

Tradition and Trouble: Gotcha
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Birds chirping, leaves scratching, knees aching; it's 7 a.m. on a Monday morning, and you're crouched in bush, eagerly stalking your prey, waiting to pounce it as it steps outside its safe home. Five minutes becomes 10, 10 becomes 20, and 20 becomes 40. The pain of crouching becomes intolerable. The brisk morning wind is slapping your face. The prickly bushes are poking you in places you didn't know had nerves. It's finally 7:45 a.m., and you've had enough. Packing up the weaponry, you turn back to the car, but you failed to notice that your prey has emerged. You hear a "ratatatat," but before you have a chance to duck, run, or even turn around to realize what is going on, it's over. You're hit.

Welcome to the world of Gotcha.

For those of you unfamiliar with the unofficial traditional game of Gotcha, it is a NERF-gun battle within the senior class. For weeks, teams of three compete to advance to the final round of the tournament and be crowned Gotcha Champs. This year, a group of seniors took over the organization and administration of Gotcha. An official rulebook was written, and a waiver was signed by all the players in order for them to be eligible to play. Besides homes, school property and school-sponsored activities, work, and houses of worship, players are free to hunt and be hunted.

With such limited safety zones, Gotcha participants are always on the lookout. It becomes a hassle to get to and from school. Paranoia nestles in seniors, and the game of Gotcha is always lurking in the back of your mind. Sleepless nights and worried days add up, but these sacrifices can payoff in the end. This year's winning team will earn \$1035.

With a jackpot that big, players tend to go to extremes to win Gotcha.

"Last year, there was a very serious car wreck. About ten years ago, someone got arrested, pulled over at gun point because [they were mistaken for using a real gun,] dean Mark Rigby said. "When something goes wrong, it tends to go really wrong."

Principal Kaine Osburn concurs.

"We almost had a lockdown three years ago. Parents saw a gun in a dashboard [in the school parking lot] and called school. We searched cars in parking lot and confiscated 30

[NERF] guns," he said. Although Niles West seniors have carried the tradition of Gotcha for as long as Osburn can remember, it is more threatened than ever before due to current gun policies changing and the general perspective on guns, especially after recent school shootings such as the one at Sandy Hook Elementary School this past December.

Science teacher Howard Swider, who says that Gotcha has been going on for at least 18 years, described the weaponry that was used nearly two decades ago.

"It used to be legal to have facsimile guns, so they used to use dart guns. Then they had that facsimile law passed, and you couldn't find anything that looked like a real gun that would shoot darts. That's when it moved into *being a NERF kind* of thing," Swider said.

That one law forever changed the game of Gotcha. Not only did the weaponry itself change, but the strategies and game play altered as well, he said.

"Dart guns used to have incredible range. it changed the game because you could be farther away- you didn't have to be so close [to your target,] and now you pretty much have to be close. The NERF pellet is not very heavy, and if it's windy, you can't be as far away as the person you're shooting, allegedly," Swider explained.

Niles West alum of the class of 1983 Michael Bender recalled playing a slightly different *version* of Gotcha using squirt guns instead of facsimile or NERF guns. That year, Gotcha was played ore similarly to Senior Assassin, where one person was assigned to shoot another person, who was assigned to shoot another person, who was assigned to shoot another person, etcetera etcetera. When player A eliminated player B, who was supposed to *eliminate* player C, the next task for player A was to *eliminate* player C. *This* cycle, which only lasted about a week, continued until it was down to two players, one of which would be crowned champion, Bender said.

In current times, it would be unimaginable to bring a weapon, or even a look-alike weapon to school. However, years ago, Swider and Bender recall seniors continuing Gotcha in the hallways.

"Someone [would] pop [the gun] out and just continue the game in school. They used to bring [the guns] to school," Swider said.

"The person who got me went to my counselor and got my schedule. He shot me in class,"

Bender said. "The final shootout was in front of the cafeteria."

Niles West administrators said they will take school safety and security seriously and will not accept Gotcha as an excuse to break established school rules.

"If you participate on school property or at school events, you run the risk of getting expelled," Osburn said.

In fact, other schools around the country have taken action to prevent this kind of activity from occurring on school grounds. Students playing Senior Assassin at Wayland High School in Massachusetts have been reprimanded for continuation of their game. Last year in

California, an incident regarding a car chase occurred and was instigated by high school seniors playing Senior Assassin. It resulted in the hospitalization of a person in the chase.

School resource officer Raphael DeLorm isn't surprised by this. According to him, even neighboring townships such as Maine West have their own cases like these.

"We've been called for different crimes, like traffic, batteries, fights. Other schools have problems, too," DeLorm said.

The sensitivity to guns on school campuses has risen, and participating students should be aware of the seriousness of the issue. However, the legacy continues with slight moderations According to 2010 Niles West Gotcha champ Joe Kosir, Gotcha is a great game and even better tradition.

"Everyone wants to do well and win, but there needs to be an understanding of what can and can't be one. No one should ever be put in a life-threatening situation because of strategy," Kosir said.

Because of the nature of the game, Gotcha is not a school-sponsored activity. Regardless, administrators plead with students to play safely and carefully.

"Be careful, make good choices, and don't break laws and the school code of conduct. We don't want to see people hurt or injured," DeLorm said.

"People tend to get a little crazy. I've seen, every year, someone gets in trouble, in a car accident, arrested for *stupid things* people do. [Gotcha1 doesn't seem to work out" Rigby said. "We just want everyone to be safe."

Perhaps it is the monetary value of winning, or perhaps it is just the competitive nature of senior classes. Either way, there is no doubt that some players make the game dangerous.

"[It] *sounds* like fun, but students take it too far when they play it on the streets. There was a car accident from it. [Students are] literally putting others at risk," Osburn said.

Senior Krista Dawson chose not to play Gotcha for this reason.

"I'm not playing because I didn't want to be paranoid for weeks about people shooting me. I remember my brother doing it last year, and it was hell for him," Dawson said. "My parents' car got followed last year for miles. The kids following did some very questionable maneuvers to keep up, and they could have easily gotten into an accident. A lot of kids get so caught up in the game, and they don't realize the danger they can put themselves in when they screw around like that."

Senior Alex Darville decided to play because for him the benefits outweighed the costs.

"I'm concerned about people stalking outside my house, but it's a senior thing. I feel like if I missed it, I'd have regrets," Darville said.

For Kosir, it wasn't about the lost sleep or money but rather the memories created by the game.

"I don't regret waking up at 5:30 a.m. to get people, or wasting a bunch of money on gas and NERF products because of the memories I'm left with," Kosir said. "I've been out of West for three years now, and I still talk to friends about Gotcha. It was a great experience, and it is one of the things I remember most about high school."

Gotcha brought the class of 2010 together, according to Kosir.

"Before school or at lunch, everyone would talk about Gotcha and strategize with other people and other teams, so we would be talking to other kids in our grade that we generally didn't talk to before Gotcha," he said.

Dawson agrees Gotcha will only bring the class closer together.

"It gives the senior class an activity where everyone can take part, it's a stupid and childish one last harrarh before going out into the 'real world', and it involves fun team activity with freedoms to lay how we want, because we control the game," she said.

Judge's comments: *While there are always ways to improve a story once it "goes to press," this one has less room for improvement than the others submitted this year. In addition, this writer has done a skillful job of using quotes from eight local live sources and has provided national perspective with information from Massachusetts and California. This writer attributes indirect quotes and does not provide analysis not supported by the quotes. Most importantly, this writer ends with a quote from a local source and resists the temptation to editorialize in the final graph.*