

## Frantic and funny, ComedySportz turns 22

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"Let's hear it for your Chicago Bosses!" booms a voice over the loudspeaker as a three-man squad bursts into the room. High-fiving audience members, and decked out in blue jerseys, the Bosses charge to the stage. Then the red-clad Evanston Express - the visiting team - makes their entrance. Shouting enthusiastically, the Express players even slap hands with viewers in the back row of the 139-seat theater. Things calm down, the National Anthem is played, and then the enthusiasm ramps back up. Clearly, this is far from your typical improvisational comedy show.



ComedySportz is two parts improv and one part sporting event, tossed into a blender, pureed until smooth and doled out in a 90-minute serving. The idea originated in Milwaukee in 1984, spreading across the country over the past quarter-century. This week, ComedySportz in Chicago celebrates its 22nd anniversary. The team-vs.-team aspect has kept this show fast and fresh.

"Something brand new is always happening," says Sam Super, a five year veteran of ComedySportz. "It's faster because it's a higher-energy show and because it's competitive. As a performer, I'm constantly on my toes."

A ComedySportz show involves two teams of three squaring off, vying for laughter and applause to score the most points and become that night's "World Comedy League" champions. Audience participation is vital - not just for their applause, but for suggestions and even participation.

"We need the audience to be part of the show," says improviser Rene Duquesnoy. "Without them, the show is nothing."

Soliciting viewers for "a phrase you heard today" or a "place you'd like to visit" is a staple of the improvisational comedy genre. ComedySportz does this and carries things further. Some of the scenes invite audience members to come on stage and participate. For example, "Moving Bodies" is a game where two viewers-turned-participants reposition the improvisers' limbs like giant action figures. In "Line Comparison" each three-person team acts as a single entity, speaking one word at a time to woo an audience member. Think "Dr. Know-It-All" working his mojo at a singles bar.

Another distinct aspect of ComedySportz is its all-ages approach. No naughty words or innuendo here.

"You don't have to be a kid to enjoy clean comedy," says Matt Elwell, the show's artistic director. "Forcing ourselves to work clean gives us a smarter product."

No sport is complete without a referee, and one responsibility of the ref is keeping the content appropriate. If a four-letter word, or even something that can be misconstrued as dirty, is said by an improviser, the whistle is blown and the referee assesses a "brown bag foul." For the duration of the scene, the actor must then wear a brown bag over his or her head. But bad jokes - as well as bad words - are penalized too.

"The 'Groaner' is some pun that literally makes the audience groan," explains Super, who sometimes plays the role of referee. The offending player must immediately apologize for telling such a joke. "There are a lot of little fouls like that that you don't see often, but if they happen they are delightful."

Rounding out the sports aspect are two large, flat-screen televisions flanking the red, white and blue stage. The screens are used to display the score, eye-catching graphics, or a checklist of tasks an improviser must accomplish - so that the audience can follow along.

Whittle away the slick graphics, penalties and uniforms, and like any team sport, it is the element of competition that is the core of a ComedySportz match. Each team tries to out-do the other - but never at the expense of laughs.

"We're trying to win, but we're also part of the same ensemble," explains Duquesnoy. "We want to win for [our team], but we want to have a good show."

Elwell elaborates: "It's kind of like professional wrestling. [The improvisers] fight hard on stage, but underneath that are trying to support each other. What is most important is the show, and that the audience has a good time."

*The ComedySportz Theater is at 929 W. Belmont Ave. Shows are Thursdays at 8 p.m., Friday at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. and Saturdays at 6 p.m., 8 p.m. and 10 p.m. Tickets are \$21, but students with valid ID can get in for \$10 five minutes before any show. For more information, visit [www.comedysportzchicago.com](http://www.comedysportzchicago.com).*

*Photo courtesy of ComedySportz Chicago.*

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