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Basically it's darts, with axes. Parallel lanes are enclosed in chain-link walls, with cartoon target boards at one end. A bullseye is worth five points; the concentric circles around it, fewer. Our instructor, Alice, teaches us single and double-handed throws. It's a whole body movement, like headbutting, she says. I have never headbutted anyone; I am not a goat. I am surprised, though, by how little strength is required to generate a hefty WHUMP. When I go on to land a bullseye in training before anyone else does, an unexpected feeling of power blooms. I must triumph. Game on.



▲ Safety first ... outside the venue, Rhik could hear the thunk of axes hitting wood in the lanes. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

We begin a tournament, Alice chalking up points on a board. Aiming to become the axe-throwing GOAT, I whip my hatchet down the lane. It over-rotates, smacking the target bluntly and uselessly. My competitor, Victoria, a former ballerina, sinks hers into the soft wood of the bullseye. This isn't right. I trash-talk her for a few throws - bringing up past failures, financial insecurities etc. It does the trick and her last axe fails with a clatter. My turn. I raise my arm and let fly. Bullseye. The cleanest bullseye the world has ever seen. Then the axe trembles and falls out of the target on to the floor. "No points!" says Alice. Unharmful, I am nonetheless in a world of pain.

Once the pastime of taciturn woodsmen in flannel, urban axe throwing is on the rise. This could be for many reasons - novelty, a need to reclaim our pre-modern wild sides, the fun of instant skill progression. But there's a physical satisfaction to chucking an



axe at wood that requires no further explanation. It feels good, the way drawing on a banana with a Biro feels good. You do need some co-ordination, though, as exemplified by my friend Heather, always picked last for school sports, who fearfully sails an axe into the lane ceiling.

Alice, the instructor, is present at all times, coaching (or in Heather's case, drawing a helpful chalk line on the floor). "Remember, winning is the most important thing EVER!" she yells. Due to the constant racket of hatchets, she has to shout throughout the 70-minute session. Her job interview was an enormous axe-throwing competition, she reveals. "Don't shake hands," she instructs Tom and me, as we step into our lanes. Because of Covid? "Because everyone here is your ENEMY!" she howls. We touch axes instead.



▲ Action man ... Rhik gears up to throw his axe. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

I'm actually getting worse. With her personalised oche - the line you toe to throw darts or axes - Heather is a revelation. She is scoring from slow arcs that peak and sink with stately grandeur. She appears to meet her match in another pal, James, especially when they throw simultaneous bullseyes. Incredible, cinematic scenes. James has a wild blond beard like a Norse berserker, and looks born to this. But Heather is too far behind to win with one throw left, or is she? There are two tangerine-sized dots in the top corners of the target, almost un-hittable. Heather's last arc sails somewhere close to

Jupiter, then perfectly splits one of these. It's worth a huge seven points. Heather takes the round, putting her demons to bed. She gets to ring a special bell, tears in her eyes.

I'm still thinking about my board, though. The target in my lane had deep gouges in it from a previous session. Surely that makes it easier for axes to fall out? "We pre-soak the boards to improve their bite," another Whistle Punks employee tells me. But there must be a point where the board getting scored on more consistently is so torn up that the axes have less surface area to stick in? "I guess so," they concede, looking at me as if I've missed the point of being here. In fact, I've proved my point.



▲ Into the groove ... Rhik got a bullseye first time round but failed to score because his axe fell out. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

Final round is a "death match". Alice explains that this means, "One person lives, the other person dies!" (It means the two highest scorers face off.) Can the underdog pull off the impossible? "Believe in yourself!" roars Alice. "This is for everyone who bullied me at school," announces Heather, throwing double handed. For the first time, her blade flies straight; directly into the bullseye. But she is in my lane. The axe wobbles and falls out. No points. "I guess you didn't believe in yourself enough," notes James, landing the most savage blow today.

Gutting. Still, deep vindication for me. The winner is justice, or at least shared unfairness. Technically I finished last, but I also have a finger injury from unloading the dishwasher, which I never mentioned. There are a few undignified jokes about my

induction into the Hall of Shame, but even I leave with a ruddy glow and an appreciation of my buried Viking abilities. There's a wild man in all of us. The next day, James mentions that he's been experiencing increased creativity. "I guess I needed to throw an axe into some wood." Talking therapies are great, but taciturn flannel therapy? That hits the spot.

## **Will we eventually turn every ancient human behaviour into a team-building activity?**

Next week, mindful stone-flake sharpening! Or a Sims-type game, based on Mesopotamian irrigation systems! Peatbog paintball!

## **Smugness Points**

Thanks for the memories. **3/5**

*Want to suggest an activity for Rhik to try? [Tell us about it here.](#)*

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