

Bocce Ball Bowls Over Hill

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Roll Call Staff

It's 7:30 on a Wednesday night, and Victoria's New York Style Night Club bocce team has just started its first playoff game. The team, consisting mostly of Capitol Hill staffers from Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite's (R-Fla.) office, is entering the playoffs with high hopes, having earned a 4-2 record in the regular season.

Victoria's isn't alone. In fact, brightly colored shirts dot Garfield Park in Southeast as bocce players toss pallinos (balls thrown to determine where the flag is placed before the game begins) and sip beers only a few blocks from the Congressional office buildings where many of them work.

"I think bocce is for people just looking for something to do in the evening," said Justin Grabelle, a legislative assistant for Brown-Waite. Victoria's, named for a bar in the Congresswoman's district, formed when the staffers were searching for something fun to do as a group outside the office.

Forty-eight teams converge on the park for an hour of bocce on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in the spring and summer, with games often followed by drinks at nearby Pour House.

The game is becoming more popular. The D.C. bocce league has grown from 50 to 675 members since its inception five years ago. Most of the members are young adults from all over Washington, as well as parts of Maryland and Northern Virginia, according to co-founder Sarah DeLucas.

The minimal time commitment of one hour a week, convenient location and mostly relaxed nature of the game — although team captain Tad Bardenwerper, also a legislative assistant for Brown-Waite, admits "we've occasionally had difficulty reaching agreements on strategy" — made bocce an ideal fit for Brown-Waite's staff.

That's likely what appeals to other staffers, who now make up 25 percent to 30 percent of the league, according to DeLucas. But the game wasn't always so popular with the Congressional crowd.

Neil McKiernan, who has played for three years, remembers when staffers were rarely seen on the bocce teams.

"Our team was actually pretty unique," he said of the Deep Rollers, made up primarily of former staffers for Rep. John Larson (D-Conn.). "I'm sure there were others at the time, but I like to think we were sort of groundbreakers."

Tom Williams/Roll Call



Teammates cheer on Carrie Keefe of Erin Go Bocce during a game in Garfield Park last week.

Although McKiernan and his teammates have since moved on to other jobs — McKiernan to senior legislative assistant in Rep. Joe Courtney's (D-Conn.) office and others to various Hill offices or new careers — they still get together for their weekly game.

Meanwhile, others have discovered the benefits of the game. Ashling Thurmond, director of operations for Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-Colo.), noted that she was drawn to the

league because she was able to walk to the park from work and see her friends.

"I live on the Hill, so it's part of my neighborhood experience," she said. "It's a great way to guarantee I see my friends every week. In D.C., you can go two to three weeks without seeing your friends because everyone is busy."

Plus, she added, "I don't want to work all day and then go to something that's just as intense."

Though not everyone who plays has a connection to the Hill, the game can get political.

Team Barack Obacce, named not necessarily in support of Sen. Barack Obama (Ill.) but because the word "bocce" fit neatly into the end of the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee's last name, was no laughing matter to a team of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) supporters.

"There were these Hillary supporters that got all up in our grill, so we had to battle it out over a game of flip cup," one Barack Obacce member recalled, referencing a popular drinking game. The Clinton supporters won that game.

Still, even at the playoffs, the overall atmosphere is relaxed and light-hearted. And for Victoria's New York Style Nightclub, it's a successful evening as the team handily wins two games to send it to the Elite Eight final tournament and end-of-season barbecue.

Though the end of the spring season might bring a certain nostalgia, there won't be much time to look back. A new season is right around the corner. Registration for the summer league opens today and will run through June 30. Teams or individual players can sign up online, and they should do so early — DeLucas warned that the rosters fill quickly.

For more information on the DC Bocce League or to register, visit dcbocce.com.