



GRANT JEFFERIES/The Herald

Peter Blews celebrates a successful hurl after a trebuchet he worked on with his son and neighborhood kids hurled a cantaloupe through the air in a field just north of Blackstone Park in Palmetto. Blews and some neighborhood kids enjoyed their Labor Day hurling stuff through the air using the medieval device.

Fruit gets Labor Day launch

Taylor Blews grabbed the rope and yanked with all his might.

"FIRE IN THE HOLE!" the 13-year-old shouted.

The home-made *trebuchet*, a catapult-like siege weapon from medieval times, sprang into action, hurling a three-pound cantaloupe more than 250 feet away, smashing it to bits in an open field.

"YYYYEEAAAAAYYYY!" cheered some 50 amused onlookers, gathered picnic-style beneath the trees lining the north side of Palmetto's Blackstone Park for an offbeat Labor Day celebration.



Vin Mannix

Mannix About Manatee

"Never thought I'd hear people cheer watching my fruit fly," joked produce market owner Billy Bob Whisnant.

"This is a blast," said Pete

Blews, Taylor's dad.

Sixteen-feet high, the wooden *trebuchet* was built as a lark, a collaborative summer project by Taylor, his dad and his neighborhood pals. Their inspiration came from a NOVA documentary, and after working on it in the Blewses' back yard since May, they had the *trebuchet* ready for its debut.

Sort of.

On the first two firings, the cantaloupe was flung straight down, sort of like a slam dunk.

Another was flung backward.

MANNIX TO 2B

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MANNIX FROM 1B

"Cleaning up won't be hard at this rate," Palmetto Police Sgt. Mike Stinson joked.

Pete was unfazed.

It had taken them more than two hours to disassemble the *trebuchet*, transport it, and reassemble it. So it just needed tuning up.

"We knew we might have some problems," he said.

They'd already overcome the biggest one.

After setting up, the *trebuchet* team was briefly stopped by Warren Kinder, a Manatee County Parks & Recreation worker. Since the field was county property, he needed to see some authorization and the Blews didn't have it.

The impasse made for some long faces.

"We thought we weren't going to be able to do it," said brothers Frankie and Nick Zaremba. Seth Turner, Jeffrey Haynes, Cory Brunson, Seth Winkel and Jeff Drew nodded glumly.

"We needed somebody with pull, but who could we get on Labor Day?" Pete said. Chuckling, he added, "So I called my wife."

Cindy Ritchie initiated a series of phone calls that ended up involving Palmetto City Council members Brian Williams and Shirley Bryant, the Palmetto Police and County Commissioner Jane von Hahmann. Von Hahmann phoned Stinson with



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A *trebuchet* hurls a cantaloupe Monday in a field in Palmetto.

her OK and he sorted it out with Kinder.

When Stinson gave the *trebuchet* team the thumbs up, he was greeted with heartfelt applause.

"Heck, I wanted to see the kids shoot the darn thing, too," he said.

And shoot they did, hurl-

ing some 20 cantaloupes up to 300 feet to the crowd's delight.

Megan Howard and Bethany Brunson, King Middle School classmates of some of the boys, marveled, "It really works. It's kinda cool, too."

Debbie Coffin, the Blewses' next-door neighbor, said, "I had no idea what was going on over there this summer, but I love it."

Her sister, Peggy Carriere added, "It's neat to see the efforts of all the kids in the neighborhood."

Homer Stickle agreed. He's Pete's uncle and a master carpenter who helped out.

"Those boys were working right over top of each other, loading it up this morning and putting it together," he said. "They took it seriously."

The *trebuchet* team's efforts made Labor Day enjoyable, indeed.

"We know the Blews family so we knew it would be interesting," said sisters Olivia and Angela Posani. "It's one of the craziest things we've ever seen."

Mannix About Manatee runs twice a week in the Herald. Have a column idea? Please call **Vin Mannix** at 745-7055, write him at The Herald, Box 921, Bradenton, Fla. 34206, or send e-mail to vmannix@bradentonherald.com. Please include a phone number for verification.