Poles: Anybody tossed into the pole is zapped. Nonlethal varieties merely require a HT roll to avoid stun; victims get a HT roll to recover after they break contact, rolling every second. Lethal ones simply inflict 3d burning damage per touch and call it a day.

Flaming Barrels: A red-hot barrel of burning junk does 1d-3 burning damage if you bounce off, or 1d-1 per second if you’re held there (e.g., some mutant presses your face against it). Barrels of homemade napalm also disgorge a nice splash of goo that does 1d-1 per second for a full *minute*, or until the deathballer rolls in dirt or mud for three full seconds. Being on fire is *distracting*: -3 to DX.

THE EQUIPMENT

I wrapped my hands in filthy bandages. I had no idea whose blood was on them. Then Denver – that’s where he was from, before the nukes – brought over a pot of rancid goo boiled down from dead animals, and grunted, “Hands in the glue.”

I did as he asked. Rat Boy followed along behind with a rotten cardboard box with “IBM” on the side. It was full of sharp-looking crud.

“What’s that, Rat?”

“Hrr. Crushed circuit boardses! Hrr. Shiny. Hrr. Sharp. Hrr hrr. You can hurts without hitting.”

I plunged my hands in. They came out covered in jagged shards of phenolic and silicon.

There’s no real standardization in Deathball gear! Suggestions appear below, but after the Big One, *availability* matters much more than silly ideals like fairness and safety.

Sponsors

A team might be a wandering band of survivors – a lot like a PC party – that ventures from town to town, challenging local teams for whatever prize they can agree on: food, gear, the right to enter the Forbidden Zone, etc. This need not be the case, though. Nascent city-states (often underground), local strongmen and gang leaders, and even the decadent remnants of pre-apocalypse corporations or governments might sponsor Deathball. They may provide arenas and prizes, back teams (feeding, equipping, and transporting them), or both – and if they do both, you can be sure that the sponsored team has a huge home-field advantage in its sponsor’s arena!

Protective Gear

Torso armor is minimal for male players. Being bare-chested, or nearly so, is popular with fans; it demonstrates a gladiator-like contempt for death. Armor may consist solely of shoulder pads (*High-Tech*, pp. 66-67), plus a cup (*High-Tech*, p. 71) for non-mutant men. Female players do wear armor, most often something like a leather jacket or leather armor (p. B283), or a padded leather sparring breastplate (*Martial Arts*, p. 234). In all cases, the material is more likely old tires than foam or leather (stats don’t change), and spikes are common (add \$20 and 5 lbs., and function as Short Spines, p. B88).

Headgear is usually leftover TL7-8 gear like motorcycle, football, hockey, and riot helmets, although teams from ruined steel towns prefer hard hats. Military headgear – ballistic helmets – might be used, but that’s both rare *and* seen as “cheating,” because Deathball players are expected to be tougher than their gear! See p. 70 of *High-Tech* for stats for these items. Players may opt to wear a mouthguard (*High-Tech*, p. 71) – usually cut from tasty tires – but this makes it hard to yell out coordinated plays, so they aren’t so common (and thus missing *teeth are*).

Limbs are protected with knee and elbow pads (*High-Tech*, p. 71), shin pads (*Martial Arts*, p. 234), and sometimes even riot gear (*High-Tech*, p. 67-68). These items are often enhanced with metal studs, giving +1 to the damage inflicted by an Elbow Strike, a Knee Strike, or a shin kick (*Martial Arts*, p. 112), as appropriate; this adds \$5 and 0.25 lb. per piece of armor.

Hands are usually covered with cloth or leather work gloves (p. B284), hockey gloves (*High-Tech*, p. 69), or MMA gloves (*Martial Arts*, p. 233). For the trendy *spiked* glove, use the stats for a myrmex or a cestus (*Martial Arts*, p. 226).

Footwear is often boots or sandals (p. B284), or *nothing*. Cleats (*High-Tech*, p. 69) – pre-apocalypse leftovers or jury-rigged substitutes – are especially prized on muddy, bloody Deathball fields!

As the world gets more technologically advanced, the possibilities for great post-apocalyptic adventure seeds grows greater, too. Check the science headlines for ideas.

Striker Stick

Strikers (see *Strikers*, p. 7) wield this combination weapon: a quarterstaff with a crook at one end and a two-yard kusari on the other. It's \$75 and 6.5 lbs., and requires ST 9. On any given turn, the striker can use it as a staff (mainly for Hook and Sweep techniques) or as a kusari (to entangle).

Motorcycles

In leagues that use motorstrikers (see *Motorstrikers*, p. 8), these players ride bladed-and-spiked motorcycles. Use the stats for any TL7-8 motorcycle from p. B464, or even the wimpy electric bike on p. 230 of *High-Tech* (nobody has fielded a Death Segway . . . yet). When tracking budgets, the custom bodywork adds \$100.

The Tank

The "ball" is usually a small keg or a large propane cylinder filled with water or sand. For the purpose of throwing and carrying, assume it weighs 14 lbs. A tank may be filled with *propane* for an especially exciting game. It's hard to set off, but "blowouts" happen and inflict 6d×5 burn ex; for complete rules, see p. 31 of *High-Tech*.

THE RULES

These rules assume that Deathball is a descendent of American football. Other sports might influence Deathball elsewhere, such as in post-apocalypse Brazil (soccer), Canada (ice hockey), U.K. (rugby), or India (cricket!). In *all* cases, simply play out the match as a combat.

Contact

Surprisingly, Deathball *discourages* most direct attacks to maim or cripple. Matches like that rapidly degenerate into team-on-team melees, with the "winners" being the team with enough survivors to carry the tank across the goal. Fans of that kind of action go to pit fights and caged death matches to avoid the distraction of rules and a ball. Thus, there are *some* rules governing contact.

Cheating

Cheating is common, and "Ref didn't see it, I didn't do it!" is practically a rule. Roll a Quick Contest: the cheater's Games skill vs. the ref's Per. If the referee wins or ties, he detects the foul; otherwise, the cheater gets away with it. The ref gets +2 to spot Telegraphic Attacks or All-Out Attacks, +1 to notice Committed Attacks, and -1 to see Defensive Attacks. The customary penalty for illegal contact, illegal substitutions, and so on is -1 to -3 points to your team, per infraction. A short melee can completely wipe out a team's score!



Permitted Moves

Players may use grapple, takedown, and pin (p. B370); Judo throw (p. B203); slam and shove (pp. B371-372); Sweep (p. B232); and, from *GURPS Martial Arts*, Armed Grapple or Hook with a stick, Entangle with a chain, Sacrifice Throw, Scissors Hold, and Trip. The common theme is restraining and pushing. However, "incidental contact" – damaging throws, slam impacts, etc. – isn't discouraged.

Damaging strikes *can* target weapons or motorbikes, though. And motorstrikers can return the favor with two legal moves. The "bike kick" is a kick by the rider; use *Cavalry Weapons* (p. B397). The lethal "bike slide" is a collision leading with the sharp bits; treat it as a slam using the vehicle's Move and HP, and make damage *cutting*. The bike slide is dangerous for the rider, too – it's a collision, and some teams like to dodge the slide and have their own motorstriker ride down the attacker.

Forbidden Moves

Damaging strikes or locks on other players, with the exception of bike kicks and bike slides, are illegal. This means any attack that has the primary goal of inflicting injury on anything *but* a weapon or a motorbike. Of course, *cheating* (see box) is a time-honored tradition!

Substitutions

Due to the deadliness of the equipment and often the field, and the risk posed even by "nonlethal" hits, players get maimed and sometimes killed. League or house rules settle what happens next. Some rules permit *no* substitutions, and attrition settles most games. Others allow one sub per team (making "substitute" a vital team position, filled by a generalist who has played many positions) or per position (in which case each position has a regular and his "clone," or understudy). A few impose no limits – which lets rich, successful teams prevail in knock-down, drag-out battles!

Play

There are no "plays" as such. Each round is five minutes (counted off with drips of water or blood, tossed stones, etc.,

Best advice for would-be looters: Corner the market on something.

not a clock), and most matches last four rounds. The *Detailed Method* (**GURPS Martial Arts**, p. 134) for resolving tournament combat is *especially* appropriate for Deathball!

Possession

American football-inspired versions have the concept of “possession,” which ends when the team that has it scores or the rival team manages to steal control of the tank. Other versions more closely resemble ice hockey or soccer, with each team doing its best to move the tank through the opposing goal.

Tank Handling

Picking up the tank from the ground is a Ready maneuver (p. B366). Dropping it is a free action. Throwing or passing it uses *Throwing* and *Catching* (p. B355); keep in mind that its weight makes for short distances! Handing the tank to another player requires two free hands (it’s bulky and has no easy handholds), and can use any maneuver that allows an attack. Treat kicking the tank as a Push Kick (**GURPS Martial Arts**, p. 78); the tank is targeted at -4 but doesn’t defend, so you can use Telegraphic Attack to offset this penalty.

The best way to score is simply to *run* to the goal . . . but opposing players will try to stop you! A knocked-down player automatically drops the tank, resulting in a scramble for possession.

Coaching

Most teams have a coach. The GM may allow coaches to use the abstract or mapped method for Tactics skill given on p. 60 of **GURPS Martial Arts**, but substituting Games (Deathball) for Tactics. Rolls may be per round or per match, depending on the desired level of detail.

Scoring

Any dismounted player can score. Carrying the tank through the goal, even if your carrier arrives dead, gives 7 points. Hitting, kicking, or throwing it through yields 3 points. After either, play stops and the tank is restarted mid-field.

THE PLAYERS

Teams consist of between five and seven players, depending on the regional variation (Mutant League, Wastelands Circuit, Forbidden Zone Rules, etc.). These occupy the specific positions, all but the last of which are typical.

Universal Features: Regardless of position, players should have Brawling and Games (Deathball). Area Knowledge (League Circuit) and Current Affairs (Sports) are valuable, but rookies and boondocks players often lack them. *Anyone* would benefit from Combat Reflexes, Hard to Kill, and Rapid Healing!

Carrier

The carrier carries the tank. Although the name of the game is running the tank down the field into the goal, it can be too

large and heavy for a small player in armor. Carriers tend to be the biggest, strongest guys on the field after the defenders. Anybody can score, but carriers make it their main job.

Recommended Attributes and Secondary Characteristics: High ST, HP, and Basic Move.

Recommended Advantages: Enhanced Dodge, Fit, and Peripheral Vision.

Recommended Skills: Jumping, Running, Sumo Wrestling, Throwing, and Wrestling.

Recommended Techniques: Evade and Feint (for faking out opponents!).

Nonhumans

If the setting has mutants, cyborgs, tame zombies, etc., then leagues might be segregated, fully integrated, or integrated with caveats (“no zombies” seems likely, given that eating brains is against the rules). Like all aspects of Deathball, this is subject to variation. Players in a “humans-only” league might arrive in the Rad Zone only to face an all-mutant or all-zombie team. They can refuse to play, but the town strongman will consider it a forfeit, and they’re on *his* turf.

Defenders

Depending on the league, there are either two or three of these “tank guards,” whose job is to protect the carrier. These tend to be the team’s biggest members, making this an excellent slot for giant mutants, cyborgs left over from the Robot Wars, etc.

Recommended Attributes and Secondary Characteristics: Very high ST and HP, and high HT.

Recommended Advantages: Hard to Subdue and High Pain Threshold.

Recommended Skills: Sumo Wrestling and Wrestling.

Strikers

Strikers – again, two or three in number – don’t strike the *tank*. They strike the *rival carrier*. Their job is to move in past the other team’s players, bypass (or take out) their defenders, and down their carrier. Strikers tend to come in two broad types. Strong ones beat down the opposition with sheer power, while quick-and-agile ones use their striker sticks to trip and entangle.

Recommended Attributes and Secondary Characteristics: High ST or DX, and high Basic Move.

Recommended Advantages: Enhanced Parry.

Recommended Skills: Judo, Kusari, Staff, and Wrestling.

Recommended Techniques: Armed Grapple (Kusari or Staff), Entangle, Hook (Staff), Sweep (Staff), and Trip.

Once you’ve cornered the market on something, you can trade that item for other things you need.

Motorstrikers

At least one league uses *motorcycles*. Teams consist of a carrier, two defenders, two strikers, and two *motorstrikers*, who are strikers on bikes. The rules forbid carrying the tank by bike, and no player may score from the back of a bike, but it's legal to shuttle the carrier to the tank. Horses, BMX bicycles, mutant beasts, skateboards, rocket skates, and so on may replace motorcycles in some areas.

Recommended Attributes and Secondary Characteristics: High DX.

Recommended Skills: Driving (Motorcycle) and Karate.

Inspirations

Many sources inspired and informed Deathball. Foremost among these were countless post-apocalypse movies, good and bad – notably *The Blood of Heroes* (David Webb Peoples, 1989) and *Rollerball* (Norman Jewison, 1975). Gaming influences were *Car Wars* (the titular sport, plus “combat football” and “hack hockey”) and the “Bombing Run” mode of *Unreal Tournament 2003/2004*. In the comics, several sports from old *Judge Dredd* issues proved educational.

CAMPAIGN NOTES

A day at the Deathball games may include vendors (“Rat on a stick!”), little-leaguers playing during halftime, and acts ranging from the entertaining (acrobats and jugglers) to the hard-edged (strippers and pit fights). Many teams have their own trainers, suppliers, vendors, prostitutes, coaches, and camp-followers of every variety. Any adventurer with a cause to travel can find a reason to be with The Team. Big teams some-

times even have specialized bodyguards – sure, deathballers are tough, but why risk your star defender against a horde of mutant rats or zombies?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Peter V. Dell’Orto – some say “Violence” is his middle name – was part of the shady Deathball underground that predated the Big One of 1995. He started out as a player of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1981, and took up the *GURPS* organization’s *Man to Man* in 1985. His *GURPS* involvement became overt after the Big One, and in the mid-2000s, he wrote *GURPS Martial Arts*, often called “The Book of Death,” with Dr. Kromm.

Dell’Orto is a connoisseur of violence. Deathball fans laud his three years as striker for Philoktetes Niigata, in the Japanese Mutant Leagues. He holds shodan rank in Kendo, studies deadly Kachin Bando, and fights in mixed martial-arts matches. An exponent of New Era thinking, he balances physical fitness with mental disciplines such as reading, music, and painting miniature likenesses of his victims.

Dr. Kromm (Sean Punch) was an obscure physicist until the Big One of 1995 – recently linked to his research – whereupon he assumed control of the shadowy *GURPS* organization. He was instrumental in most *GURPS Third Edition* programs afterward, most famously *GURPS Undead* (“Project Zombie”). In 2004, he and the notorious D.L. Pulver penned their New Era manifesto: *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. His recent works have investigated *Übermenschen* (the *GURPS Power-Ups* monographs and, with known transhumanist P.J. Masters, *GURPS Powers*) and stimulated aggression (the *GURPS Action* and *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy* treatises, and, with Deathball player-turned-manager P.V. Dell’Orto, *GURPS Martial Arts*).

Researchers have learned that Kromm has been playing such games since 1979. He and his mysterious companion, Bonnie, dwell in the Montréal Forbidden Zone, where they keep mutant “pets.” His known weaknesses are fine food and wine.

