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Larry Karas (left) delivers a kill shot from the back of the pickleball court, which is half the distance of a standard tennis court.

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Pickleball from 1B

makes for a lot of laughs. "I get a great aerobic workout from the laughter alone." The game of pickleball has been around since 1965, when Washington State Congressman Joel Pritchard, William Bell and Barney McCallum created the game as something their entire families could play together, regardless of age.

With courts being half the size of a tennis court, the distance makes it easy to cover for young children as well as many of those with mobility issues. By using a wiffle-type ball rather than a racquetball or tennis ball, it's easier to keep the game in play while

still making it competitive. The rules are similar to tennis. So why "pickleball?" Pritchard's family dog, "Pickles," had a habit of stealing the ball during play and hiding it in the bushes. And pickleball was born. Before long, the game had moved from family backyards and driveways on Bainbridge Island, to clay courts with official rules throughout the country.

Today it is the second-fastest growing sport in the United States, next to lacrosse. It's also a sport that the group wants to expand in Florence with a little help from the city. "We've approached them about allowing us to divide

one of the tennis courts at Rolling Dunes into four pickleball courts," says Karas. "We'll do all the fund raising and the work if they'll let us do it." Griffin says he's met with City Manager Erin Reynolds, and that she's considering the idea.

"Eventually, we'd really like to see this grow and include sanctioned tournaments," Griffin says. "We already have people coming here from Reedsport to play, and there are people who travel in RVs year-round to compete in tournaments all over." But even more important is the exercise the sport gives to people who may not otherwise get that kind of activity, says Debbie Griffin.

"We played with a man a while back who was 85 years old," she recalls. "His movements were choppy but he was having fun. He was wearing a pedometer and, in a little more than two hours, he had covered 4-1/2 miles. "That's the best thing about pickleball. It's exercise you want to do because it's fun — and just about anyone can do it."

The group meets regularly on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at Rolling Dunes Courts on 35th Street, starting at 8:30 a.m., before the wind picks up.

"We are working to find an indoor space, which would let everyone play year-round," says Karas, who spends part of the year in Palm Desert. "While I'm there, I play every day. And when I'm not playing, I'm thinking about when I can play again."

"It's an addiction your heart will thank you for." Steve Larson, who began playing back in February with knee problems, says pickleball has steadily improved his mobility.

"When I started, I was sort of hobbling around because my knees were so stiff," he says. "Now I'm moving around the court and my knees are in much better shape. It's really amazing — and I've made new friends in the process."

More than 50 years after the Pritchard family created a game for the whole family, pickleball is still bringing people of all ages together.

For more information about playing here in Florence, contact John Griffin at 661-496-6438 or email jgriffish@yahoo.com.

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