

PASS THE BOCCE

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By Jodi Lee Reifer and Rob Bailey

Frank Morano and his 20-something buds don't hesitate to get their balls out.

They don't flip coins. Forget rock-paper-scissors. When these Islanders settle a beef—where to eat or how to rock their Saturday nights—they do it like their grandfathers might have back in the Old Country.

"There's no better way to settle something than with a game of bocce," says Morano, 23, a producer and on-air contributor to WABC radio's "Curtis and Kuby Show."

Traditionally the domain of older Italian gentlemen sipping red wine, bocce courts are increasingly populated by 20- and 30-somethings, Frappuccinos and designer beers in hand.

While many young Islanders try to distance themselves from other Italian stereotypes, bocce's old school appeal is a piece of heritage a growing core group seems keen on preserving. The generation gap gets even narrower this weekend as the city Parks Department hosts its 13th annual Citywide Bocce Tournament.

The new wave competes Saturday to represent S.I. at South Beach's twin 90-foot-long courts near the northern end of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Boardwalk at Capodanno Boulevard and Doty Avenue. Sunday, the best two teams from each borough advance to the finals.

Registration is open until the competition begins Saturday at 10 a.m. or online at nycgovparks.org.

Winners make bank: \$1,000 for first, \$300 for second and \$200 for third. And start practicing the Miss America wave -- No. 1 is invited to ride on the Parks Department's float during the Columbus Day Parade next month in Manhattan.

The Staten Island Bocce Club, a 100-member crew that hits the clay and sand courts at South Beach every morning and every night -- sometimes until 1:30 a.m. -- will field at least 15 four-member teams. The players are on average 50-something-year-old guys, many retirees. But recently, more wives and younger dudes are getting on the ball.



Chad Rachman/Staten Island Advance

Bocce veteran Jaime Caro, far left, looks on as Matt Simonetti, center, takes aim with new generation of bocce ballers Frank Morano, Brian Silverstein and Craig Simonetti at Bloomingdale Park on the South Shore.

"It's just something fun that relaxes me after work," says Thomas Dunn, a 36-year-old construction worker and married father of two. "It's not like football or softball. You can go home after and sleep like a baby instead of rubbing on Bengay."

Dunn got hooked on the game three years ago after he overheard some older guys goofing on each other. At the time, he was the youngest. Today, there are about 10 players he could call junior.

"It's a game that challenges you," says the South Beach baller. "It's like golf without the green fees."

And like billiards or chess, bocce is a game of strategy -- not sweat.

Gamers compete on clay courts or flat grassy fields. It begins when one player throws a 1 3/4-inch target ball called a pallino. Each player then tosses or rolls a 3 1/2-4-inch ball weighing about 2 pounds -- called a "boccia"-- with the goal of getting closest to the pallino.

The best players plan ahead, using remaining bocce to nudge the pallino into a favorable position or to blast an opponent's boccia out of the way. It's similar to bowling or shuffleboard with one crucial difference: Players can bank shots like pool sharks.

As with many sports, the origins of the game are shadowy. Some say the game originated in ancient Egypt, while others credit it to the Romans who played on courts made of crushed seashells and in dirt backyards.

Today, many Islanders bust balls at Bloomingdale Park and South Beach. The bar and restaurant scenes are also turning the video game generation on to the old school charms of bocce.

And then there are the leagues: Floyd, a bar in Brooklyn Heights, pitches itself as the home of NYC's only year-round bocce tournament. Its 24 teams include the top-ranked Old Dirty Barristers, as well as Chewbocce and New Kids on the Bocce.

More than 200 men and women between 25 and 40 years old, many of whom work in advertising, play in the Los Angeles chapter of the 2-year-old Beach Bocce Ball League, and 50 compete in the Chicago branch.

The new bocce brethren is a good mix of men and women from a variety of industries, says Sarah DeLucas, founder of DC Bocce League in Washington, D.C. Its 550 players first took the grassy field at Garfield Park, a few steps from Capital Hill, last summer.

Bocce is even more conducive to hook-ups than other, trendier childhood sports resurrected by 20-and 30-somethings, such as dodgeball and kickball, she says.

"You pay attention to the game, but you don't have to be completely involved," says DeLucas, 28, marketing coordinator at CQ Press, a publishing company. "If you miss a throw it's not going to throw your game off."

And no matter how fit (or flirty) players are, they can ease into the game, says DeLucas. "People really want an excuse to be outside after work, hanging out with their friends instead of just sitting at home."