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HIGH SCHOOL

A Younger Generation Takes Up Bocce

By [SARAH N. LYNCH](#)

Greenwich

GROWING up in Greenwich, John Agostino can remember eating pasta and watching his grandfather toss bocce balls in the backyard on Sunday afternoons.

So when he entered his freshman year at Greenwich High School and saw that the Italian club was floundering, it was only natural that he looked to bocce as a way to rejuvenate it.

“The club was all over the place,” said Mr. Agostino, who is now a senior. “We had to think of something to promote the Italian culture. If we didn’t, that club would just die out and that would be the end of it. It’s been there since ’79, and we weren’t going to be the ones to let it go.”

Some students might have organized a club trip to Italy, or maybe to Little Italy if finances were low. But Mr. Agostino had an idea with more lasting value, more of a capital improvement than a one-time class project. It was also a project that reached back to older generations of Italian-Americans. He and Sean DiSesa, a friend who graduated last year, decided the construction of a bocce court might stimulate interest.

Bocce has ancient Italian origins. It is said that the game was popular with the early Romans, and today it is still played throughout Italy. The aim of the game is to see who can throw the bocce balls closest to the smaller pallino ball.

Italian immigrants brought their bocce tradition to the United States, where it has thrived, perhaps in part because of the nostalgia it evokes.

At first, the school said no to Mr. Agostino’s and Mr. DiSesa’s bocce court idea because of concerns about costs and maintenance, but that did not stop them.

The next year, in 2005, Mr. Agostino and Mr. DiSesa ran for president and vice president of the Italian Club and made the bocce court their main campaign issue. They won the election and got other students involved in the bocce court plan. The students made proposals, appeared before the Greenwich Board of Education and helped raise roughly \$5,000 for the court through bake sales. Meanwhile, Mr. Agostino started an informal team that played the game in a small, grassy area on the school’s campus once a week.

FINALLY last fall, the new court was constructed on the school grounds, and in March, the club held its first bocce game against the Italian Club at Stamford’s West Hill High School. Now, the club is inviting everyone from firefighters to members of an adult Italian Club in Stamford to put together an informal team and come out to play a match.

With the creation of the court, however, the students are also carrying on a tradition that has been a popular pastime among communities in [Connecticut](#) for generations — and perhaps bucking a few stereotypes, too.

The game, which has been a longtime summer sport in cities like Norwalk and Stamford, is often thought of as a game played by older men.

“Our bocce league has been around 55 years, and in the past that is what it was — a bunch of older men,” said Enzo Iorfino, 42, the vice president of the adult Stamford Bocce League. Today he estimates that about a third of the more than 200 members in the league are under 40.

Meanwhile, the director of the Norwalk Recreation and Parks Department, Michael Moccia, said he too had noticed a more intergenerational mix of people playing at the city’s courts, which were installed about four years ago. The city is organizing a new bocce league, at the request of local Italian clubs, which will start this May.

“People think it’s old Italian guys with a glass of wine and a stogie, and there is a lot of that still, but young people are playing,” said Mario Pagnoni, who helps run an annual youth bocce tournament through his local library in Massachusetts and self-published “The Joy of Bocce.”

That was the case at least in Greenwich on a recent April day. Italian techno music blasted from a car stereo as the club members squared off against the school’s Iranian Club. Several students huddled before their next round and shouted something in Italian. The Italians won, 36-12.

Since Mr. Agostino took over the reins, he says the club has grown to over 30 members, from 6. And the club’s secretary, Anthony Cantavero, said he’s seen the results of Mr. Agostino’s efforts.

“He’s the guy who brought it back from the dead,” he said.

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