

EVENTS

Have Your Cake and Fling it Too

It's a bird, it's a plane, it's...fruitcake. Finally, a good use for the confection.

BY PETER BRONSKI



JUST WHAT KIND of motivation does it take to win the Great Fruitcake Toss in Manitou Springs on Jan. 6? Take a cue from Team Omega 380, a group of five Boeing engineers who devised a pneumatic device to send their fruitcake into virtual orbit, launching it an unbelievable (and record-breaking) 1,116 feet. The engineers began competing in 2001 with the Evil Snowflake, a 10-foot slingshot constructed with surgical tubing, and they dominated the competition until subfreezing temperatures the following year wreaked havoc with the tubing's elasticity. "It's a shame for engineers to admit this, but we should have studied our material's science better," says team member Joe Carberry, from Colorado Springs. "We had to come up with a better mousetrap." They returned the next year with an air cannon powered by a used exercise bike (the Omega 380 that gave the team its name) purchased for \$7.49 at Goodwill. It's been smooth sailing since.

At the start of each year, Manitou hosts the Great Fruitcake Toss, a quirky event that's part festival, part competition. It began 12 years ago as a way to lift spirits during the postholiday doldrums, says Floyd O'Neil, special events coordinator for Manitou's chamber of commerce. "We were chatting about holiday gifts, and the proverbial fruitcake came up," he says. "Does anyone ever really eat one? What do we do with these things?" The answer was

clear: See how far they can be thrown.

Competitors bake their own projectiles—cakes must contain only edible ingredients, including mandatory glacé fruit, nuts, and flour—and enter them into one of three weight classes: under a pound, one to two pounds, and more than two pounds. Now, how to hurl the cake: the Launch (using a mechanical device), the Toss (by hand), the Official Hurl (using a catapult built by event organizers), or the Pneumatic Spud Gun (air pressure supplied by human-powered pump).

Last year, more than 5,000 spectators watched 82 competitors—both individuals and teams—fling more than 200 fruitcakes in the competition. Brandon Martin won last year's hand toss, chucking his confection an incredible 285 feet. Want to get in on the action? Team Omega 380's Carberry has simple advice for would-be competitors and spectators alike: "Come with a strong desire to see fruitcakes fly far." ▲

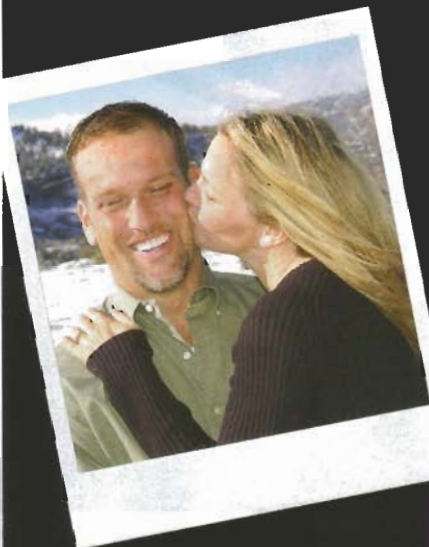
When: Saturday, Jan. 6, 2007

Where: Manitou Springs High School track field (401 El Monte Place, Manitou Springs)

Entry Fee: One nonperishable food item to be donated to a local food bank

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