

# Balancing acts

The Atlanta Jugglers Association casts no shadows on Groundhog Day with its quick-fingered annual festival

Story by A. SCOTT WALTON  
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**W**e live in an era of multitasking, but juggling too many expectations at home, work and in social circles takes its toll on the mind, body and spirit.

Fortunately, learning to literally juggle inanimate objects – like balls, rings or even burning stakes – can help soothe your stress. “Juggling takes your mind off things,” says Andy “Drew Bob” Ford, a 58-year-old carpenter and longtime president of the Atlanta Jugglers Association.

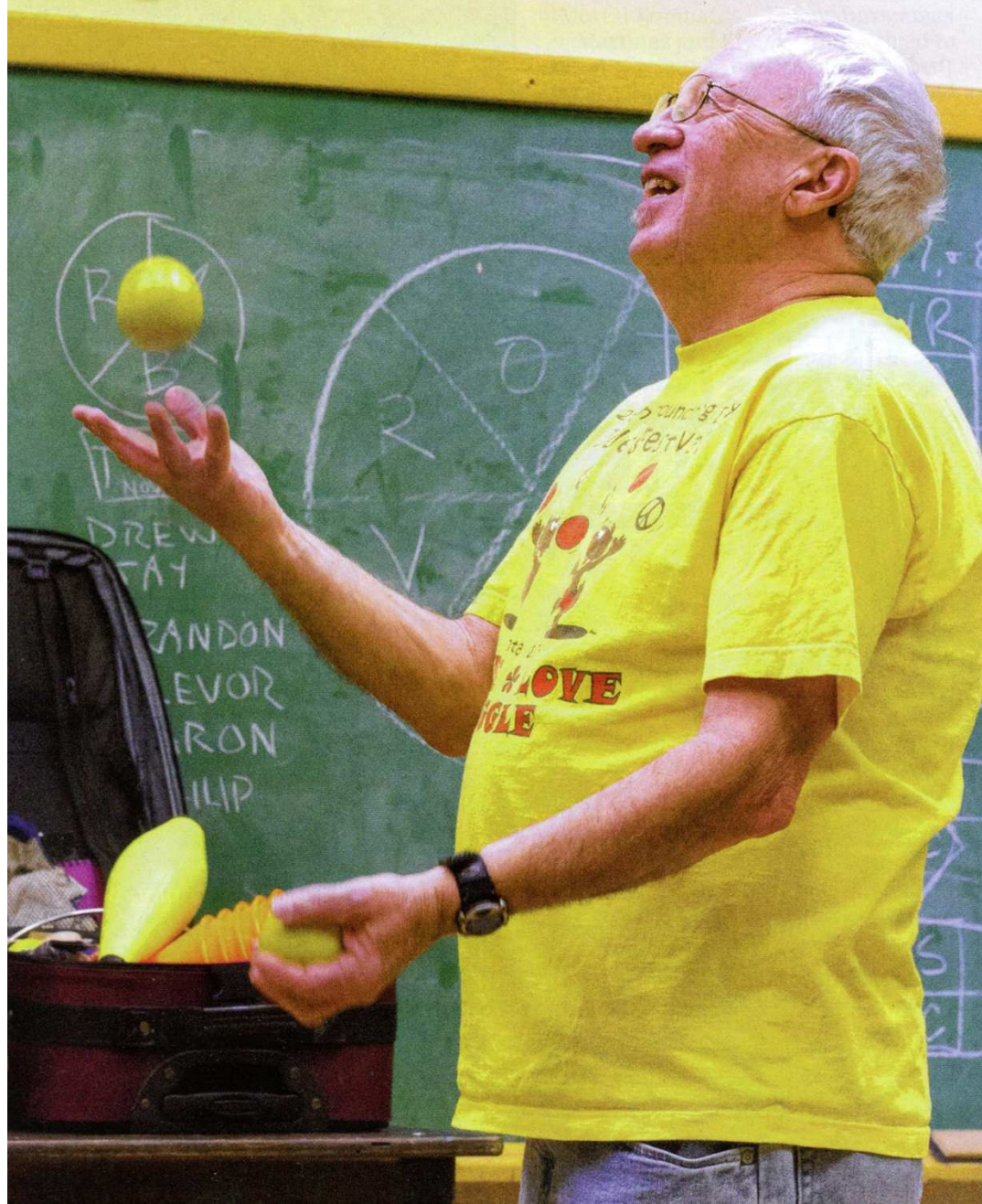
The club gathers on Tuesday and Thursday evenings at the Little Five Points Community Center and practices on the lawn whenever the weather allows.

“It can lead to a kind of obsessive-compulsive behavior, but in a good way,” says Ford, who considers himself slacking if he doesn’t juggle for at least an hour per day.

Ford found his favorite pastime 30 years ago while watching a rerun of “The Mickey Mouse Club,” featuring that frisky Annette Funicello he adored as a child. Then, a side act captured his attention.

“There was a guy juggling while riding a unicycle, and I decided I could do that,” Ford says.

Stone Mountain’s Bruce Plott is a regular at the Atlanta Jugglers Association’s twice-weekly practice sessions at the Little Five Points Community Center.







Above, the Atlanta Jugglers Association participates in the Little Five Points Halloween Parade every year. Below left, wooden tops can be popular juggling items along with balls and hoops. Below right, Andy “Drew Bob” Ford practices on the Little Five Points Community Center’s top floor.



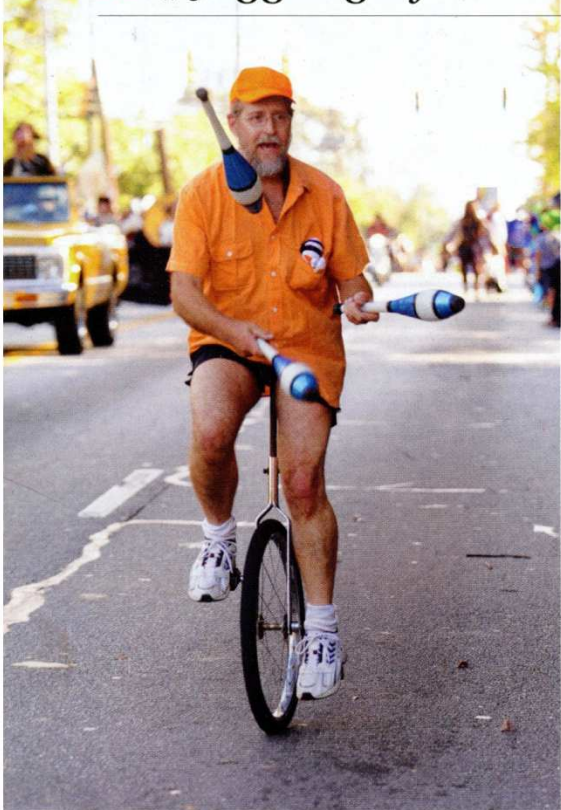
These days, Ford juggles to preserve his health, peace of mind and social attachments. “I keep reading about how older people tend to fall because they’ve lost their sense of balance, and it gets worse over time,” he says. “I’m fighting that age thing. Juggling and riding my unicycle helps that. I’ve heard lots of people say, ‘I could never learn to do that.’ But if your eyes and arms work, trust me, you can learn to juggle.”

The Atlanta Jugglers Association observes a Groundhog Day tradition that dates back even further than General Beauregard Lee’s annual appear- »



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ances at Lilburn's Yellow River Game Ranch to signal the approach of spring.

In 1978, the AJA first presented its annual Jugglers Festival, which over the years has cultivated interest and attracted participants from Atlanta's suburbs and beyond.

"We typically draw close to 200 jugglers," Ford says. "The competition room brings in 500 or 600 people, but we don't charge the audience so it's hard to keep an accurate count."

From Feb. 6-8, the 2015 Jugglers Festival will be held at the Yaarab Shrine Center in the Poncey-Highland. The festival's top competitive prize for jugglers is the PHIL Trophy, named for the 115-year-old national Groundhog Day icon, Pennsylvania's "Punxsutawney Phil."

"We picked the date because it doesn't interfere with any of the other major holidays," says Ford.

Included among the AJA's festival ac-

A carpenter by trade, Atlanta Jugglers Association president Andy "Drew Bob" Ford rides a unicycle in the Halloween Parade.

tivities are supervised practice sessions, demonstrations, workshops and assorted skill-testing games. Most are free and open to the public, but entrants in competitions may be required to pay small fees to cover the cost of trophies.

Juggling's historic origins have been lost — perhaps it began after man discovered fire and first tried to handle hot coals. North America's earliest recorded forms of juggling for entertainment date back to the early 1600s, when settlers in the Puritan "New World" were allowed precious few diversions other than the simple tricks, acrobatics and dramatic performances that laid the groundwork for vaudeville.

Four centuries later, clinical researchers at centers like Johns Hopkins are amassing evidence that juggling enhances locomotive skills related to walking and running, stimulates brain and cardiovascular function, improves muscle memory, raises concentration levels and reduces anxiety.

"To learn juggling, you have to want to learn and practice, that's all," says



Caroline Creed and Andy "Drew Bob" Ford practice with pins until about 9 p.m., when the jugglers visit Savage Pizza or the Wrecking Bar Brewpub.

Joyce Howard, a grandmother and graphic designer who manages the AJA website and appreciates how juggling stimulates her mind. "I love the juggling community," Howard adds. "You can start without any cost. All you really need is some old tennis balls."

As juggling arts have evolved, the forms they take have multiplied. Beginners should consider starting with the simplest ball or ring styles of juggling. Then they can try their hand at more demanding styles such as Cigar Box (tossing and stacking), Devilsticks (using a central baton to balance multi-

ple other batons) and Diablo (twisting and tossing an hourglass-shaped object with two sticks attached by string.)

Semi-pro juggler Ron Anglin, a retired teacher and U.S. Army helicopter pilot, says he became a self-taught juggler 42 years ago after seeing a circus troupe perform at Callaway Gardens.

"I rolled up socks to juggle with after my mom forbid the baseballs," says Anglin, who performs at local schools, churches, hospitals and corporate events.

He puts aspiring jugglers at ease with a gravity-defying technique.

"I use nylon scarves to slow the pattern down when I teach kids," he says, while adding that all the juggling videos available on social media speed up the learning process for beginners.

Enthusiasts like to cite an old adage: "The key to juggling is understanding which balls are made of rubber, and which ones are made of glass."

That's one way to keep life's priorities in proper perspective.

*Groundhog Day Jugglers Festival.*  
Feb. 6-8. Yaarab Shrine Center, 400 Ponce de Leon Ave. [www.facebook.com/groups/atlantajugglers](http://www.facebook.com/groups/atlantajugglers) ■