

# Have a ball

**Bocce:** Throughout the region, toddlers to 20-somethings getting in on this 'old-man's game'

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Mario Sciarretta planted his feet in the earth and stared down the gravel alleyway scattered with red and green balls. The smaller yellow ball was wedged between the side wall and his opponent's green ball. This was going to be a tough shot.

"Either we wanna bump it or we wanna go!," [Umberto Stella](#), known to teammates as "The General," advised from the far end of the court.

Pat Pappa, Sciarretta's father's stepdad (Uncle Pat, as Sciarretta calls him), whispered something into his ear. Sciarretta nodded, his eyes still fixed on the yellow ball.



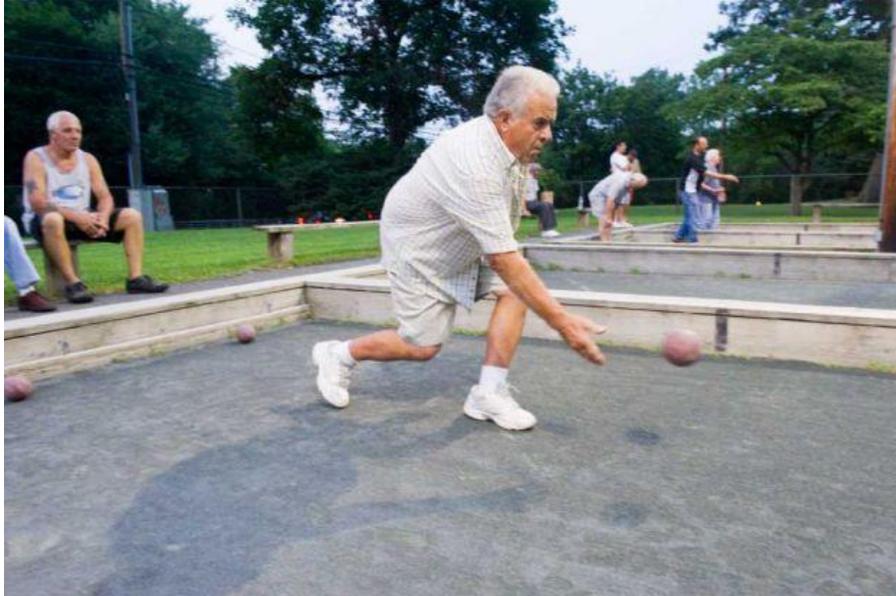
Mario Sciarretta rolls as 32 teams convene as the Stamford Bocce League hosts games at Scalzi Park in Stamford, Conn., July 11, 2011. Photo: Keelin Daly / Stamford Advocate

Tony Sciarretta, Mario's father, stood on the sidelines as three generations of his family carried on a tradition that has been passed down for hundreds of years.

"My son has been playing since he was a little kid," said Tony Sciarretta, a Stamford resident who is also Stella's cousin. "Now, he's doing very well. He can make the shots. Pat taught him everything he knows."

Sciarretta's team, sponsored by Bedrock Landscape and Irrigation, the family business, is one of 32 teams competing in the [Stamford Bocce League](#), which plays every Monday and Tuesday night at Stamford's Scalzi Park.

They are hardly alone. Throughout Fairfield County, in clubs, parks, backyards and beaches, residents of all ages and nationalities are playing bocce, a game that has transcended its origins as a centuries-old ritual dating to ancient Rome.



Pat Pappa rolls as 32 teams convene as the Stamford Bocce League hosts games at Scalzi Park in Stamford, Conn., July 11, 2011. Photo: Keelin Daly / Stamford Advocate

"It's fun. That's the whole secret behind it," said [Al D'Elia](#), president of the Stamford Bocce League. "Guys play on Monday and Tuesday and bring coolers of beer. The women play on Thursday and bring bottles of wine. How can you go wrong?"

The rules of the game are simple: competing teams of two to four players stand on opposite ends of a rectangular, sand-

covered court. Each side takes turns tossing balls down the court to get as close as possible to the yellow ball, the pallino. Opponents have the chance to knock each other's balls out of the way. The team with the bocces closest to the pallino earn points; the team that reaches a pre-determined number of points wins.

Unlike most sports, bocce can be enjoyed regardless of athletic skill. As the [United States Bocce Federation](#)

put it, "The exceptional democratic spirit of the game of bocce is the basis on which its deeply peaceful character is founded. It is often the beginning of lasting friendships."

Not that bocce isn't competitive -- close balls are often measured and argued over; opposing teams might exchange a few choice words.

"But we never had a fight," D'Elia said. "There's a lot of guys hollering, but that's the worst it's gotten."

While bocce has customarily been thought of as an old man's game, young people -- from toddlers to 20-somethings -- have been getting in on the fun.

In 2007, the [Greenwich High School](#) Italian Club raised money to build a bocce court at the school, a move that dramatically increased the club's membership.

"Right after we built the court, I noticed how many people would come to the Italian Club meetings just to play bocce," said [John Agostino](#), 21, a Greenwich High School graduate who helped spearhead the project. "It's still thriving." The courts are being relocated because of construction, and are slated to reopen by the spring of 2012.

Bruno Tropeano, a member of the [Amerigo Vespucci Lodge](#) No. 160 in Danbury, says he has seen a surge in interest in the sport, especially among younger generations. The Lodge, where bocce has been played since its inception in 1925, is constructing a court just for children.

"We want to teach them how to play," said Tropeano, who learned the game from his father and grandfather as a child growing up in Milan, Italy. "And you don't have to be Italian."

Such is the obsession with bocce that some residents have gone so far as to have courts built in their own backyards. [Wendy Lindquist](#), owner of Lindquist Landscape Design in Bridgeport, started building bocce courts for her clients 10 years ago after [Bill Pasqua](#), of Westport, asked to have one set up on his property.

"He was so happy, we decided to do some marketing with it," recalled Lindquist, who has since formalized the side business, naming it Bella Bocce. The company now builds one or two courts a year.

Said Pasqua: "It's a great game to play when you're getting up in age. In order to play, the only thing you need to be able to do is to drink a beverage and throw a ball at the same time."

Such multi-tasking was being executed at Scalzi Park. Players drank Coronas and Bud Lights, discussed business and family matters and of course, argued over close balls. More than just a social gathering, the scene at Scalzi Park was a testament to culture, tradition and familial bonds.

That wasn't lost on Sciaretta, who hurled his ball down the court, smashing the opponents' ball away from the pallino and eliciting roars from his father, Stella and Uncle Pat.

"I love coming down here and seeing the family all together," said Sciaretta, a graduate of [Westhill High School](#). "I've learned from Pat and my dad. They've taught me everything I know."