

# Survival game creates primal high

By Ed Cassavoy  
Sports Editor

Only the eyes were clearly visible. 20 pairs, staring through their war masks.

Their disguises were simple and effective. Olive drab and khaki green outfits made them all but invisible in the backdrop of the forest. Faces streaked and smeared with black and green paint, completed the eerie disguise.

We came as interlopers, one photographer and a sports writer, to cover the Survival Game. And we were scared stiff.

We walked over to find John Waterhouse, the president of Survival Games of Texas, more for protection than anything else.

Waterhouse, wearing a "Don't shoot the judge" t-shirt explained the rules of the game while handing protective goggles and a release from liability form to each of us. Not very reassuring.

I had come to the 60 acre Survival Game area because curiosity had gotten the better of me.

We both were issued a belt, holster, gun, a supply of yellow paint pellets (water soluble paint) and extra CO2 cartridges.

The equipment was simple and effective. The guns we were using were the same type used by foresters to mark trees. The paint pellets are loaded into the gun propelled by compressed air.

In the roped off practice area, human cutouts were tied to the trees to serve as targets. They just made me more unsettled as I fired a few test rounds. The guns proved to be surprisingly accurate and powerful.

Power. That was the uncomfortable part. I felt torn in my desire to pit myself against man and nature, and my distaste for all that these "games" symbolized. I figured I was overreacting.

We were dumped on blue army. Two hopeless civilians. As we moved away from the house, crossing under the red taped area that separated safe from hostile territory, I couldn't help feeling a twinge of excitement.

"It feels like we're in Vietnam," a photographer from Waller said in a hush tone.

One of the players said the Survival Game gave him a chance to act like a kid again, and I knew what he meant.

The adrenalin was already pumping.

The survival game is a game of capture the flag. Each army starts at their flag station at opposite ends of the field.

When I say field, I don't mean a meadow or large farm tract. I am



Photo by CAMILLE BROWN

In the heat of battle, two blue army members try to clear a jammed gun. The guns fire plastic pellets filled with water

soluble paint. All players must wear protective goggles when participating in a game.

talking about a densely forested area. Brambles and thorns choke many areas, and a shallow stream snakes its way through the course.

We separate our blue team into offense and defense. We begin the first game (usually they last about an hour) by defending our own flag. Six of us break up into smaller cells of two and fan out around the flag station.

We wait. I lie crouched under a tree, one hand on a tree for support until I discover fire ants swarming over my hand. I shift position. I imagine that the noise can be heard for miles. It is that quiet. For the first five minutes I can hear Scott, my partner settling down about 10 yards away. Invisible.

I sit down on the carpet of pine needles and concentrate on the huge forest around me. I have selected my spot carefully. I am on high ground, within easy sight of the flag, but protected on three sides by a tangled mat of bushes and thorns.

The sun filters down through the trees casting weird shadows, distorting my view of the one path I know red army will use. My goggles fog

up, but I concentrate on swivelling my head in every direction. I want action.

But nothing happens. We hear distant shots, shouts, and several times we tighten the defensive ring around the flag. Each time the action is around the next corner, or over the next ridge. Once, I take a bead on someone emerging from around a tree, only to discover it is my photographer yelling, "Blue army, blue army!!!" The slimmest of margins.

The second game blue army shifts to the other flag station and we both decide to be offensive players. As soon as the horn sounds to begin the game, the offensive players charge toward the enemy as quickly as possible, trying to penetrate deep into red territory before we run into them.

As we hustle down the freshly cut paths, the guy ahead of me stumbles and catches himself several times before falling. There is no time.

Cautiously we creep towards a large ravine, a small creek trickling through it, with steep sharp cliffs on either side. I am to the right of my squad. I crouch behind a tree and try

to figure out how to get across the ravine without getting hit. This is a perfect place for an ambush.

By chance I happen to see a familiar shape huddle behind a tree directly across from me. I am mildly surprised. Like in a dream, I'm not sure who he is.

I aim my gun at him. I know he can see me, so I try and identify him as either red or blue. He just huddles down closer to the ground. I still am not sure, but I can't risk letting my buddies get it, so I squeeze off one shot. It slams into the grass in front of the man. I figure I missed. But he stands up, disgusted, and says he is dead. He was just a vague blur, a shadow, now he has ceased to exist.

My first kill. Incredibly, I stand up and whoop and yell in triumph. I beat him. I survived. I beat the odds this time. I feel invincible, and I slide and roll to the creek bed and scale the other side of the ravine. I can feel the blood pumping in my ears. Two Jims, D-Day, John Wayne, the whole bit.

We sweep closer to the flag, now I zig zag from tree to tree. But we over

shoot red army's flag station. We retrace our steps.

Confusion reigns as the flag is brought out. A minute ago we had nine players, now there are only four, the others might as well have been swallowed up by the earth.

Closer we dashed to our flag, the terrain now much gentler, the going much easier. We skirt two ambushes and stumble into another. Two of the enemy shadow us from behind — it is my job to hold them up.

But then that uneasy feeling came back into my gut. It was just so close to hunting real human beings, with real guns.

It was an exciting adventure, the chance to hone the primal edge in your character. For one time. But I am afraid if I did again, I might like it. And that is the most dangerous thing of all.

As I walk into the newsroom, yellow paint splattered on my jeans and hands, Travis, the assistant sports editor put it just right.

"Just imagine if all that yellow paint was real blood."

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