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Hey Grandpa, It's My Turn at Boccie



FORGET BEACH VOLLEYBALL Bocce leagues have emerged as social outlets in Chicago.

By KAYLEEN SCHAEFER
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VENICE, Calif.



In Venice, Calif.

THE scene on the beach seemed normal for an 80-degree day: Children flew kites, while women in leopard-print bikinis sunbathed. But near the edge of the water, a group of young men and women were throwing heavy balls at a smaller one stuck in the sand.

It was the third annual Beach Bocce Ball League championship tournament, and the Big Bambini, a two-man team made up of Dominic Bernacchi and Adam Svatek, was struggling during a tight match.

Mr. Svatek had tossed what a bystander called “the ultimate first throw,” his ball landing directly in front of his target, but the opposing team, Bocce Bocce & Sons, managed to knock it away. And when Bocce Bocce & Sons blocked out the barrage of insults and trash talking by listening to Enya on their iPods, it made matters even more challenging.

“This is not fun,” said Mr. Bernacchi, 31, as he tightened the drawstring on his brown sweat pants. “We can’t talk to them.”

But like a latter-day Michael Jordan (if Michael Jordan made his living casually tossing small plastic balls on sandy beaches), Mr. Bernacchi came through in the clutch. After drinking a beer that belonged to his rivals, he waved the empty bottle in front of them saying, "Will you get me another?" Bocce Bocce was so rattled that it missed its final throws.

Big Bambini won, 11-9.

Boccie, the genteel Italian sport once played exclusively by leathery men in alabaster outfits on courts made of crushed seashells, has been adopted by young professionals.

"Those old guys were wicked experienced," said Tim Jacobs, 31, who works in advertising and founded the league three years ago along with Mr. Bernacchi, who also works in advertising. "They had a wine buzz. They had a cigar. They were relaxing. Why should a 30-year-old not be able to relax like that?"

One hundred men and women, most of whom work in the advertising industry, play in the Los Angeles chapter of the Beach Bocce Ball League, and 50 more participate in the Chicago branch, which Mr. Jacobs started this year after moving from Los Angeles. Elsewhere, the DC Bocce League in Washington, which is four years old, meets on the grass at Garfield Park and is so popular that the 300 available slots were filled in 15 minutes.

Although boccie's rules (and its spelling) can vary, basically each of the two team gets four balls weighing about 3 pounds each, which are rolled or tossed at a smaller target ball called a pallino. A team scores points for each ball it gets closer to the pallino than its opponent.

The early Romans were among the first to play the game as it exists today, though the French and the British have similar games. Thus boccie is especially ingrained in Italian culture. In the 1950s, for instance, certain models of Fiat automobiles came with a boccie set in the trunk.

Today, most people in their 20s and 30s don't flock to boccie the way they do to sports like Ultimate Frisbee or dodge ball.

"The game still has this image problem," said Mario Pagnoni, 59, the author of "The Joy of Bocce." "People think it's old Italians with a cigar and a glass of wine, and it is that to a certain extent. But it's changing. We're a couple of years away from the mainstream."

Mr. Bernacchi agreed that younger players were not necessarily interested in a sport that is most commonly associated with retirees. "The fun of it has been that juxtaposition," he said. "With our attitude we try to make it feel youthful and engaging. It's an old man's sport, but it's being played by people in T-shirts with skulls on them."

Mr. Bernacchi and Mr. Jacobs decided to form their league three years ago on Venice Beach, while sharing a 12-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon and a game of boccie, mostly as a way to get their friends out on the sand with them. Mr. Jacobs learned the game from his father at his grandparents' farm in Lyons, Wis.

The two men are so obsessed with the sport that they once played a grudge match in a patch of poison oak after a three-mile trail run in the mountains. "We totally joked about how ambitious it was to form a league," Mr. Jacobs said. "In L.A., it's hard to get someone to commit to a 15-minute lunch."

In selling boccie to their friends, they were more pragmatic. "We positioned it as a simple game you could play with one hand while the other was holding a beer tightly," Mr. Bernacchi said.

As in bowling, a player doesn't have to be completely focused on the game, which makes bocce ideal for socializing. "No one talks to you in L.A.," said Jerry Torgerson, 38, of Bocce Bocce & Sons. "Then you start throwing bocce and you're buddies."

Bocce is also a sport in which some women say they feel comfortable competing against men. Sarah DeLucas, 28, a marketing coordinator at CQ Press, a publishing company, and a founder of the DC League, had previously joined a mixed kickball league when she moved to Washington, but became disenchanted when she found her male competitors to be too aggressive. "There was a lot of screaming from men at girls," she said.

In bocce, Ms. DeLucas added: "Those gender lines disappear. You could be the greatest athlete in the world and stink at bocce. It's nice not to have to worry about some guy screaming at a girl, 'I can't believe you didn't catch the ball.' "

The mixed competitions can lead to romantic matchups at parties after a game. (The name of the game, after all, is derived from the Italian word for "kiss.")

Mr. Bernacchi met his girlfriend, Camille Labouchere, 28, through the league. She agreed to go out with him only after he shaved the mustache he had grown during what he called his "Bukowski phase."

"I showed up to practice one day and there he was, clean-shaven and holding his clipboard," she said. "We kissed a week later."

IN Venice, the championship match was all about adrenaline. James Moore, 36, and Sean Stortroen, 26, two rookies on Team America, were dressed in camouflage shorts and hats, and did push-ups between throws. Their opponents, Cory Noonan, 36, and Chad Einbinder, 37, were three-year veterans on the Chrispan McNuts team.

It was a lopsided contest from the start. The McNuts' arms were tired; one of the early tosses missed the pallino by about five feet.

"Come on, Nuts," Mr. Bernacchi shouted from the sideline. "Don't let these boys do it."

But Team America landed toss after toss as close as they could to the pallino. Their fans cheered: "Stunning!" "Gorgeous!" "They're cyborgs!" Soon, the score was 9-0.

In a desperate attempt to salvage a victory, the McNuts moved the match to the hard-packed sand at the edge of the water where, they said, they played better. But even that didn't help. Team America won, 11-4, and was given the league's version of the Stanley Cup: a sand-filled glass boot that their names would be etched on. They raised the trophy in the air and cheered, "Mission accomplished."