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Boccie Players Gain in Number

BY JOHN CAVANAUGH

FOR about 20 seconds, Angelo Mattered peered down the narrow alley goal, studying the lie of the balls, that had already been thrown, and their proximity to the "pallino." Then he fired his hard plastic green ball down the court.

Mr. Mattered's aim was true and he accomplished his objective, knocking away a red ball close to the pallino and, because of the underspin he had imparted, his own ball spun after the impact and came to a halt about four inches from the pallino.

Mr. Mattered's partner, Luke Per-randino, and about a dozen spectators seated on benches along one of the four courts at the St. Ann Club in Nor-walk applauded the classic boccie shot enthusiastically.

Before the hot, muggy afternoon was over, Mr. Mattered and Mr. Per-randino, along with six other two-man teams from throughout Connecticut, qualified for the Tristate Boccie Championships in New York next Sunday, which Mr. Mattered won two years ago.

About a decade ago, the old Italian game of boccie was on the verge of extinction in Connecticut and elsewhere. The players, practically all immigrants who had been playing the game since boyhood, were getting old and there was no fresh blood coming into the game to replace them, since most young Italian-Americans had long since turned to traditional American summer sports.

But in the last few years the game has undergone a remarkable resurgence in the state. And today more people than ever — including many women and children — are playing a game that some sports historians say was first played during the days of the Roman Empire.

Wearing casual clothes plus shoes, sneakers, sandals and, in one case, bare feet, about 100 men, most of them in their 20's, 30's and 40's, took part in the competition last Sunday at the St. Ann Club near the Connecticut Turnpike. And next Sunday more than 200 players from throughout the tristate region are expected to compete in a boccie tournament sponsored by the Medaglia D'Oro Espresso Cafe Company Inc., at Scalzi Park in Stamford. That event will offer \$400 to the winning team, \$200 to the runners-up and \$100 to the third-place finishers.

Where, suddenly, have all the boccie players come from?

"A lot of the players are from families which have been playing the game for generations," said Lou Passarelli, a member of the 30-year-old Tri-Colore League in Norwalk and a boccie player for more than 40 years.

"Others see us play and realize it's a fun game, and they get involved, too," he said. "It's a great game for old people, but as young people are finding out, it's a great game for them, too."

Three years ago, there were 36 men playing on six teams in the Tri-Colore League, Mr. Passarelli said. Today, though, the league includes 72 men on 12 teams, along with 66 women playing on 11 teams. Men and women play separately. In the Stamford Boccie League, believed to be the largest in the state, the number of players in the last few years has doubled, according to Robert Fiore, an official of the 32-year-old circuit.

"We have 160 men and 80 women playing in three different leagues three nights a week," Mr. Fiore said. "And, unlike years ago, not all of them are Italians. A lot of people will wander over to the eight courts, completely puzzled over the game. Some will ask about the game, and we're always glad to explain it to them. Quite a few of them are now boccie players."

This year, for the first time, the Stamford Boccie League is conducting clinics for children from 11 to 16 years of age. And next year, Mr. Fiore said, a children's league will be formed.

Similar to lawn bowling, boccie is played on a composition clay court about 90 feet long and 19 feet wide and surrounded by foot-high sideboards. Players on teams — which include either two or four members — roll two plastic balls, each of which is about the size of a duckpins bowling ball and weighs about three-quarters of a pound — towards a much smaller "pallino," the target ball.

The object of the game is to have the boccie ball stop closer to the pallino than an opposing boccie, to "cover" (protect) a well-placed ball and knock an opponent's boccie away from the pallino. At the end of a round, either side can win from 1 to 4 points, depending on how many balls it has closest to the pallino. The first team to win 12 or 16 points takes the game, with matches usually played on the best-of-three basis.

The game combines elements of bowling and billiards, with players often carrying shots off the sideboards to achieve good position or to knock away an opponent's boccie.

Most boccie balls used in this country are imported from Italy, with a set of eight balls costing about \$70, Mr. Passarelli said.

The game is relatively easy to play, but, like most other sports, requires considerable practice and patience if a player is to progress to a high level of competition.

"Once you acquire a certain amount of skill, concentration is the big factor," Mr. Passarelli said. "Throwing style is not important. Many players, like myself, throw from a squatting position, but others, like Angelo Mattered, throw from an upright stance. The main thing is to throw from a comfortable position."

In the Stamford league, entry fees are paid by sponsors, who also provide T-shirts with the sponsor's name on the back. Some teams are also sponsored in Norwalk and in leagues in Danbury, Derby, Shelton, South-ington, New Haven and Fairfield.

As with golf and tennis, boccie becomes an obsession with many players.

"I recall a guy playing in one of our tournaments, even though he was getting married that afternoon," said Selma Gore, a tournament organizer for the Sambuca Romana Company, a liqueur maker, which sponsored last Sunday's competition in Norwalk. "Luckily for him, his team was eliminated early."

Most of the players in the Norwalk and Stamford leagues range from their early 20's to their mid-50's. Two of the players still going strong in the Stamford League are Mike Catino, at the age of 81, and Pat Masone, who is 76.

Mr. Masone, who began playing the game as a young boy in Italy, recalled how, years ago, a losing team was obliged to furnish homemade wine for the winners, "even during Prohibition."

Gambling on games also was popular in the old days, he added. "You don't see that much anymore," he said. "But afterwards, the losers have to pay for the drinks." ■