

SPORTS

54 years in, Stamford Bocce League rolls along

By CAMERON SMITH
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"Hey Pete, who do you play tonight? Yeah? Are they bringing their own wine?"

"Even if you played Dom you wouldn't have to worry."

"We're on a winning streak! Get outta' here!"

"There's Pete!"

"Grandpa Lou!"

Can you hear that? It's the sound of bocce.

As Stamford residents from age 11-80 file in through the chain link fence surrounding the Scalzi Park bocce courts, everything but bocce balls seem to be flying through the air.

After 54 years, the Stamford Bocce League is in full swing. And there are plenty of arms swinging, sending bocce balls down the league's eight courts on a recent Tuesday night. It was the second consecutive evening in which the league had filled the Stamford night air with exultations and enough tobacco smoke to force a cough from a horse.

Dating back to Roman soldiers and the Emperor Augustus, bocce is an ancient sport which has always had its roots in Italy. It is played with eight large "bocce balls," four designated to each of two competing teams, and a smaller target ball called a "pallino." Each of the two teams consists of up to four players (the Stamford league mandates that each team have at least four players) who take turns trying to place their bocce balls closer to the pallino than their opponent. The pallino is placed at the beginning of each frame when one player throws it between the court's center line, called a volo line, and the pitch line, the line behind which players throw their bocce balls. Teams compete to reach a designated point total, and the first team to the finishing point wins.

"I've been playing for about 20 years," said Umberto Stella, a 40-something father whose 11-year old son, Travis, has been tagging along with him weekly for the past three to four years. "I'm a descendant of Pat Masone, one of the first guys who started the league.

"When I grew up we would play in a couple courts we had behind the racquetball courts. But I've been here the whole time. The heritage draws you in. Trying to beat the old-timers is a big thrill."

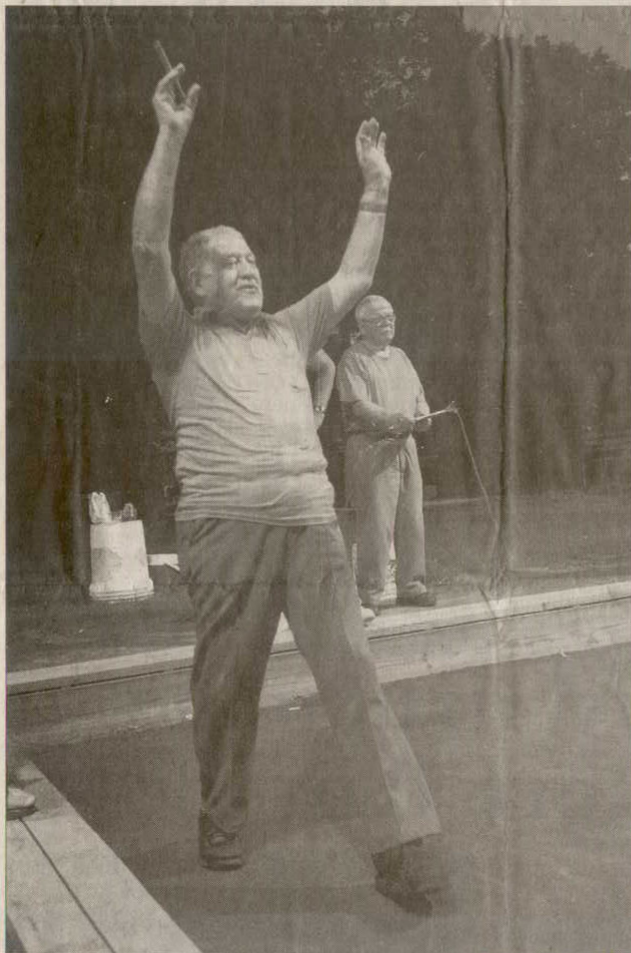


Photo by Alex von Kleydoff

Lou Molgano, team captain (and owner) of Lou's Kitchen, celebrates a bocce toss that won his team three points in Lou's Kitchen's Tuesday night match against Lacerenza.

In most sports a 20-year veteran would be considered an old-timer and a half. Not in bocce ball, and especially not in Stamford, Theodore Coppola, Michael Catino, Nicholas Carlucci and Emanuele Terenzio started the Stamford Bocce League in 1951.

In Stamford, competitors like John Alvarado, a 67-year old member of the Ball Busters team are a staple. While there is a splattering of youth (in bocce ball players in their 30's and 40's are considered young athletes) in the league, it hardly dominates the canvas that encompasses Scalzi's eight courts.

"Oh my God, I've been playing here 10 years," said Frank Francis, a 72-year old bartender of the Piedmont Club. He is also captain of the organization's similarly named bocce team. "The guys down at the club wanted to get a team

go golfing on the weekends, you play bocce during the week."

His Piedmont team draws a crowd, including Frank Cesario, a club chef who is unable to play because of a hydraulic boot on his left foot brought on by diabetes. Cesario said that he watching the Piedmont team gave him a way to get out.

"I come here and watch Piedmont every couple of weeks," he said as ash from his cigar slipped down in arc of repose, settling in a small puddle on his shirt. "I used to own the Brass Rail in Stamford, but after that I ended up at the Piedmont Club and got to know all the guys on the team. They're a fun group of guys."

Over on court one, league treasurer Dominic Corbo fires a shot toward the pallino. A fit-looking, cigarette puffing Italian American in his late 30s, he slips a delicately rolled bocce ball between his Testa Dura team's leading red balls.

"Hey ya!" Corbo said, excitedly. "How 'bout that! Three red, baby!"

As Corbo greets a team member with a hug and a kiss to each cheek he refocused on the longer tradition of the Stamford league.

"We've been here for 54 years, with these eight courts for the past 25. Before that the league played over behind the basketball and tennis courts."

Exactly where the league's original two courts existed seems to be a subject of



Photo by Alex von Kleydoff

Players for Lou's Kitchen and Lacerenza watch as Lacerenza members bowl in the two teams' Tuesday match.

together with all the members, so we put together a team.

"We're not doing great, but we're having fun out here. It's a way to have a night out. You

debate. What isn't debated is the superiority of the league's new playing courts.

With gray gravel and sand playing pits resurfaced in

2004, the league added a sprinkler system and lights, both donated by league members. Even with the donations the renovations cost over \$30,000.

No other bocce courts, or leagues, in Connecticut come close to Stamford's. There is only one other court officially listed on ibocce.com, a website to connect bocce players with parks in which they can play (the other Conn. court is in Southington). And while Norwalk has discussed the idea of courts at Calf Pasture Park (the concept has never generated notable traction with officials), Norwalk would only provide four courts at most.

The Stamford Bocce League is also the only known organized bocce league in the state. While there are regional and national tournaments that course through Connecticut on occasion (New Jersey hosts the largest number of organized bocce outings), weekly play in the state seems at home in Stamford.

It's a fact that isn't lost on Al D'Elia, one of two league vice presidents and a former eight-year head of the league.

"They have tournaments all over the state, but I haven't heard of any other leagues," he said. "Bocce is a sport like any other sport, and we take it seriously. Right now we have 26 out of a possible 32 teams, with a separate women's league that plays on Thursdays.

"But we need more young people. We can't get a whole lot of younger guys interested. That's why we have an open invitation to the league; as long as someone gives me a call at 203-323-1455, they're welcome to play. Bocce isn't just for Italians anymore. We have (other ethnicities) in the league, too."

As serious as some of the team's take the scores, it all seems secondary to the atmosphere fostered by plenty of cigars, wine, beer and sandy bocce balls. As tattoos, team uniforms, alcohol and Italian exclamations flow together seamlessly, the elements weave a tapestry of near universal celebration and comfort, regardless of outcome.

"We play three games, however long it takes," said Corbo as he passed out the final bocce balls from a Scoop Away Kitty Litter container. "We're not in a hurry as long as people are having a good time."