

Published September 23rd, 2015

## Parks and Rec's Pickleball Increases in Popularity

By Daniel Smith



People play Pickleball at Orinda Community Park. Photo provided

While walking through Orinda Community Park several weeks ago, I came upon an odd site: grown adults running around with oversized ping pong paddles, whacking a Whiffle ball back and forth over a net. I may have actually rubbed my eyes and shaken my head before taking a second, confirmatory look.

A flyer on the courtside corkboard read, "Pickleball ... Thursdays from 2 to 4." Pickleball. Odd name for an odd game. I wondered, where did such a goofy sport come from?

Research revealed an origin story fraught with disagreements; however, the following details were common to all accounts:

Pickleball was invented in 1965 by Joel Pritchard, a future senator, and several friends. The children, having been summer couch potatoes, were dragged by Pritchard one afternoon to their badminton court and handed not rackets or a

birdie, but a Whiffle ball and wooden paddles. The tomfoolery that ensued would become the sport of Pickleball. Accounts differ on whether Pritchard devised the event as a lesson in creative play or whether he was just really good at improvising after he lost the family's badminton equipment.

Whatever the case may have been, Pickleball caught fire - today it's played by 2.46 million people. The Whiffle ball and court dimensions haven't changed, though the wooden paddles are now regulated by the USAPA (USA Pickleball Association).

But these stories and facts still weren't answering the big question: Why would someone choose to play Pickleball when there are already so many established racket sports without embarrassing names?

Several Thursdays later I decided to return to Orinda Community Park and to seek answers, not as a spectator, but as a participant.

The Pickleball boundaries were visible in white paint, the whole game played in one half of the tennis court. The net, balls and rackets were all provided by the Orinda Parks and Rec Department.

I met three other players. Two were equally new to Pickleball and unsure of what to expect. The third, Tom O'Brien, had only played twice.

We stretched and batted the air with wooden paddles, the weight of a tennis racket at half the size. O'Brien, our default veteran, explained the game. The rules are nearly identical to tennis with a few notable exceptions: volleys can't be returned from a demarcated area at the front of the net called the kitchen; serve returns can never be hit before bouncing. Scoring is more like volleyball: you serve until you lose the point and can only score on your serve. As O'Brien spoke he unsheathed his own paddle. Its handle had sleek vinyl gripping. The head had a matte surface for extra touch. It was inscribed with the Japanese symbol for power, capability, and influence.

"The Zen Paddle," O'Brien announced after finishing the rules, "graphite composite laid over honeycomb aluminum." O'Brien had bought this secret weapon after his very first Pickleball game. He said he'd known that very day that Pickleball was to become his new sport.

Within minutes of playing I understood Pickleball's appeal. The satisfying simplicity of the gameplay was addictive. The gentle pace of the Whiffle ball and the small court size allowed even us first-timers to build sustained, competitive rallies. Yet there was challenging depth to the game. The difficulty of applying finesse with a wooden paddle, the restraint required to place balls within

the shallow boundaries - these elements demanded an engaged player, physically and mentally present.

A notable drawback of Pickleball is its susceptibility to wind. Periodic gusts easily swept the hollow ball off course. Much of the game was a test of our ability to adjust the strength and direction of our hit to counter the wind.

These gales were unanimously and vocally recognized as the cause of most of our learning errors. After the wind calmed it was decided that on-court objects could also be to blame. Rookie Dave Wolden became the first player to draw our attention to an obstructive pine needle, which he claimed was responsible for his missed return. I was skeptical at first, but after badly missing my serve I was forced to conclude that this pesky pine needle had most likely blown over with the wind and lodged itself under my shoe, wrecking havoc on my traction.

During the entire two hours we only took breaks to re-erect the wind-embattled net and we only stopped when the Parks and Rec Department needed its equipment back. Despite dripping with sweat one player, commenting on the ease of play, remarked that "the hardest part was keeping the score," and added. "I'll be here next Thursday!"

I believe Pickleball's popularity also lies in its accessibility. Aging tennis players will find that the sport offers a comparable experience to tennis, but that the shrunken court demands less impact while still offering good exercise. Young athletes will appreciate the economy of Pickleball gear in comparison to other sports equipment.

It's worth mentioning that a few spectators stopped by, no doubt amused by the novel sight, as I had weeks before. Considering Pickleball's continued expansion, one wonders how big its future might be. The USAPA is optimistic, pointing to the upcoming first-ever professional live broadcast of the Pickleball National Championship as a sign of the sport's explosion. According to a USAPA representative, the organization sees Pickleball becoming an Olympic sport sooner rather than later. Who knows, yesterday's spectator could be tomorrow's paid Pickleballer.

Pickleball is played at Orinda Community Center Park from 2 to 4 every Thursday, excepting rain and holidays. Cost: \$3 for Orinda residents; \$4 for non-residents. For info, visit [www.cityoforinda.com](http://www.cityoforinda.com), Parks and Recreation Department, adult programs.

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