

# The next big competitive sport of ... pickleball?



Photos John T. Miller

**Luke Brightbill, a junior at Acalanes, returns a serve at a recent practice with other Bay Area high school students. If the students want to enter tournaments they currently must compete against adults.**

**By John T. Miller**

What, you might ask, is the next big sport to hit the competitive circuit? The answer could just be pickleball.

A large portion of the population may still be wondering, pickleball?

But for over an estimated 4 million people, pickleball is an exciting new sport that is fun to play and growing in

popularity and competitiveness. As of 2019, the USA Pickleball Association tracked nearly 8,000 pickleball locations, with an average of about 110 new locations being added every month.

The game is a cross between tennis, volleyball, badminton, and ping pong and is played on a court that is one-fourth the size of a tennis court. Singles and doubles play use the same size court,

employing a plastic ball that resembles a sturdy whiffle ball—with about 40 holes—and a paddle that looks like an oversized ping pong paddle. The paddle can be made of plastic with a graphite skin layer, or of carbon with the cheapest paddles made out of wood. The net is slightly lower than for tennis.

Locally, when the tennis courts at Orinda Community Center Park were last resurfaced in 2013, two new pickleball courts were lined in – one on either side of the existing tennis midcourt line. Interest died out shortly afterward, but Drew Diefenbach, who runs Paragon Tennis at the site, was encouraged a couple years ago by some friends to include pickleball in his lessons.

Diefenbach, a graduate of Miramonte High School ('03) has a master's degree in sports psychology from JFK University, coaches tennis at Acalanes High School, and is a USTA High Performance Coach. He now runs pickleball clinics through the city of Lafayette at the Community Center multi-use rink, which serves lacrosse, roller hockey, basketball and pickleball. When not used for clinics, there are six courts for public use at the Center.

"Pickleball is definitely the number one choice," says Diefenbach, "and the interest has grown tremendously since

last year." Diefenbach has traveled and competed nationwide in the sport and has organized leagues, locally.

Pickleball has been offered as a unit in the high school P.E. programs locally for the last 15 years, but the students use the full-sized tennis courts for lack of a pickleball layout.

Pickleball was founded in the summer of 1965 by Joel Pritchard, Bill Bell and Barney McCallum on Bainbridge Island, Washington. Within days, Joan Pritchard came up with the name "pickle ball" – a reference to the thrown-together leftover non-starters in the "pickle boat" of crew races.

An alternative version has it that the game was named after the Pritchard's dog, a Cockatoo puppy named "Pickles." According to the Pickleball Portal, the story has it that once they started playing, the dog would pick up the plastic ball and run off the court with it.

There are holes in this theory, however, since the dog didn't arrive until

two years after the game was invented. Perhaps the dog was named after the game?

Diefenbach is hopeful that the game can be presented as a high school sport in the area – much like lacrosse was last decade – and plans to start up a club team at Acalanes to gain traction. "The students could play coed and it could provide a lot of unity in the school," he says. "There's some top-notch high school players in the area who have to compete at the adult level in order to enter any tournaments."



**Brightbill demonstrates size of paddle and ball.**

# Orinda resident closes in on record for most consecutive Boston Marathons run by a woman



Photos provided

**Celebration at the Christian Science Plaza at the Reflecting Pool in Boston.**

**By Jon Kingdon**

Starting in 1985, as regular as clockwork, Orinda resident, former teacher and current nurse, Patty Hung, made an annual trek to Massachusetts to run in the Boston Marathon. Hung's attempt to run in her 35th consecutive Boston Marathon in 2020 did not come about for over two years as the race, like so many other events, was canceled due to the coronavirus.

Though the 2021 Marathon was further postponed from its usual April 19 starting date this year (Patriots Day) to Oct. 11, the 124th Boston Marathon returned to its former glory and for Hung, it was a case of the more things change, the more they stay the same. "The crowds were amazing," Hung said. "It was great to have them out there cheering for us after not being able to do so during the pandemic. It was just like another holiday."

The Boston Athletic Association went the extra mile to ensure the safety of the runners, requiring proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test for every runner prior to being allowed around the other competitors. The race started seven months later than normal to make sure that all the rules and regulations were in place. For the first time, the race was run with a staggered start, further insuring the safety of the runners. All were assigned different colors contingent on their previously established marathon times.

The first group of rated runners to run after the seeded runners was the red group along with the members of the quarter century club (those with 25 Boston Marathons to their credit which included Hung) followed by seven other colors. "Starting out in the red group with so many top runners was fun," Hung said. "We got passed quickly but it was special to start off with the rest of the red group. "Everyone had to wear a

mask right up until the race began," Hung said. "Everyone had to wear a mask right up until the gun sounded and the race began," Hung said. "After that we took off our masks and there were baskets for the runners to throw our masks into. Everything was done very efficiently, and it was amazing how safe we all felt."

With over 18,000 people officially entered and 15,374 finishing the race, Hung ended with an official time of 5:34.25. "Conditions for the marathon were excellent," Hung said. "My time wasn't great, but I felt really strong and healthy. My training was very indicative of what I was going to run so I wasn't disappointed. I was a little too comfortable and enjoyed all the festivities because it was so beautiful. I did wear a shirt that was a little too warm. It bothered me at the beginning of the race, but I told myself to put it out of my mind and just run and that is what I did."

Hung's strategy came from the many years of experience along with established traditions developed over the years in running in Boston. "My cousin, as always, prepared a big lasagna dinner and I stopped as I always did half-way through the race to give kisses to my cousin Jackie, Nancy, Hannah and Drew. Hannah is a newscaster for the Hub in Boston and did a story on me and it was fun to see it and feel famous, seeing myself on TV."

As for the race, Hung looked forward, as she always did before to her favorite landmark, the huge CITGO sign that when seen showed her how close she was to finishing the race: "I went out fast and the hills then slowed me down though I still felt strong throughout the race. When I can see the CITGO sign, I know it's the last four miles of the race," Hung said. "When I reached that sign, I knew there was only a mile to go to the finish line. I love to see that



**Hung's family, from left: Sons Erick and David, Hung, partner Don, and Grandson Gavin.**

sign."

Hung is looking forward to running two more marathons knowing that after the second marathon she will hold the record for the most consecutive marathons run by a woman with 37. This will break the record of 36 by Andrea Hatch who has held the record since 2013. She is also looking forward to running with her sons Eric, who has

run four other marathons, and David, who is training to qualify to run with her for the first time next year.

Hung has already laid out her training plan for her 36th marathon: "I am looking to improve my speed and finish the race in under five hours. I may hire a trainer, but I know I can do it. I have the stamina and God willing, I will continue to stay healthy."

# Lady Mats make it happen at NorCal Invitational 2021



**2021 NorCal Girls Water Polo Invitational Champions**

Photo provided

**Submitted by April Murphy**

The Miramonte Varsity Girls Water Polo Team, with a record of 20-0, won the Invitational last month. Coach John Roemer said: "At North Cal Championships the girls played ex-

tremely well. The tactics we are using take time to understand. This fast paced high tempo offense is very effective with current rules. We are just beginning to understand how effectively it can be when run properly. I'm so excited to see how we continue to improve on our play this season".