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The pickleball courts are fully booked on a fall day at Bauer Drive Local Park in Rockville.

A Smash

Hit

BY AMY HALPERN

As players flock to local pickleball courts, Montgomery County aims to meet the demand

THE SMALL PLASTIC PICKLEBALL flies through the air, dropping close to the net in front of Alex Walsh and Julia Kae as they scramble unsuccessfully to smack it back at their opponents during an outdoor game in Rockville on a chilly weeknight in March.

"Nice dink!" says Walsh, 27, of Rockville, as he tosses the perforated ball over the net to opponents Michele Kenno and John Crooke. "You popped that one good," adds Kae, 57, of Silver Spring, who was Walsh's doubles partner that night.

Kenno of Rockville and Crooke of Silver Spring—both in their 50s—chuckle modestly at the praise. Kenno gets ready to serve again, using the underhand motion that

pickleball players say is easier to master than the traditional overhand serve of tennis. "I never played a sport in my life until 18 months ago," Kenno says as she fires off a fastball.

It's 9 p.m. and about two dozen people are spread across four of the six courts at Bauer Drive Local Park—one of the newest spots to play pickleball in the county. Some nights, regulars say, all six courts are packed with players and many more are waiting on the sidelines to compete against the winners in the next round.

Scott Nilsen, 53, who is playing two courts over from Walsh, recalls an impromptu holiday gathering at the courts in December. Just before Christmas, he says, a player in one of his WhatsApp pickleball chat groups

PHOTO BY EDGAR ARTIGA



Revelers at an impromptu holiday pickleball tournament and party at Bauer Drive Local Park in December

floated the idea of a last-minute tournament. Within hours, dozens of aficionados, ranging in age from teenagers to retirees, signed up to bring everything from chocolate-covered strawberries to crab dip to pinwheel sandwiches. People showed up wearing Santa costumes and ugly Christmas sweaters, he says.

Nilsen, who lives in Olney, brought a folding table—and 50 bananas. “I had to work all day,” he says. “I didn’t have time to make anything.”

Kenno brought pumpkin cheesecake squares to the holiday party. She says she comes to the Bauer Drive courts every night and plays so often that she’s worn out her sneakers. Kenno estimates that she’s spent a few hundred dollars online buying pickleball supplies—including a net, sneakers, balls and her paddle. “It’s worth it,” she says. “It’s cheaper than a gym...and I’m not home consuming calories.”

A COMBINATION OF TENNIS, squash, badminton and ping-pong, pickleball has been gaining traction around the country for decades, including among celebrities such as Leonardo DiCaprio and George and Amal Clooney, who built courts at their Los Angeles homes, according to *Vanity Fair* magazine.

The game’s name is a reference to the sport of rowing, according to *Pickleball Magazine*. The magazine says that in 1965, a couple of successful businessmen and their families were vacationing at the summer home of then-U.S. Rep. Joel Pritchard on Bainbridge Island in the state of Washington. To ease their children’s boredom, they grabbed table tennis paddles and whiffle balls, brought their kids to a badminton court on the property, and created a game that they all could play together. Pritchard’s wife named the game pickleball because it reminded her of the “pickle boats” in crew that are made up of oarsmen chosen from the leftovers of other boats, according to the magazine.

Over the last two years, pickleball has become the fastest growing sport in the U.S.—participation has grown nearly 40% since 2019, according to the Silver Spring-based Sports & Fitness Industry Association. But in Montgomery County, it really

hit its stride only after the coronavirus pandemic began. Now, county planners and local jurisdictions can’t add pickleball courts fast enough to keep up with demand.

It’s been an “absolutely huge explosion,” says Gaithersburg resident Emer Daly, 48, a certified instructor with the International Pickleball Teaching Professional Association. Daly started the MoCo Pickleball Facebook group in 2017 and has watched its membership grow from about 100 to more than 1,500 people in less than five years. About 1,000 of the online group’s members joined in the past two years alone, she says. “The pandemic may have helped kick-start the growth [of pickleball], but honestly it’s not the pandemic, it’s just the game itself.”

Today, more than 150 indoor and outdoor pickleball courts are open to the public in Montgomery County, according to MoCo Pickleball, a website Daly founded in 2019 and now co-owns with Rob Campbell, the USA Pickleball Association’s district ambassador for Montgomery and Prince George’s counties. About 90% of the pickleball courts in Montgomery County are tennis courts with pickleball striping to make them dual purpose, Daly says. But more dedicated pickleball courts, like those at Bauer Drive, are in the works, according to Montgomery Parks planner Chuck Kines. By summer, the parks department is expected to add more pickleball striping—and upgraded lighting—to the dual-purpose courts at Colesville’s Meadowood Local Park and Good Hope Local Park in Silver Spring. Lighting is important because “the highest demand is for evening play,” Kines says.

Even private clubs are getting into the game. In 2021, Bethesda Country Club in Bethesda and Manor Country Club in Rockville each added dedicated outdoor pickleball courts to their racket sports offerings. “We’ve had a lot of people who are interested in pickleball,” says Frank Hatten, Bethesda Country Club’s director of tennis, “and it’s our job to respond.” Leisure World, a community for people aged 55 and over in Silver Spring, opened dedicated pickleball courts in 2020.

In pickleball, players use a special paddle—usually made of wood, graphite or composite material—to volley a ball back and forth over a net. The paddles are bigger than those used for pingpong and smaller than a tennis or racquetball racket. Pickleball courts—for both singles and doubles play—are about half the size of doubles tennis courts, so there’s less running and more socializing during games. The rules and techniques can be learned in one or two lessons, which makes the game accessible to those without a background in racket sports, according to players.

A game is played to 11 points and generally lasts up to 20

How to Get Started

Thinking about giving pickleball a try? Here are five tips from local experts.

- 1. Check your fitness level.** If you are fit and active and have no balance issues, you shouldn’t have trouble adjusting to the physical demands of pickleball, USA Pickleball Association District Ambassador Rob Campbell says. But if you are older or in poor health, or haven’t exercised in years, talk to your doctor first. Remember to warm up before play, and be sure you are comfortable with side-to-side shuffling movements, he says.
- 2. Take a lesson or two before playing.** Campbell recommends private lessons (generally \$50 to \$100 an hour) if possible. Group lessons can be cheaper, and most clinics run \$20 to \$30 for a two-hour session, says MoCo Pickleball founder Emer Daly. The International Pickleball Teaching Professional Association (iptpa.com) and the Professional Pickleball Registry (pprpickeball.org) list certified instructors on their websites.

3. Start with a decent paddle. If you can’t borrow a paddle made of graphite, fiberglass or composite material, consider taking advantage of the loaner program at TennisTopia in Rockville, Campbell advises. Most instructors will have paddles available for lessons, but confirm with them in advance, he says. “All rec centers have a box of wooden paddles to borrow,” adds Daly, but she says those paddles are far heavier than newer models.

4. Wear the right shoes. You don’t need shoes specifically designed for pickleball, Campbell says, but you should wear shoes made for tennis or other court sports.

5. Don’t show up to a drop-in site as a total novice. The pickleball community is an inclusive one, but some experienced players won’t be as welcoming for a newbie who doesn’t know the rules and can’t serve or volley, Campbell says. Play with peers of similar skill levels until you have the basics down, he advises.



PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT NILSEN

PHOTO BY ERICK GIBSON

Hunter Wyatt and Lisa Venable (foreground) play Scott Nilsen and Lisa Babcock at Bauer Drive Local Park.

minutes, so those who lose a round can get back in the queue and into another game fairly quickly, especially at sites with multiple courts in play, according to Daly. "There's something addictive about it," she says. "If you are sporty and in your 60s, you can have a great game with someone in their 20s. You can't say that about a lot of sports."

BACK IN 2016, when Daly started playing, she and her fellow enthusiasts went to indoor recreation centers where badminton lines had been painted on the gym floor—the footprints of pickleball and badminton courts are the same. In the summer, when camps were in session and the rec centers weren't available to them, they chalked their own lines on outdoor tennis courts and competed with tennis players for court time. "Backbreaking," she says, "and if rain came, all your hard work washed away."

The first outdoor court to be striped for pickleball in Montgomery County was at Meadowood Local Park in Colesville. That happened about 12 years ago, says Bill Wiley, who lived

nearby at the time. Wiley says he pestered the parks department so much that they sent a crew to add pickleball boundary lines to an existing tennis court. The crew painted lines down the middle, assuming pickleballers would use the same net as tennis players, though pickleball nets are shorter in length and height. Wiley, now 65 and living in Annapolis, says he read about the sport in

"There [are] always people on the courts. ... You just say, 'Hey, I want to play. Can I get in?'"
Perry Brown says.

the newspaper at the time and then built a court on his driveway. He liked the game so much that he thought the county should provide a place to play.

It wasn't until 2018, according to Daly, that the city of Gaithersburg added pickleball stripes to its outdoor tennis courts at Diamond Farms Park so that players could set up nets designed for the sport. Once Gaithersburg started the trend, other local jurisdictions followed, she says.

That same year, the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), an umbrella agency that includes Montgomery Parks, painted its first pickleball stripes across six tennis courts at Olney Mill Neighborhood Park in Olney. Almost immediately, players from all over the county showed up in droves with their nets, paddles and balls. Neighbors began complaining to the park commission about the constant "ping" of the ball hitting pickleball paddles, the overflowing parking lot, and the parked cars that blocked nearby roads and driveways, according to Kines. "It was our first test case," he says. "We learned a lot from Olney Mill."

It took another year before pickleball enthusiasts succeeded in getting designated outdoor courts—not just tennis courts with pickleball lines. In May 2019, about 50 pickleball fans including Daly brought their paddles to Rockville City Hall to petition the mayor and city council for courts designed specifically for the sport. They demanded lighting for nighttime play and permanent nets so they wouldn't have to bring their own, Daly says. Three months later, the city of Rockville redesigned some mini-basketball courts and in September 2019 inaugurated the first designated public pickleball courts in the county—at Rockville's Mattie J.T. Stepanek Park near the

King Farm neighborhood, according to the city of Rockville.

The King Farm site, with its four lighted courts, is still one of the area's top gathering spots for players from around the county. On a sunny afternoon last fall, all four courts were in use, and six more players had hung their paddles on the fence, signifying who was next in line to play. Several folks sat in folding chairs along the sidelines, sipping lemonade and iced tea. They doubled as a welcoming committee to anyone who was new to the sport. "You ready to try your hand at it?" an older man in a red folding chair asked a reporter who had come to check out the action.

Since the site opened, other local jurisdictions have added dedicated courts, including those at North Creek Lake Park in Montgomery Village and at L.M. Stevens Park in Poolesville. "King Farm was actually like the first domino," Daly says. "Once [King Farm] went in, it just kick-started everything else."

With pickleball, "there [are] always people on the courts that you find, and you just say, 'Hey, I want to play. Can I jump on?'" adds pickleball enthusiast Perry Brown, 35, who grew up playing tennis and squash. "You go to tennis courts and there's nobody there, or it's the two people that chose to play together."

Brown, a Gaithersburg mother of three young children, has been playing pickleball for about a year. In the spring of 2021, she signed up for a beginner clinic that meshed with her newborn baby's nursing schedule and was hooked from the start. She began meeting some experienced players at a park near her house, and they welcomed her into their group immediately. "The greatest thing about pickleball is that it's...coached by the people around you," Brown says.

Now, when her husband gets home from work and can watch the kids, she grabs her racket and heads to the Bauer Drive courts; even on the coldest nights, dozens of players are already gathered. Throughout last winter, someone inevitably brought a portable heater for those waiting their turn on the sidelines, she says. And even though she didn't know anyone when she first picked up a paddle, she now considers those in the pickleball community to be close friends. "None of us have anything in common except our love for pickleball. ...It's a lovely sport; it's lovely people," she says.

SINCE THE PANDEMIC BEGAN, Lisa Venable, 62, has been working from her home in Rockville. When she signs off for the day, she grabs a quick dinner, heads to the pickleball courts, and plays until the lights shut off at 11 p.m. She's been playing pickleball for three years, ever since her brothers became fans. They took her to Diamond Farms Park in Gaithersburg with their pickleball net, paddles and balls, and showed her how to play.

Venable, a federal government employee, used to play every evening at King Farm, but now her favorite site is Bauer Drive. "Everyone wants to go to the newest spot," she says.

On weekends, she checks the posts on her WhatsApp pickleball chat groups to find out who's playing there and when. She once tried to get in some games during her lunch hour as well,



Laytonsville's Ben Johns wins the Foot Solutions Arizona Grand Slam Men's Singles Champion in February. He is ranked the men's No. 1 player in the world by the Professional Pickleball Association.

but she found it too hard to break away. "Once you get on the court, you can't stop," she says.

Bauer Drive's pickleball courts are the first dedicated courts in the county built and maintained by the M-NCPPC, according to Kines. With ample parking, high-quality lighting and permanent pickleball nets in place, Bauer Drive's six courts are packed with pickleballers most hours of the day and evening, according to regulars. Even Ben Johns, 22, who is ranked the men's No. 1 Professional Pickleball Association (PPA) player in the world, showed up for the grand opening last October. The same month, the county also opened two dedicated courts at Seven Locks Local Park in Cabin John.

Johns grew up in Laytonsville and is expected to graduate in May from the University of Maryland, College Park. He and his six siblings were homeschooled, and the family spent winters in Florida. That's where he picked up the sport when he was about 16. He competed in his first PPA tournament less than a year later. Now living in Austin, Texas, with his older brother, Collin, who is also a professional pickleball player, Johns has an endorsement deal with Franklin Sports and a paddle named after him, the Ben Johns Signature Pickleball Paddle, which sells for \$100 in sporting goods stores and online. Insiders say he's expected to earn more than \$500,000 from the sport in 2022. Johns says the best women's singles player is 15 and the oldest player (ranked No. 2 for men's doubles) is 44. "It's a wide range, generally aver-



Lisa Venable, next to Hunter Wyatt, spends most evenings playing until 11 p.m.

PHOTO BY ERICK GIBSON

PHOTO COURTESY OF PPA TOUR

a smash hit

aging late 20s," he says.

Johns' parents built a pickleball court on their driveway in Laytonsville when he took up the sport, but there weren't any public courts near his home until the last year or so. "It's not just Maryland; basically all of the Northeast is definitely more behind," he says. "It usually has required snowbirds to find it down in the Southern states and bring [pickleball] back up. ... If it's not present, nobody knows about it, but as soon as people do start knowing about it, it catches [on] very rapidly."

More young people than ever are playing, Daly says, thanks in part to the sport's growing media presence. In 2020, ESPN3 became the first large-scale media outlet to offer live coverage and re-airings of PPA Tour events, according to Hannah Johns, Ben Johns' sister and the PPA's head of content. Other networks such as CBS Sports, FOX Sports and the Tennis Channel have also started broadcasting PPA Tour events. When people watch the pros play, they "realize, oh, this is a hugely competitive, fast game...this is not my grandmother's game of pickleball," Daly says.

ON A CLOUDY SATURDAY afternoon in February, 18 pickleball newcomers—bundled in ski caps, down vests and sneakers—are gathered on the outdoor courts at Westleigh Recreation Club in

North Potomac. Daly runs a beginners clinic at the private club whenever the weather forecast looks decent, and her inbox is filled with requests. "I just advertised one [class] yesterday and it's already full," she says.

A few minutes into the two-hour lesson, Daly is going over the rules of the serve. "There are only three rules," she tells the group. "The paddle must be going low to high—that's rule No. 1. Rule No. 2: I must hit the ball below my waist. Rule No. 3: The top edge of the paddle cannot be above my wrist."

In 2021, she says, the USA Pickleball Association added an additional serve—the drop serve—that players can use if they find the traditional pickleball serve too challenging. "There are no rules for the drop serve," she tells the group, "except I just drop the ball!"

Daly spreads the students across the courts in groups of four to practice volleying. In less than an hour, most have grasped the basics. "All I care about is that they have a good time," she says. "They can learn the finer points later."

Then Daly moves on to one of the most complicated parts of the game: calling the score. "The server must call the score fully before she's allowed to swing at the ball," Daly tells her students. "It's three numbers—our score, their score, and then" the number of the server, who is labeled either "one" or "two," depending

on the player's position on the court.

First-timer Karen Tsarev, 38, and her husband, Sasha, 37, wave to their daughters, ages 4 and 6, who are watching just outside the fence under their grandparents' supervision. Karen says lots of young families from their North Potomac neighborhood have started playing together.

A deaf couple in their 60s are in the group, too—lip-reading Daly's words and bantering in American Sign Language. Most of those who've signed up for Daly's adult class are in their 40s or older, but Daly says she's had groups with 20-somethings, and teenagers who come with their parents. Some of the county's public middle schools have added pickleball striping to their tennis courts too, she says. Once thought of as a sport for retirees, Daly says, now "it's all ages, all demographics."

"LIVE. LOVE. PICKLEBALL." That's the message embossed on a T-shirt at TennisTopia on Rockville Pike in Rockville. The 3,500-square-foot shop has been catering to the local tennis community for more than 15 years. In 2019, it started carrying pickleball merchandise, too. "We didn't bring in a lot," owner Darrell Haines says. "We wanted to take the temperature of the area."

Today, Haines says about 15% of the store's floor space is

devoted to pickleball, including a wall of paddles that are part of its pickleball loaner program. For a small fee, folks can choose from an assortment of more than 100 loaner paddles to try for up to a week before making a purchase. Less than a year ago, about 20 paddles were available in the loaner program, but now "we have a lot more paddles, we have pickleball shoes, pickleball bags [and] balls," Haines says.

Venable used TennisTopia's demo program to select her \$190 paddle. Before she got it, she'd been playing with her brothers' hand-me-down paddles, but found that they were too heavy for her, especially as she played more and more. "I was getting pickleball elbow," she says.

Hunter Wyatt, 31, has been working at TennisTopia since the summer of 2021. He says he's seen kids as young as high schoolers shopping for paddles, including a teenage girl who came in recently to check out some loaners for a get-together she was having with some friends.

"She picked out a couple [of paddles] just to play for the night," he says. "The game can be what you make of it. Anybody can have fun with it in a way that works for them."

Amy Halpern is a journalist who has worked in print and television news. She lives in Potomac. ■

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