

IN A PICKLE

Demand for courts on the rise as pickleball craze pummels peninsula

By DAVID PLECHL
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LONG BEACH, Wash. — Early one recent Wednesday morning, before most of us were starting our workdays, four older adults were spotted commandeering a local tennis court for the purpose of Pickleball.

On hands and knees, Deb Stone, a recent retiree and newly anointed pickleball nut, was cleaning, scraping and “chalking out” a court so the foursome could get their fix.

“This is what you have to do to play locally,” Stone confessed.

The four unfurled their contraband; a portable pickleball net. Once assembled, the quartet quickly and quietly got to “dinking,” that is, gently volleying the pickleball back and forth over the net, within the “kitchen” of the court, that’s the inside box, closest to the net. The rhythmic, continuous volleying was made possible by lots of gentle twists, swings and under-hand “dinks.”

Bounce. Thwack. Bounce. Thwack. The hypnotic ritual was but a warm up to the nefarious action yet to come.

Within minutes, two opposing teams now stung the ball back and forth with a good deal more gusto. Lunging this way and that, the duos danced like partners at a Wimbledon reunion.

Most passers-by would hardly know it, but Stone, her friend Lois Hantho, along with Dave and Jackie Stout, are part of a fast growing movement. Let’s just call it a Pickleball Revolution.

While the craze has attracted thousands of players of all ages, shapes and sizes, some of its most ardent enthusiasts are of retirement age. And though they may not be spring chickens themselves, the game helps keep the spring in their step, they say.

As this pickleball contingent grows, so too does the demand for dedicated pickleball courts. If local players get their wish, both the Peninsula Senior Center and Culbertson Park may soon boast dedicated pickleball facilities. The more the merrier, local pickleballers are saying.

“What we would like to do is get the city to do something permanent here,” Stone said. The others nodded in agreement.

In the first game of the morning, Dave Stout was paired with his wife, Jackie. The two dabbled in the sport 35 years ago in Bellingham, Washington, but

both only began playing regularly three years ago while living in Arizona when they saw it take off in their Phoenix community. Dave said he knows of some hardcore pickleball heads that have been playing locally for 15 years in the second story of an old barn.

He’s right, the Chinook Observer featured the story of Steve McPhail and his curious band of barnyard pickleball enthusiasts way back in 2004. Now, the game has gone street level.

“There’s a real following here,” Stout assured. He and the others often commute to Seaside to play at Thousand Trails, a campground and RV resort that boasts a dedicated outdoor pickleball court.

Long Beach Mayor Jerry Phillips said pickleball has recently breached the council agenda and there is some talk of developing a dedicated court at Culbertson Park, on the site where the skatepark used to be. That might cost as much as \$9,000, said Phillips, who added that plans are still in a discussion phase, and no decisions have been finalized or funds set aside.

After each game to 11, the players alternated partners. The focus was firmly on having a good time and getting in a light workout. Although there was some debate about that.



Luke Whittaker/EO Media Group

Pickleball enthusiasts are coming out of the woodwork. Several local players pose for a picture before another morning of friendly informal pickleball gets underway at Culbertson Park.

“This is all for fun. Right?” Stone said, after some confusion about how many points had been tallied.

“Nothing’s for fun if you’re keeping score,” Dave Stout replied with a smile.

What the heck is pickleball?

The game the foursome played looked a lot like doubles tennis, though a singles version of pickleball is also popular. The ball is hard, light and punched with little holes; similar to a whiffle ball. Instead of a tennis-like racket, a large stiff paddle is employed. In the doubles version, players don’t need to alternate hits on the ball, but rather, must cover the court, left to right, and front to back with cooperative aplomb.

The pickleball can be volleyed back without a bounce, but the player has to avoid stepping “into the kitchen” to do so.

Even though the game is quick and resembles tennis, it is less jarring, and the smaller court means players travel a shorter distance to the ball. While it may simulate a slower tennis-like game, fitness, skill and strategy are definite advantages. The doubles game rewards partners that muster a mix of seamless teamwork and individual hustle.

Pickleball was born in Bainbridge Island when then-Congressman Joel Pritchard and friends improvised a game to keep the kids busy through the lazy days of summer. By the end of that first week however, the adults had taken

over the court and then introduced the game to more friends. It spread from there. Today, approximately 2 million people are playing pickleball, and the number of places to play has doubled since 2010.

No pickles are used to play. According to legend, the game took its name after the Pritchard’s spaniel, “Pickles,” who was said to disobediently fetch the ball and run off with it. But even the family has disputed that claim, saying it made a good story, but the dog was actually named after the game, not the other way around. Joan Pritchard said the game reminded her of a slow boat of oarsmen, something she called the “pickle boat.” Joel Pritchard said they needed a “nutty name,” and so pickleball fit the bill.



David Plechl/EO Media Group

Lois Hantho performs the patented underhand pickleball serve during a game with friends, including Jackie Stout, pictured behind. Both the Peninsula Senior Center and Culbertson Park may soon boast dedicated pickleball facilities if local players get their wish.



David Plechl/EO Media Group

Local players set up their own net and court at Culbertson Park on a recent weekday morning. Pickleball is growing nationally, but local places to play are still lacking.



David Plechl/EO Media Group

Deb Stone backhands the pickleball as Jackie Stone reads a return during an informal game at Culbertson Park recently. The friends set up their own net and chalked out their own court. As the game grows locally, so does the demand for dedicated facilities.

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