



## Skills, showmanship and good-natured arguments on the bocce courts

BY RON SWOBODA

PERHAPS THE MOST AUTHENTIC Italian flavor in New Orleans might be found at the Italian-American Bocce Club on Severn Avenue. Bocce, also spelled bocce or bocci, is a bowling game ancient in its origins and as Italian as minestrone.

Three bocce courts are busy almost every night of the week with men's, women's and mixed leagues. The courts are surfaced with indoor/outdoor carpeting; the walls are decorated with a faux piazza look; and the play is intense. The most outgoing of the men rolling bocce on the evening I visited was Giorgio Beltram, who offered me the first pertinent piece of bocce history. "Standard equipment for Roman legionnaires 2,500 years ago were bocce balls," he says. "Ninety percent of the rules the Romans used, we play today." Roman legionnaires,

like American soldiers with baseball, carried the tools of their game with them and played throughout their empire. Today, offshoots include lawn bowling and shuffleboard.

Bocce played at the highest level is a wonderful game of exactitude and strategy. The U.S. Bocce Federation rules are pretty simple. The court is surrounded by sideboards and backboards. To start, a jackball or *pallino* (little ball) is rolled down-court as the target. The object is to roll your team's balls closest to the *pallino*. Teams then take turns rolling and knocking their opponent's balls out of the way. And that's where the fun begins. From what I could see, world affairs should hold our interest as well as the measurements determining who scores how many points in each frame of bocce.

During the Wednesday men's league, scoring at times got a little heated. Or as Beltram says, "If we didn't argue, we wouldn't be Italians." There were a couple of young guys around the table where I was sitting. Steve Headrick, a non-Italian, rolled his first few bocce balls two years ago and found himself

hooked. Now, he's part of the new breed that the club is looking for. Bob Agnelly, a lawyer from the older set and one of the club's 40 owners, says, "We want to attract some younger members who can take over." Or maybe they want to show the newcomers what a little age can teach them about bocce.

"They think they know it all," comes a verbal volley from Marc Bagnetto, 21. And so it goes.

This little Italian-American bocce club in Metairie hosted the Midwest Bocce Tournament last October with teams coming from Florida, St. Louis and Chicago. The home team lost the regional title to Chicago by 3 points. Chicago left New Orleans to finish sixth in the World Championships. Agnelly calls it a "head" game. "That team from Chicago had us beaten before we ever started. It took us most of the match to figure out we couldn't beat them," he says. Alas, too late.

Bocce is a game that you can grow old playing while learning the deeper values of strategy and cunning. In life, like in bocce, so much depends on how the balls bounce. ♣