



Sports

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Joni loves bocce: lawn bowling Italian style by Anthony Francavilla

While most of the country spent last Saturday enraptured by football's annual television reconquista, a band of sports enthusiasts enjoyed a more peculiar pastime in the shadow of the Capitol: bocce ball.

Just a few Herculean bocce throws south of the House offices on Capitol Hill lies Garfield Park, the home of the D.C. Bocce League. The League's summer championship game tore this throng of weekend warriors and marinara-blooded Italophiles away from their televisions and brought them to the park .



Show us some skin: the boys of DC Bocce show what they're made of.
KATIE BORAN

"It's the highlight of the summer, hands down," Amy McHale of Capitol Hill said.

It certainly has the look and feel of a late-summer gathering—barbecued chicken, cold beer, sweltering heat—but somebody traded the staple pigskin and Budweiser for bocce balls and Peroni. Che bella!

Bocce is a precision leisure game similar to lawn bowling. The playing field is a boxed-in area of fine gravel about 20 meters long and three meters wide. Players toss or roll a softball-

sized ball at a smaller white ball called a "pallino." Each team has four balls per round, and the team with the closest ball or balls is awarded points for that round. The first team to reach 16 wins. The game as it is known today was developed in Italy, but its roots extend all the way back to the Roman Empire, though there are some who dispute this claim.

"The Cosby Show," Dupont resident Josh Grippo insisted. "The Huxtables used to play it in their backyard. That's the earliest bocce reference I can think of."

The genesis of D.C. Bocce, however, is much clearer. The league began in the fall of 2003 as the brainchild of five friends who had grown tired of the standard offering of recreational sports.

"We had all played kickball and everything like that," co-founder Sarah DeLucas said. "It was fun, but we were looking for something different and one of my friends suggested bocce."

There were 50 people on 10 teams meeting on Tuesday nights to compete in the league's maiden season. As curiosity turned to growing popularity, D.C. Bocce began to expand. The league became an official

non-profit organization with a four-person board. In 2005, the board obtained permission from the D.C. Department of Parks and Recreation to construct two bocce courts in Garfield Park.

“We constructed and funded the courts ourselves using league dues,” DeLucas said. “We actually went into the negative while we were building them, but now we have the only public bocce courts in the entire District.”

It didn't take long for their investment to prove its worth. During registration last spring, the league filled up within 15 minutes, shutting out many returnees. To accommodate for the unprecedented interest, D.C. Bocce expanded to two nights, creating Martedì (Tuesday) and Mercoledì (Wednesday) Divisions. The league, now sponsored by Miller Lite and Peroni, is up to over 40 teams and 550 participants.

“D.C. is probably the best city in the country for sports leagues,” volunteer Lauren Pinch said. “But this is the best one that I've done here. It's completely unique.”

The competition may be unique, but the competitors don't differ from other Capitol Hill groups nearly as much as one might think. The field consists of lawyers, lobbyists, contractors, even an EMT, and most are between the ages of 25 and 35. It's not exactly a Sunday afternoon with Grandpa Tony and Uncle Vito, but that doesn't mean there aren't a few people out to celebrate their inner Italian.

“I've been playing since I was four years old in Sigonella, Sicily,” Alexandria resident John Tipa said. “It takes concentration, it's a touch game, that's the best way to put it.”

The bocce guru, a contractor for the Department of Defense by day, displays his heritage as much with a Kangol hat perched atop Prada sunglasses as with the green, white and red tricolore adorning his Nikes. Tipa is a member of Luca Bocce (Il Resurrezione), one of the top teams from the Mercoledì Division. Luca Bocce made it far into this year's playoff tournament, but found themselves sleeping with the fishes once more after the division semi-finals.

The long hot day and seemingly endless supply of booze might have made for a sloppy championship game, but the undefeated Yaks of the Mercoledì and the defending champions Strictly Bocce put on a show for the remaining supporters. Strictly Bocce, made up of five George Washington alumni, were last year's George Mason, overcoming an 0-5 league record to take the spring title. Their experience showed in this year's final, as they successfully defended their championship against the Yaks.

The winning pay-outs may be the best part of the D.C. Bocce League. The first and second place teams receive \$1,000 and \$500, respectively, to donate to a charity of their choice. Strictly Bocce's championship purse will be donated to the AMC Cancer Research Center.

“It's a great league, and I would recommend it to anyone,” Dan Fody of Strictly Bocce said. “I've done softball, kickball, bowling and every other league, but this is the best by far.”

With booze and bocce wrapped up in a charitable cause, the D.C. Bocce League is the sweetest deal this side of the cannoli. For now, the majority of the District's 9-to-5ers and nostalgic gym class heroes will flock to softball and kickball leagues for their recreational fix. But with the emergence of D.C. Bocce, this monopoly is in serious jeopardy. Just give them a chance, and they'll make you an offer you can't refuse.