

The Sunday ADVOCATE

Sports



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Masone's not alone as bocce has its day

The thick plastic ball thrown by Pat Masone rolled slowly down the first bocce court at Scalzi Park, gently kissed the wooden side board, and ricocheted toward the small white ball, or pallino, some 60 feet distant. Masone's ball came to a halt a hair's breadth from its target. Had it been any closer to the pallino, the ball would, in the immortal words of Groucho Marx, have been behind it.

"Now that," Masone said with a broad grin, "is how you throw a bocce ball."

Masone ought to know. He's been playing the game for all but five of his 76 years, and remains, among the dozens of bocce enthusiasts who congregate at Scalzi each spring and summer evening to quench their passion for the sport, one of Stamford's premier players.

He was, therefore, the ideal candidate to teach the game to a paunchy neophyte whose russet moustache, curly hair and graceless form corresponded strikingly with my own.

Adding expertise to what essentially was a Herculean effort was Bob Fiore, a 28-year-old Wunderkind who, compared to Masone, is a virtual hobbledehoy on the court.

Masone and Fiore, who play in the 48-team Stamford Bocce League, which is hosting the Stamford Open Bocce Tournament today at Scalzi Park, are skilled, talented practitioners of a 400-year-old sport that is largely unfamiliar to nearly everyone not of Mediterranean, and particularly Italian, descent.

"It's too bad more people don't play," Masone said, his ebullience unbridled. "A lot of people know nothing about bocce. But once they get into it, they don't want to stop."

Neither did he. "We don't have only Italian people playing down here — we have all kinds of nationalities. The game appeals to just about everybody. And it's pretty simple to learn."

That, of course, is easy for Masone to say. When you've been playing bocce for almost three-quarters of a century, it ought to be a piece of cake. Right, Pat?

"Well," Masone said with a laugh, "it depends how fast you get the hang of it."

The object is score points (a total of 16 wins a game; two games win a match) by chucking the pallino, which is about the size of a golf ball, at least

two-thirds the distance of the court, then attempting to roll — or sometimes shot put, depending on the condition of your biceps — a two-pound bocce ball as close to the pallino as possible.

In Masone's case, as close as possible is well-nigh impossible for his opponent. But the neophyte's competition this day was Fiore, certainly no slouch, especially when one considers that he has been playing the game since he was in rompers.

"My grandfather first got me interested in bocce," Fiore said. "I've been hooked on it ever since."

The hook, apparently, is Fiore's forte, for almost every ball that wasn't thrown with the velocity of a meteor had a smooth, graceful curve that invariably put it within the shadow of the pallino.

"I'm a power player," Fiore explained. "I like to throw the ball hard. Pat doesn't. But there is a lot of finesse involved. Actually, this game is a combination of billiards, golf and bowling. It really takes a lot of skill and quite a bit of strategy."

Unfortunately, both of the aforementioned qualities completely

eluded the neophyte during his first couple games against Fiore. Even Masone's coaching could not help what basically was a pathetic performance. The proximity of each of the neophyte's bocce balls to the pallino was, on a comparative scale, roughly the distance between here and Neptune.

"You've got to be patient and plan your shots," Masone instructed.

The perseverance finally paid off in the third game, which, incredulously, the neophyte won.

"Nice going," Masone said.

"Beginner's luck," the neophyte replied. Masone didn't argue.

The session ended with Fiore and the neophyte agreeing to a rematch, which will be held any day but today, when the big boys play.

But for all the frustration that learning the game entails, Masone was right — once you get into bocce, you don't want to stop. It may not be the most popular of sports, but it certainly is among the most enjoyable.

And coming from a beleaguered neophyte, that's saying quite a bit.

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