

What a pickle! Sporting seniors seek more space for latest fad in San Francisco

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Pickleball is the fastest growing sport among seniors. McClaren Park is one of several places in San Francisco where the game can be played. Chen, in back, is getting a lesson from Jason Batong. (Photo by Freddie Nadarisay)

The Crocker Amazon sport complex recently unveiled two, newly resurfaced pickleball/volleyball courts. Volleyball is really popular with 8- to 13-year-old girls, said Facility Coordinator Gerald Reader. But pickleball?

Pickleball has been called the fastest growing senior sport in the United States. Itâ??s a blend of tennis, badminton and ping pong, usually played on converted tennis courts â?? one can be divided into four pickleball courts.

â??The game is particularly popular among boomers looking for an activity that offers good aerobic exercise without being as strenuous as traditional racket sports,â?• said Excelsior resident Wellington

Chen. The pickleball court is about one third the length of a tennis court, so thereâ??s less running â?? good for boomers discovering their knees arenâ??t what they used to be. Games are shorter, too. At about 12 minutes, everyone gets a chance to play.

Meet Mr. Pickleball



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Wellington Chen, right, helped get the game going in San Francisco. Heâ??s known around here as Mr. PIckleball. Terry Chan, pastor at the Portola Lutheran Church, is also a regular player. (Photo by Freddie Nadarisay)

Less than three years ago, bringing pickleball to the area courts was just an idea. â??Itâ??s low impact and easier on the joints. I knew it was something that should be introduced,â?• he said. He just needed to find the resources. Today, heâ??s known locally as Mr. Pickleball for his advocacy of the sport in San Francisco.

So, Chen invited the U.S. American Pickleball Association to come tell them more. About a dozen volunteer ambassadors met up at the Palega Recreation Center, where Chen had taped up a tennis court for a pickleball demonstration. A representative from the San Francisco Department of Recreation and Parks also attended. The end result was the two resurfaced courts at Crocker Amazon.

Pickleball is a phenomena most people donâ??t understand, said Anne Cribbs, chair of the Bay Area Senior Games, which last year involved more than 1,500 men and women over age 50 participating in over 20 sports.

â??The culture is friendly and inclusive; theyâ??re more willing to help others learn the game,â?• she said. â??We added pickleball to the games about five years ago, and the numbers of participants are soaring. Cities up and down the peninsula are building dedicated courts.â?•

Marla Reid, co-owner of the City Racquet Shop in the Excelsior, said they recently began stocking pickleball racquets and balls. â??Itâ??s a good game,â?• she said. â??Iâ??ll probably pick it up when I can no longer play tennis.â?•

While pickleball is mostly perceived as a game for seniors or for non-athletes, it can be highly competitive.

â??Some courts attract people who come for the socialization. Others are more competitive. Iâ??m a competitive player, â?• said Chen. He is one of a number of San Francisco players who travel outside the city to compete in pickleball tournaments around the Bay Area.

He made a point to note that these tournaments are held in cities with â??dedicatedâ?• courts. You hear a lot about that from local enthusiasts â?? courts used just for pickleball. Player Bill Lafferty lamented that the city doesnâ??t have one permanent pickleball court. Said Chen, â??How can our players compete when they can only practice a few hours a day?â?•

Wait for it! Dedicated courts in 2020

But thereâ??s hope for local pickleballers. When renovation of the Golden Gate Tennis Courts is complete, by 2020, the new facility will have four dedicated courts â?? with lights for nighttime play. And the Eureka Valley Recreation Center is opening up to pickleball this spring.

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Reader said pickleball activity at Crocker Amazon hasnâ??t been as frequent as volleyball, but heâ??s hoping more people will bring drop-in games. And he admits he needs to get a better understanding of the sport before he can address some recent complaints: no lights for nighttime play; the courts arenâ??t enclosed so players have to run farther to retrieve balls hit outside; instead of dividing one tennis court into multiple pickleball courts, thereâ??s been a one-to-one conversion.

â??Iâ??ve never seen pickleball played. Iâ??m a baseball man,â?• Reader said. â??I wonâ??t know that until we get groups out here actually playing the game, and I can see what we need. If itâ??s important, we can put in portable barriers. Lights would be more difficult.â?•

Not just for seniors

Pickleball is also winning fans among younger people. Reader plans to introduce pickleball to youngsters attending summer camp at Crocker Amazon; it will also be introduced to summer campers at the Golden Gate Park Tennis Courts.

Pickleball is played on seven public courts in San Francisco: Crocker-Amazon, Golden Gate Park Tennis Courts, Upper Noe Recreation Center, Glen Park Recreation Center, the Palega Recreation Center, Louis Sutter Park, and the Alice Marble Tennis Courts.



Facebook logo of the
San Francisco
PicklePack.

As none of these are dedicated courts, check the individual centersâ?? websites for information on equipment, registration, fees and hours of play. The USA Pickleball Association has a handy list of places to play in San Francisco. And you may want to check out the San Francisco PicklePack, a pickleball enthusiasts group or the Pickleball Forum, both on Facebook.

And the name? According to the USAPA, the sport was conceived at the home of a former U.S. congressman from Washington state one lazy family afternoon. With a badminton court but no racquets, they improvised with ping-pong paddles and a perforated plastic ball. One story has it that it was named after the foundersâ?? dog Pickles, who like to chase the ball; another that it was by his wife, thinking of the sport of rowing, where a pickle boat has a mixed crew.

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