

Pickleball Arrives In Lexington

*Latest Sports Sensation A Hybrid of Tennis,
Ping Pong, Racket Ball And Badminton*

BY CLAUDIA SCHWAB

“What’s Pickleball?”

That is the question most frequently asked when one of its advocates mentions the name of the game they all love.

“Everybody sort of rolls their eyes,” said Lexingtonian Alice Correll, who has been playing for over a year. “One guy said, ‘I’m not old enough to play Pickleball yet’ but it’s really for all ages.

“It’s kind of a combination of tennis, ping pong, racket ball and badminton,” she explained. “You play with a very light paddle [about 6-9 ounces] that’s solid, sort of like in ping pong, but bigger and shaped differently. The ball is the big difference – it’s hard plastic, about the size of a baseball with holes in it and hollow like a wiffle ball.”

Correll, formerly an avid tennis player, has now switched her allegiance.

“I gave up tennis last November,” she said. “Pickleball has my heart now.”

Correll is one of those who come together with a number of other fans of the game three times a week, usually on the outdoor tennis courts at the Virginia Military Institute.

“What makes it fun is we have such a good bunch of people and it’s very informal,” she said. “We laugh and poke fun while playing the game which you wouldn’t do if you were playing tennis since it’s more structured and formal.”

Rick Heatley, a 71-year-old former Latin teacher, is another fervent advocate of Pickleball. Heatley, who is secretary-treasurer and online coordinator for the group, said there are approximately 25 to 30 people who play. Not that many show up necessarily for each session but whoever comes gets to play on a round-robin basis. Four people are on a court at a time – two teams of partners on each side of the net taking turns serving.

Games are short, Heatley explained, usually about seven points or sometimes 11, points as in tournaments. Heatley and Correll were two of six, in fact, who went up to Fishersville in the spring to play in a tournament and were among those who played the last weekend of July in The Virginia Commonwealth Games in Lynchburg. It is the first time Pickleball has been included in the event.

‘You don’t have to have outstanding athletic ability. It’s great exercise, social and a heck of a lot of fun.’

Alan Bassett

“Pickleball began in 1965 off the coast of Seattle on Bainbridge Island,” he said. “Those people had tennis courts but when the trees began encroaching on their courts, they decided to rein in the courts, making them smaller. They’re essentially half the size of a regular tennis court [or badminton-size court] and it’s still that way today.

“They also decided they weren’t going to use the big long tennis rackets any longer that can mess up your arms and cause rotator cuff injuries,” he noted.

Heatley had been a longtime tennis player, but like so many others, said, “to be frank, most of us who were tennis partners and friends learned as we aged that tennis was just too stressful.”

With a shorter court and lighter rackets and underhand serving, it is much easier on a player’s arms, legs and joints, he added.

“All of a sudden, Pickleball has become a sensation,” he said. “It was even covered in a special on CBS this spring. It’s answered the question for senior citizens who cannot run way back to tennis lines or continue to slam balls overhead.”

Behind The Name

There is some mystery surrounding just the name of the sport of Pickleball.

Heatley offered what many think is the reason it is named as such.

“It’s a term based on rowing, oaring and crewing,” he said. “The last team chosen is called the ‘pickle’ team. It’s a mixture of everything that’s left.”

A Pickleball Family

Almost everyone mentions one player in particular – Joe Valko - who has his own Pickleball court on the driveway of his Rockbridge area home.

Not only is the Pickleball court for Valko’s use; his entire family has become involved.

Valko, who is turning 69 this month, had a massive stroke nine years ago while living in Florida.

“I finally worked my way back to playing tennis again and started playing with my daughter Tara [Dean],” he said.

Valko, a former construction and church pew builder from the northeast, was at one time a professional dancer who performed in “Bye, Bye Birdie” on Broadway.

Valko and Dean made an unusual but determined pair playing tennis, and now, Pickleball. Dean, who has leukemia, is the reason they moved to the Rockbridge area, since she wanted to be in cleaner, purer air than they had in Florida, said Valko. During the course of their tennis-playing years, however, Valko had two accidents. After falling



SYLIA KIRGIS (above) gets off a nice backhand while (at left) Rick Heatley concentrates on his forehand shot as they play a recent game of Pickleball. (Claudia Schwab photos)



SALUTING each other at the end of a game of Pickleball are (from left) Dennis de Graffe, Alan Bassett, Wally Hawkins and Jerry McCoy. (Claudia Schwab photo)



PEGGY PAINTER (at right) hits a nice underhanded shot while Rick Heatley (at left) prepares to block it and Painter’s partner, Wally Hawkins, watches. (Claudia Schwab photo)



RICK KIRGIS (at left) serves while teammate Jerry McCoy waits for a return and (in background) other Pickleball players socialize as they wait for their turn at the round-robin Pickleball fun. (Claudia Schwab photo)