

PLAYING PICKLEBALL

◆ Why Seniors Relish this Game

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KAREN FINUCAN CLARKSON

Organized sports were never Susie Weber's thing—until she discovered pickleball. “Anyone can do it; you don't have to be great to enjoy it. The bottom line is to have fun,” said the 91-year-old Vienna, Va., resident. Twice a week for the past 16 years, Weber has joined more than a dozen other seniors at the local community center for several games of this increasingly popular paddle sport, savoring the associated social, emotional and physical benefits. “Sometimes you're tired or down before you start, but you always feel better by the time you quit.”

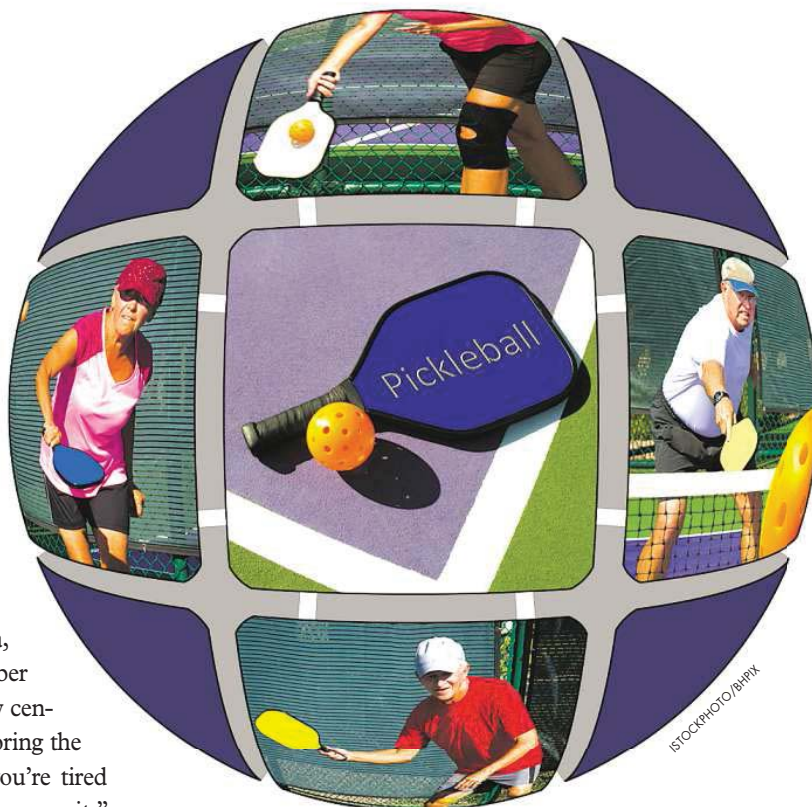
Pickleball is a “combination of tennis, badminton and table tennis,” said Helen White, the USA Pickleball Association's ambassador for Northern Virginia and the National Senior Games' reigning silver medalist in women's 60-plus singles. “We use a wiffle ball, which doesn't bounce as high, fast or hard. The paddle—like a table tennis paddle, only elongated—makes hand-eye coordination easier.”

While the pickleball net is low to the ground similar to tennis, the court is smaller than a regulation tennis court. Locally, games are played in gyms or on modified tennis courts. At Leisure World in Silver Spring, residents play outdoors year round, provided the temperature is above 40 degrees. “We wanted to play on the indoor tennis courts,” said Donna Leonard, “but the surface wasn't right and the ball

wouldn't bounce on it.” Leonard is hoping that when the fitness center at Leisure World is expanded, there will be space somewhere for dedicated indoor courts.

The smaller court size is one reason pickleball is ideal for older adults. “My knees are shot and I had to give up tennis five or six years ago, but I can move two steps to

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ISTOCKPHOTO/BWPIX

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

At the Vienna Community Center, David Sandidge (left) of Vienna, Va., prepares to return a shot as his doubles partner Ron Rothberg of Annandale, Va., stands ready to help.

Hal Corby (left) of Vienna and Helen White, USA Pickleball Association ambassador for Northern Virginia, are ready for the shot from their double opponents.

Left to right: Rothberg and Corby acknowledge a game well played against White and Sandidge.





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Pam Robinson of Oakton, Va., and Mary Flynn of Vienna, Va., (right) prepare for a serve during a game of pickleball at the Vienna Community Center.

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hit a pickleball," said George Huson, a resident of Asbury Methodist Village in Gaithersburg.

"You don't have to cover so much territory," said LeisureWorld resident Marlys Moholt, who took up the game after shoulder surgeries forced her to give up tennis. "Pickleball is all underhanded, so even people with shoulder problems can play. Really, anybody can play, provided they can move around a bit."

Gus DeLeon began playing pickleball in 2005 after his second hip replacement. "It's good therapy—at least it has been for me," said the Vienna resident. "Even as your reactions begin to slow down, this is a game you can play and enjoy."

Those who play pickleball do so primarily for the exercise and companionship, to judge from responses of seniors at the Vienna Community Center and Leisure World. Pickleball provides a good workout, according to Leonard, but "I never feel exhausted or drained when I'm done."

"It uses all parts of the body and requires some agility—you've got to move left, right, up, down," said Vienna resident Frank Boyko, who rides his bike to the community center three times a week

to play. The sport "isn't just physical. You have to do some thinking, too. It challenges you mentally."


Pickleball "makes you move," said Pam Robinson, an Oakton, Va., resident who began playing about a year ago. "Once you can hit the ball, you can think about strategy. There's something new every step along the way."

"I like the camaraderie," said John Tremaine, the resident who was instrumental in getting pickleball off the ground at Leisure World. "We don't take it so seriously, but we are competitive. And, we certainly get in a lot of laughs. Pickleball draws people back because they can exercise and have fun doing it."

"We have a very congenial group here" in Vienna, said Asako Coleman of McLean, Va., who is in her second year as a pickleball player. "We have such fun."

"The group is diverse," said Vienna resident Thomas Warring, noting the "wide variety of ages and ethnic backgrounds. And, while there are some real differences in skill levels, we all play together."

Doubles, rather than singles, is the way the game is played in these Vienna and Silver Spring locations. Not only does that give people more court time, but it also heightens the social interaction, according to Leonard.



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