

The renovations of the pickleball courts at Meadow Park followed other improvements, which included a new playground, landscaping, paved plaza, benches and restroom renovations. The improvements made the park an attractive location for the pickleball club, Koenig says.

With outdoor courts constructed, Schaljo was quoted in a press release from Willamalane as saying that pickleball would surge in popularity. He referenced the game's upward trend in Bend, where the growth of members increased from 90 to 650 after outdoor courts were constructed.

This popularity is evident at EVPC, too. Last year the club had 142 members, and now it's grown to nearly 300 members. It's beginning to catch up to the Corvallis and Bend clubs, Schaljo adds.

Bob Keefer, former superintendent of Willamalane, tells me that before the Meadow Park courts were installed, EVPC approached the district about using the space in the center that's now named for him. It was perfect timing, since the district was looking for ways to maximize use of the center during the day, he says.

Once EVPC began playing inside the center, Keefer started playing habitually after Schaljo taught him and other Willamalane staff. Keefer says he still plays to this day in Sisters — where he also serves as a board member of the city's parks department.

I see why the sport is so addictive after playing for nearly two hours with EVPC president Schaljo. And it's no surprise the sport could have a court in Eugene.

Pamela Symond with Eugene's Parks and Open Space Planning says a recent survey conducted by the agency shows interest in the game has increased and that residents are requesting courts.

The popularity — and Schaljo's persistence — has revived the lives of failing tennis courts in the area.

The single court at Sladden Park was resurfaced and restriped for both tennis and pickleball. The courts at Westmoreland Park were renovated and resurfaced to feature two tennis courts and eight pickleball courts, Symond says.

Renovating the courts at both parks cost \$30,000 and — just as with Willamalane — EVPC pitched in some money, this time contributing \$5,000.

The renovation at Westmoreland Park has had a hiccup in development, however. Symond says that, although the contractor has had a lot of experience in developing courts, the ever-changing weather in Eugene caused trouble.

"Right when they were finishing the sealant, we had cold rain," she says. "The bubbles were so large that when they popped, this big amount of sealing was sloughing off."

As a result, city officials worried the courts might cause user injuries. The contractor has agreed to fix the court at no cost to the city, though. Symond adds the contractor is currently waiting for the right conditions.

Pickleball Breathes Life into Its Players

The game has renovated more than just local courts. For many players who have played the game, it's been a way to keep active while being low impact, Schaljo says.

Don't let the low-impact nature of the game give you the impression that it's a low-activity game. Schaljo says the game keeps one's heart rate high over a long duration.

The non-stop action of pickleball is what converted Buzz Summers, former tennis coach at the University of Oregon.

Summers, 83, says pickleball replaced tennis in his life a few years ago. He adds that tennis wore out his shoulder from too many shots. Part of what got him hooked on pickleball was that it was easier than other activities on his aching joint.

In fact, Schaljo says he remembers when Summers had to get surgery on his right shoulder. But he showed up to the courts a few days later, ready to play as a southpaw.

Injury hasn't stopped Schaljo from playing, either. He says when he had a knee replacement, he went on to play and organize a tournament — after getting written approval from his doctor to ease concerns from his wife about his return to the sport.

Summers has gone on to win championships, ranking as the best pickleball player in his age bracket nationally, Schaljo says. Summers brought home the gold from 2015 to 2017 in the 80-and-up age bracket, but he's also received gold in doubles in the 75-and-over bracket during that time.

What's also attracted Summers to the sport is that it requires more strategy than tennis. He says you can win by just overpowering someone in tennis. In pickleball, he adds, it takes more finesse and strategy — and it's also faster.

"You have a lot more hits, a lot more action," he says. "Tennis has a lot of breaks that slow the action down."

As I waited with Schaljo for a second match at Meadow Park (which we would end up losing because of my knack for over-hitting and forgetting Schaljo's advice), I met a couple who have made life decisions based on pickleball.

"We had to drive an hour to get to higher level of play," Roger Harrison tells me.

So he and his wife Shary decided to move from Southern California to Surprise, Arizona, which they describe as a "hotbed" for pickleball during the winter. And they've combined travelling and pickleball, which is why I ran into them at Meadow Park in Springfield. They add that going place to place, they know all of the pickleball players are a family.

"Pickleball was invented as a social game," Harrison says. "The number one rule is to have fun."

And that's the overall atmosphere at Meadow Park. Sure, frustration from competition was evident, as missed shots and scoring opportunities will do to anyone. But, at the end of the game, all players are brought together by the sport whether it's coming together for a Sunday potluck or traveling in droves to compete at tournaments. ■

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