

Passing a good time at a bocce tournament - Local bocce players are really on the ball

Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - Sunday, October 19, 2003

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The date had been circled on my calendar for nearly two months.

Oct. 12 -- the day I would play my first game of bocce.

Many people have heard of bocce and know the game originated in Italy. But how many of us have actually played the game? Probably not too many.

But some members of Slidell-based Order Sons of Italy Lodge 2449 have great experience playing the lawn bowling game, one of the world's oldest sports. They gathered at John Slidell Park last week to match skills with members of the Metairie-based Italian American Bocce Club.

I showed up before the games began and received a crash course on bocce from Mario Sperandeo, a member of the Slidell club who organized the event.

Briefly, here's how the game is played. A pallina, which is a small ball not bigger than a plum, is pitched onto a 60-foot-long course. The object is take a larger ball, the bocce, and toss or roll it as close as possible to the pallina. Meanwhile, your opponent tries to get his bocce closer to the pallina, perhaps knocking your bocce to the side in the process.

The closer bocces receive points. It's sort of like shuffleboard without the big stick.

As I flipped a few bocces onto the bocce court, I kept an eye on other players practicing prior to their games. These guys were good. No way I was competing against them, especially with cold, hard cash on the line (entry fee, \$10. I only had \$2 in my wallet).

Instead, I watched the players deftly place bocces a whisper away from the pallina. Then, only seconds later, watched an opposing player's bocce replace it in surgical fashion.

It was a pleasant way to spend the afternoon, especially with an assist from the sounds of Louis Prima and the smells of sausage and pepper sandwiches.

Slidell's Alex Platania said bocce is "huge" in the Italian communities of his native Baltimore.

"If it's not 30 degrees and snowing, they're playing," Platania said.

Bob Agnelly, president of the Italian American Bocce Club, said his group has 55 active members. The club owns an air-conditioned facility in Metairie and its members travel to tournaments throughout the country.

Agnelly said bocce is "a big game everywhere but here. I've never been able to figure it out."

The game remains popular in Italy, but Joseph Ranzino, who was born in Sicily, said he didn't play bocce until he moved to Gentilly. Now 67 years old, Ranzino said he's played the game for only 10 years.

"We pass a good time," he said.

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The Slidell Sea Scouts will hold a sale and swap meet Saturday and Oct. 26 at West Marine, 4036 Pontchartrain Drive.

Anyone interested in selling or swapping used boating gear can set up in the West Marine parking lot from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. each day. Cost is \$5 per spot, which will benefit the Sea Scouts.

For information, call West Marine at 649-4777.

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Send news and feature stories about St. Tammany recreational sports and leisure activities to Andrew Canulette at 2070 Gause Blvd., Slidell, LA 70461, or 1001 N. U.S. 190, Covington, LA 70433; call 645-2855 or 898-4825; or send e-mail to acanulette@timespicayune.com.

Caption: STAFF PHOTO BY T.K. GOODELL Frank LaGaccia and his wife, Cathy, they watch the Order Sons of Italy Lodge 2449's fourth annual Bocce Tournament on Sunday at John Slidell Park. [149646] A close-up look at bocce balls used in the lawn bowling game that originated in Italy. [149647] STAFF PHOTOS BY T.K. GOODELL [149648] Joseph Ranzino pitches his bocce toward the targeted pallina.

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Record Number: 419449149

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