

Marble Manufacturer Fires Up Furnace For The Last Time

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MARIETTA, Ohio (AP) — David McCullough will say a little prayer early Monday, fire up a massive gas furnace for perhaps the last time and do what he does best — produce pretty marbles.

McCullough may have to work his magic on the furnace, which has sat idle for months in Jabo Inc.'s tiny factory near Marietta. Jabo is the last marble maker in Ohio. McCullough hopes to produce up to 120,000 one-inch marbles for a group of collectors from across the United States and Canada.

McCullough, a retired marble master, will do the job for free. The collectors put up the money to run the beat-up furnace for one last time.

"The furnace is badly in need of repair, and the repairs are far too expensive," he said. "Actually, I don't even know if it can be repaired. I gave up on it more than a year ago. But I think I can coax one more run out of it."

In the first half of the 20th century, Ohio was the marble-producing capital of the world, with dozens of companies making millions of marbles for schoolchildren. But children don't play with marbles much anymore. Besides Jabo, there is only one other marble factory in the United States, in West Virginia.

McCullough said Jabo has been for sale for several years. He said it mostly produces industrial marbles for use in spray paint cans, oil wells and water purification equipment. It's rare that he gets to create marbles that people will see.

"We just can't afford it," he said. "But every now and then, collectors pay us to make a run. They give us the money to buy the glass, which now costs a fortune, and we do it."

Steve Sturtz, a marble collector from Kingston, Ontario, who has written several books on the subject, is happy they do. He is one of several dozen collectors who will be at the Jabo plant to watch the molten marbles roll out of the furnace and take on different colors as they cool.

"No one makes marbles like David," Sturtz said. "He's an artist. His colors are incredible; he does things with marbles that no one else can do. We're just excited that he's going to make a one-inch run for us."

Many people call McCullough a genius and an artist, notions he just laughs off.

"The perception is better than the reality," McCullough said. "I just dump colors and

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other things into a vat of molten glass and hope pretty marbles come out. It's a lot of guesswork, and I am often surprised."

The collectors will watch the glass heated in a 2,200-degree furnace. The red-hot liquid glass will drip from the end of the furnace onto a series of rolling coils, where it is shaped into perfect spheres.

The marbles quickly cool to 1,800 degrees as they solidify and roll into catch buckets. The buckets are dumped into 6-foot-square crates, which are set in the warehouse to cool for 72 hours.

McCullough adds chemicals to the soupy, molten mass and watches what comes out. The color and pattern on each marble is always different and totally unpredictable. He said that when he tries to create a pattern, he fails. The marbles come out the way they want, he said, and like snowflakes, no two are alike.

The marbles that will be made Monday will be much larger than the typical marble. In the old days, these marbles would be called shooters. Because they are so much larger, only one of the company's furnaces, or kilns, can handle the job. They will be the first shooters Jabo has made since 2007, the last time the furnace was used.

McCullough said the marbles could sell for \$10 each. But some, deemed special by collectors, will sell for even more.

Sturtz said some of McCullough's creations sell for \$100 each to collectors.

McCullough is embarrassed by the attention.

"I like the collectors," he said. "I wish marbles were used by kids, like they used to. I still want to see the kids play with them; that makes me feel good. I like giving kids bags of marbles and watching their faces light up."

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