

## Bocce Players, Holding Court

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BEER AND BOWLING go together, of course. And it's no different with the Italian lawn bowling game of bocce, it seems.

A burgeoning new league in the District has taken the social aspects of bocce to new heights. Immediately after games conclude at Garfield Park on Capitol Hill, the players roll on over to the nearby Pour House pub on Pennsylvania Avenue and the beer specials arranged by the league.

"There's no denying that bocce is a very social sport," says DC Bocce League founder and commissioner Rich DiFranco, who in his other life is a marketing manager for Bacardi. "Sure, there's a competitive aspect to bocce, but not to the point of it being no fun for those who are just there to have a good time. And I think that combination of fun and competition is why most of our players come out."

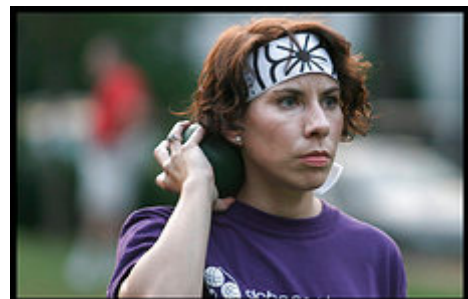
Many of the league's players, the great majority of whom are in their twenties, are there just to have a ball.

"I had never even heard of the sport before I started playing, but I just came out to meet people because I was new to Washington," says Jenn Jacobs, a congressional staffer. "Bocce is the kind of nonthreatening activity that attracts new players who have no special athletic skill or experience."

The game's simplicity is one of its most appealing aspects. The object is to roll the bocce balls -- diameter 4 1/2 inches, weight three pounds -- closest to the small, white target ball, called the *pallino*. The court is 60 feet long, and each team rolls four balls in a frame. A point is scored for each ball that is closer to the *pallino* than the other team's closest ball. (Yes, a tape measure is vital bocce equipment.) A regulation game in the DC Bocce League is played to 11 points.

There are many techniques to rolling a bocce ball. There's the direct, ground-hugging roll. Others employ a high loft, some with a back spin. The more skilled players can knock the other team's balls away from the *pallino*, or even knock the *pallino* closer to their balls.

When it comes to the DC Bocce League courts at Garfield Park -- which are simply marked with small cones on a grassy expanse -- the lay of the land, as in golf, always comes into play.



Stephanie Baldwin of Team Ralph Bocce-o is ready to roll in DC Bocce League's summer playoffs last month. (Lucian Perkins - Twp)

"Figuring out the slope of the court and where the rocks and bumps are is the biggest challenge to playing bocce here," says Becky Brown, a lawyer with U.S. Customs and Border Protection. "When our league builds actual courts this fall, we can start focusing on developing our skills and really learning the game the way it's supposed to be played."

The two gravel surface courts to be built at Garfield Park will perhaps change the strategy of many players in the league. Not only do bocce courts have a level, fine-gravel surface, they have wooden barriers surrounding them. Shots can be played off the sideboards, similar to billiards.

The new courts reflect the league's growing popularity. It started last fall with 10 teams and 55 players; the recently concluded summer season featured 26 teams and 155 players.

A native of Cleveland who moved to Washington four years ago, DiFranco founded the league after discovering there were none in the District.

"In Cleveland, we would play bocce every night at the local park that had five courts," DiFranco says. "D.C. is a great city for sports leagues. When I moved here I first played kickball, but I missed bocce because I've played since I was 5 years old."

Although there was no bocce league before DiFranco came to town, many played the game informally.

"I always played with friends in back yards or at the Sons of Italy lodge," says Antonio Russo, who at 65 may be the oldest player in the league. "I was pleased to have a league formed, especially when I came out and saw all these young people playing. In Italy, bocce is what the retired people do to pass the day."

Playing bocce in the back yard appeals to not only older players. Ed Iacobucci, a Falls Church gym teacher who played the game as a child in Aliquippa, Pa., a suburb of Pittsburgh, introduced the game to his three sons at an early age.

"It seems every time we have a backyard gathering of any kind -- and we have them all the time -- we lay out a bocce court for the kids and their friends," Iacobucci says. "It's a great backyard activity because not only do the kids like it, but the adults, young and old, men and women, can play, too."

The accessibility of bocce is fueling its growth nationwide. The game's original centers of popularity were New York and San Francisco because of their large Italian American populations. The center of the game in the United States today is Martinez, Calif., a city in the San Francisco Bay Area with a large Italian American population, which has leagues with more than a thousand participants. The U.S. Bocce Federation says there are about 1 million players in the United States. For serious competitors, there are national tournaments with large entry fees and prize money, and even a national championship. Bocce is also a mainstay in the Special Olympics.

Perhaps the biggest indication that the game is no longer the province of back yards, picnics and Italian festivals is that a downtown District law firm has put a bocce court on its rooftop deck.

Venable LLP, with 222 lawyers and 422 employees in its D.C. office, built the court when it moved to its new headquarters on Seventh Street NW in 2003.

"Bocce is an ideal recreational activity for a business like a law firm," says Roger Colaizzi, a partner who served as commissioner for the firm's recent bocce tournament of 66 teams. "Because the game is not that demanding, anyone in the firm can play, and you can build camaraderie with your colleagues and even conduct business with clients as you play."

Venable routinely holds employee happy hours on its rooftop deck where bocce is the main activity. Once again, beer and bocce just seem to go together.

*DC BOCCE LEAGUE -- Weeknights at Garfield Park, beginning in late September, Second and F streets SE. Registration is \$35 per player. Watching is free and encouraged. The league provides all necessary equipment. Each player also receives a team T-shirt and benefits from post-game food and beer specials at the Pour House, 319 Pennsylvania Ave. SE. For registration, visit <http://www.dcbocce.com>.*

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