



PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORRTHA

PÉTANQUE

Get the balls rolling BY RICK LEVIN

Unless your idea of heaven is nibbling escargot while reading Rimbaud to Jeanne Moreau by the shores of the Seine — in short, unless you're a total Francophile — you've likely never heard of *pétanque*, a version of *boules* that involves pitching big metal balls in the vicinity of a much smaller ball, called a *cochonnet* ("piglet"). Think horseshoes, marbles, croquet, lawn bowling — all these outdoorsy contests of precision and accuracy contain elements of *pétanque* (pronounced, somewhat onomatopoeically, as *peh-tank*).

Since making the game part of his cultural curriculum when he taught at Fox

Hollow Elementary, Michael Stasack, a French teacher at Churchill High School, has been an avid proponent of *pétanque* — though he himself didn't start throwing the *boule* (literally, "ball") until last year. In 1998, he began coaching the sport at Churchill, where the game drew in a diverse and clique-busting array of kids ranging from computer nerds to cheerleaders to mainstream athletes.

"The excitement slowly has grown," Stasack says of student involvement in *pétanque*, which he describes as a game where "you can come in and be a star on the first day." Not to say *pétanque* is easy; it's just that the rules and rudiments are fairly

simple to grasp, while the subtleties and complexities continue to reveal themselves over time. "It's the weirdest thing," he explains. "There's a Zen quality to it, like 'I'm going to be the *boule*.' As your nerves get involved, it gets tougher."

The game is started by a player who tosses the piglet out onto the dirt or gravel playing field; the same player then tosses — softball style, but palm down — a *boule* as close to the piglet as she can. The types of shots taken largely determine the game's strategic appeal. There are pointers, who try to crowd the piglet for points, and shooters, who attempt to knock the opponent's *boule* out of play and thereby take up a scoring position. There are further intricacies involved, of course, but this is the game in a nutshell.

Stasack says one of the most appealing aspects of *pétanque* is that it provides an

outlet for kids who typically don't go out for sports. The game draws a fairly even number of men and women. "This is a low-cost thing to get kids involved who aren't normally involved," he says. "It's endured longer than a lot of activities. I think it merits a different level of support from the district," Stasack adds, noting that despite the comparative affordability of the game, "it's been difficult to drum up administrative support."

Stasack, who is also president of the Eugene Petanque iClub for both youth and adults that plays at University Park Wednesday and Sunday afternoons, says ideally he would like to see kids start playing *pétanque* in fifth grade or so; he'd also like to see the UO start up a league. Stasack says he's finding more time to dedicate to the promotion of this uniquely French sport, which could mean his tracking down grants and endowments to pay coaches. "A little bit of money to say it's worth putting the time in," he says. About \$500 would do it, Stasack adds.

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— MICHAEL STASACK

Even lacking the relatively substantial funding received by more entrenched sports, Stasack succeeded this year in securing his team a spot in the junior nationals to be held mid-July in San Rafael, CA. "The only other part of the country that has put teams together is Fresno," he points out. "This is like the Olympics. The kids who win this are going to go on to the world championships and represent the United States."

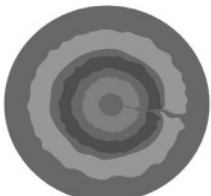
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A longer version of this story is at www.eugeneweekly.com. To learn more about *pétanque* in Eugene, visit <http://sites.google.com/site/eugenepetanqueclub/home> or email Michael Stasack at stasack@comcast.net

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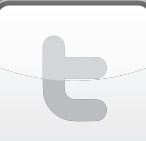
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