

## ROLL WITH IT - EVEN FAR FROM ITS ITALIAN HOME, BOCCE CAN GET IN PLAYERS' BLOOD

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Anthony Macaluso stares down the 75-foot court with hawk-like intensity. He throws. He shouts. He gasps. He falls to the floor.

A good shot, and then a victory jig and a round of hugs and kisses.

"Bocce," the 71-year-old Metairie resident said seriously, "is life."

And the rest, as they say, is just details. Although the uninitiated may think of bocce as a slow sport for the gray-haired set, the game is gaining popularity among all age groups in all corners of the country. One national newspaper calls bocce "the de rigueur diversion of the moment." Another notes that the sport popular with Roman soldiers more than 200 years before Christ is second only to soccer as the ball game played in the most countries. It will be a trial sport at the 2000 Olympic Games in Australia.

"The nice thing about it is it's like bowling or playing pool: Anybody can play, but it takes a long time to learn to play it well," said Bob Agnelly, vice president of the Italian-American Bocce Club in Metairie.

In bocce, a small ball known as the pallino is tossed down the court. It serves the same purpose as the spike in horseshoes: Players try to get their balls the closest to the pallino.

But unlike the horseshoe spike, the pallino isn't stationary. Opponents try to knock the pallino loose or at the very least to smack their opponents' balls away.

Only the team that has a ball closest to the pallino scores during a round of play. The number of points is based upon where the nearest opponents' ball lies. The game ends at 12 points.

Local bocce players can find companionship and competition through Agnelly's group. Formed in 1984 by a group of Italian immigrants who missed long afternoons of vino and competition, it has about 55 dedicated members who play on two courts in an air-conditioned clubhouse on Severn Avenue near the Interstate 10 Service Road.

The building's plain brick front is deceiving. In the playing area, the floors are tiled, two of the walls have murals of Italian seascapes, and one features glass and Italianate sculptures. Another part of the building features a full working bar, a card room and a large reception area.

Players range from 16 to 77. Bocce veterans toss the pallino Wednesday evenings. Thursdays are open to all, especially those just learning the game.

"We come here, it's like a family," said Frank DiMichiel, 73, who speaks with a thick Italian accent despite more than 40 years in the United States. "We play or don't play. We talk, drink a beer."

DiMichiel, who grew up in northern Italy, started playing bocce at 7, using rocks instead of balls. Give any Italian family some space and a bocce set and a passionate game will be rolling within minutes. Anyone can play; size, strength and sex don't matter.

DiMichiel said bocce is a thinking game. As little as a sixteenth of an inch can mean the difference between a point or a wasted round. The game is on the line with every throw.

"It's not good only to throw the ball. Anybody can throw the ball. You got to use your brain to play," DiMichiel said.

The brain is also needed to think up elaborate insults to wreak havoc on the opposing team's psyche. There was

rarely a quiet moment during a recent match at the Metairie clubhouse. Cheers and jeers continually filled the air. The "malocchio," the Italian evil eye rarely seen this side of the Atlantic, was given to opponents often and emphatically.

"It's a head game as much as a physical game," Agnelly said. "You have to out-psyche your opponents."

Nobody likes to win as much as DiMichiel, the other players say. He watches every toss. He offers advice before, during and after a game. He can't help himself. He loves the game.

Adele DiMichiel, Frank's wife and an ardent bocce player, said she has threatened to make him sleep on the couch if he doesn't stop telling her how to play the game she grew up with.

But for the younger players, DiMichiel is an inspiration. The three Bagnetto brothers have learned to play under his guidance, and they say DiMichiel is Yoda to their Luke Skywalker.

"He's taught me everything," said Bryan Bagnetto, 21, a junior at the University of New Orleans.

Bagnetto and his brothers, who were introduced to the game by their aunt and uncle about 10 years ago, have tried to interest friends with little success. That hasn't shaken their passion for bocce.

"I love the game. It's exciting," Bagnetto said. "There's a lot of strategy to it."

Although many of the Metairie club's members are Italians or Italian-Americans, anyone may join the league, Agnelly said. The only requirements are a competitive spirit and a willingness to learn the game.

Patrick Donovan, who lives in a nearby apartment complex, walked past the building and wondered what was inside for three years. One day, the doors were open and he caught a glimpse of the Italian frescos and two carpeted courts. He stepped inside.

That was eight months ago. Now Donovan plays four times a week. He's single and has no family in the area, and the bocce courts and the bocce players have become an integral part of his life.

"I love the game, the competition," said Donovan, 46. The players "are family, friends. You can ask them for anything."

Macaluso walked over and heard the last part of Donovan's comment.

"We take him under our wings, teach him how to be part of a family," the older man said.

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Illustration:

Anthony Macaluso gets ready to let the ball fly in a recent round at the Italian-American Bocce Club in Metairie.

Bocce players take their avocation seriously: Macaluso, left, and Paul Verdigetso go to the tape measure to be certain whose ball is closest to the pallino, that is, who gets the points.

STAFF PHOTOS BY ALEX BRANDON

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