



Pickleball IS LIFE

Paddle sport takes over Eugene-Springfield, giving zip to local courts

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It's a cloudy spring morning at Meadow Park in Springfield as I get ready to serve. I have a pickleball in my left hand and my right hand holds a paddle below my waist. I double-check my form by mentally telling myself, "It's like throwing a bowling ball."

First, I call out the score: "1-8-2." Yes, my partner — Roger Schaljo, president of the Emerald Valley Pickleball Club (EVPC) — and I are losing by that much because, despite my eagerness to learn the game, I'm a slow learner in sports. So much for beginner's luck.

Next, I hit the ball, which makes a ping-pong-like sound, and it soars over the net into play.

The rally begins — and so does the fun. After ruining countless exchanges by hitting the ball too hard and forcing it out of bounds, Schaljo and I finally get an almost minute-long rally with our opponents.

Pickleball has nothing to do with pickles.

Created in 1965 by Joel Pritchard, who was a congressman and lieutenant governor of the state of Washington, the name has two possible origins. The first origin comes from Pritchard's wife, who was reminded of a pickle boat crew in boating, a term for leftovers from other boats.

The other — and the one that USA Pickleball Association (USAPA) Executive Director Justin Maloof and the whole organization claim is the official origin — is that it's named after a dog the Pritchard family had that would chase the ball.

The ball looks like a wiffle ball, except it has holes all around the ball. The paddle looks as if a Ping-Pong paddle and a tennis racket had a baby. And when the two collide in a full-on rally, it gives off a pitter-patter sound that reminds me of Maggie Simpson's (of *The Simpsons*) cartoon pacifier sucking.

Gettin' Pickled

Pickleball is a paddle sport created for all ages. The game, which can be played in singles or doubles, starts out with a serve through underhand (unlike tennis) and that must be made diagonally crosscourt. When the opponent returns the serve, the serving side must let the ball bounce before returning the volley.

Then the players run up closer to the net for a volley, but they have to make sure to stay out of the game's trademarked region called "The Kitchen," a zone of seven feet. Points are scored by the serving team, and the game is played up to 11, though wins must have a margin of two points.

Just like in real life, it's hard to stay out of the kitchen. But the game is designed so beginners can learn and then quickly develop into experienced players, leading to competitive play.

And that's what I hear at Meadow Park. Players tell me the game is easy to pick up, but it also has skills and techniques that develop over time, encouraging continuous practice.

Maybe those are the reasons why the sport is gaining popularity nationwide — engaging 2.8 million players across the country, with the most activity on the West Coast, according to a report by Sports and Fitness Industry Association.

This is part of what's made pickleball transition from a game into a sport, Maloof says.

For Maloof, the proof this transition has happened is that the equipment is becoming available in big box stores. Before Dick's, Target or Walmart began to sell pickleball equipment, he says, players had to buy through a website or from vendors at a pickleball tournament.

Yes, there are pickleball tournaments, and one seems to take place nearly every week-end during summer in Oregon. Maloof tells me that the first national championship tournament was played in 2009. Since then, the championship made a big move from Casa Grande, Arizona, to Indian Wells, California.