

El Trompo



por Alvin O. Korte

Pre-adolescence is a time of being involved with same gender peers such as in boy or girl scouts, playing neighborhood baseball, little league or more common today in one of the soccer leagues or spending time shooting hoops. Our preadolescence was different in that we would trek over to “La Guitarra” and “El Violin” for swimming, catching pigeons, telling ghost stories, building race “cars.” We also played with trompos, tops which we would buy at Katz Five & Dime on Bridge St., Las Vegas, New Mexico, if we had money, else we would trade for them. Some kids had a big brother make them in high school shop.

Trompos have always fascinated me. First it is a child’s toy shaped like an inverted cone, with a point at its apex and made to spin by various means usually by quickly unwinding a string. The top is then thrown on a usually flat surface where it spins and spins until it runs out of momentum. The 1937 Encyclopedia Ilustrada goes into the physics and mathematics that has to do with the spinning of tops.



There are many types of tops. The top is known to many cultures the world over. One source says that clay tops were discovered in ancient Ur, a site in Iraq dating back to 4500 b.c. This source also says that the characteristics of a top can be found in nature. An interesting example is the acorn. It has all the characteristics of a top. For that matter an apple with a stick driven through it can also server as a top. Anything that can be made to spin along its axis is a top. Does this mean a bullet qualifies? The lowly top, however, usually has a nail or a point on its narrowest point on which it spins.

Games with Tops

There are a number of games that are fostered by the characteristics of the top. One such game is to see how long a top spins. The one whose top spins the longest is the winner. Other games involve putting a top within a small circle. Another possibility is picking up the top while it is spinning with one’s hand while another variant is using the string to pick up the spinning top and place it next to a target.

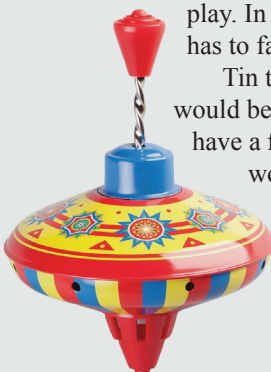
A game we played was called “puyazo” and involved trying to split another kid’s top by landing on it hard. My compa says he saw several split in games in the neighborhood. My recollection is that these tops were made of some rather hard wood. I do remember being enthralled by tops that would zoom because a hole would be drilled on the side to create a buzz saw sound effect.

Kids would naturally make comparisons about their tops. Some were small tops others rather large. All were wooden. It is interesting that not one wooden top was found for the writing of this piece. The plastic top displayed in the picture (at right) came from a specialty store in Santa Fe. It has excellent spinning characteristics although it took this writer some time to get my top throwing skills into



play. In throwing the top the point has to face up rather than down.

Tin tops were another type of top. They would be bought at the store. These tops would have a flat spiral rod going down the middle that would be pumped several times to get the top spinning. Holes on the side created a neat sound effect.



Cazuleja

Reyes Martínez described the following game called cazuleja for the New Mexico Writer’s Project in the 1930s:

For cazuleja several rings, called cazulejas, about six feet in diameter each, were drawn on the ground, about thirty feet apart, in circular or rectangular arrangement. To start the game a mark (usually a spit-mark or a small hole) was made in the center of one of the rings. Each player then spun his top at the mark in an effort to hit it, or as near as possible to it. The player hitting farthest from the mark had to lay his top in the center of the ring. This top was called “El Muerto” (the dead one). Then the other players would spin their tops against the dead one in the ring in an effort to drive it from one ring to another, as in the game of Arriada, one that in Cazuleja there were no opposing sides, the dead top was driven in one direction, only, and the players were also allowed to pick up from the ground, in their hand, their spinning tops and hurl them against the dead one as many times as possible, while spinning, driving it in the direction of the next ring. While the dead top lay inside of a cazuleja, it was fair to drive it out only by spinning their tops at, toeing the ring, and not hurling a spinning top at it, picked up with the hand, this was allowed only between the rings. Any player failing to strike the dead top with his own spinning top, had to lay it in place of the dead one. This game had such entrancing fascination that it was played almost daily; the younger folks engaging in this pastime

on Saturdays and Sundays, when they had no school. (Works Progress Administration Files, # 353, New Mexico State Record Center and Archives).

Games of Chance

The next game is called “pon-pon” by the four actions it entails. Another name has not yet surfaced. Before the game is played each player has something like candy, coins, piñon. My uncle told me beans were used in the labor camps in Rocky Ford, Colorado in the 1920s. This is a game in which a homemade top is spun manually and depending on which letter or word it falls on—one of four actions can occur. If **P** comes up then the player has to ante up. **P** stands for “pon”/”put” into the pot. **T** for “todo” means the player can take all there is in the pot. **N** stands for “nada”, you win nothing. **S** means “saca” you can take out half of the pot. Some spinners had a “D” which I understand stood for “deja”. **N** was for nothing. An example of “pon-pon” with the words written out is pictured on page 10.

I asked my uncle to make me one of these tops and he made one that looked remarkably like the one used on Jewish observances at Hanukkah. The top (spinner) with letters in the picture at the bottom of this page came from the Senior Center in Taos and was brought to me by a student. I have seen one other from the Villanueva area. In showing these off to the the students, a Jewish student brought in the yellow one with Hebrew characters which I had never seen. It is called a dreidel and has a lot of significance beyond it being a game of chance.



The Festival of Lights

In Theodore H. Gaster’s book *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (1952, p. 247) a top called a dreidel is played by Jewish children and adults during Hanukkah. Acquiring somebody else’s *geld* (a form of chocolate covered coins) or other types of candy or goodies is the object of the game. The game is played during the Festival of Lights or Hanukkah as it was called by the historian, Josephus. The festival of lights is to celebrate the victory of the Maccabees over the Syrian Greeks. Only one lamp was found to light the temple. The light lasted for 8 days hence the lighting of 8 candles during the feast of light, Hanukkah. The Hebrew characters for N,

G, H, and S are on the dreidel. These really stood for the Judeo-German words for nimm, “take,” gib, “give” halb, “half” and stell “put”; but they were popularly interpreted as the initial letters of the Hebrew motto, Nes Gadol Hayan Sham, (Nes –N miracle, Gadol –G great, Hayan-H happened, Sham – S there), thus “A great miracle took place there.” We are told that in Israel instead of the fourth letter, we are told the fourth letter “shin” is substituted with “peh” meaning “a great miracle happened here.” The Festival of Lights has a lot more meanings including that of overcoming oppression, celebrating identity, freedom and expression.

How the trompito of the Pon, Todo, Nada and Saca came to have the same characteristics of the dreidel is not so mysterious. The chart at bottom compares the “pon-pn” and dreidel.

The red and yellow plastic top has great spin characteristics. If you are totally inept at throwing it you can use a plastic belt (not shown) that can be used to set certain tops spinning.

The top pictured next to the article’s title comes from Mazatlan, Mexico. It has a *mecate*, a shoe-string that as it is pulled drops the spinning top to the floor. The colors are dazzling as it spins. One has to admire the simple, effective mechanism for its operation. The blue plastic top at left lights a set of lights as it spins. The gyroscope (below) is a top with an axle supported on two points on which a wheel revolves. One can also use a string or use the belt to set it in motion. This device has an indentation on the top brace on which one can put another spinning gyroscope on top or also on its sides. Anyone interested in putting several spinning gyros on top of each other? ¡Andale no te rajes!



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How the trompito of the Pon, Todo, Nada and Saca came to have the same characteristics of the dreidel

נ	Nun	Nothing happens—next player spins the dreidel	N for nada, nothing is taken out
ג	Gimel	Player takes all tokens in the pot	T for todo, winner takes the whole pot
ה	Hey	Player takes half the pot	S for saca, winner takes half the pot
ש	Shin	Player must put one token in	P for pon, player must ante-up one token

