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RELISHING PICKLEBALL

Though it's been around for 40 years, it's new to the Tucson area. The senior-friendly game is especially popular among snowbirds.

Corky Simpson

GARY GAYNOR/Tucson Citizen

By CORKY SIMPSON

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If you're interested in taking up a new sport that won't bankrupt you, doesn't require the strength of a weightlifter or the endurance of a distance runner, you might relish pickleball.

Yeah, right. Pickle what?

Trust me, the game's not as silly as the name. It's easy, it's fun, it's exciting and although it's been around for 40 years, the sport is fairly new to Tucson.

But it's beginning to catch on.

Basically, pickleball is tennis in miniature. The court is 44 feet in length (compared with 78 feet in tennis) and 20 feet wide (instead of 36 feet).

And they use a paddle instead of a racket to hit a plastic ball dotted with holes much like a whiffleball.

Out at the Voyager RV Resort Park east of town, pickleball is about the hottest game going. Folks out there say about just six or eight played the game a year ago and today they have 250.

"It just keeps growing," said Bill Seiferth, originally from Georgia and Voyager's pickleball coordinator.

Ron Shy, whose home is in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., when he isn't cruising the interstate, said, "I bought a park-model (trailer-home with a carport) here just because of pickleball."

Seiferth bought a site-built home for the same reason.

Nancy Jordan of Voyager is an "ambassador" of the United States of America Pickleball Association.

"There are over 1,600 active players in Phoenix, and 700 or more in Casa Grande," she said.

She and husband Dave are from Florida.

"We're going to have a tournament at Voyager Feb. 15," Seiferth said, "and some of our players will compete in pickleball at the Senior Olympics in Surprise at the end of February."

The Senior Olympics program in Tucson this week did not include pickleball as a sport.

"But we hope to have it in the Senior Olympics here next year," Nancy Jordan said.

One morning last week, she and Elaine Helvie were playing doubles against Shy and Dave Jordan. It was more of a teaching process than competition.

Shy, a tennis coach for 20 years, is only a rookie at Pickleball, but has caught on quickly and is an excellent player. So is Dave Jordan, a former physical education teacher in Tennessee.

"These are the only courts in Tucson," Nancy Jordan said. "But pickleball is growing in popularity and, trust me, it can be addictive. It's senior-friendly, although young people are beginning to take it up."

Steve Zorns, from Hoopeston, Ill., another rookie, said pickleball "is good exercise, easy to learn and just about anybody can play."

The game was created in summer 1965 on Bainbridge Island, a quick ferry ride from Seattle. Co-inventors were William Bell, Barney McCallum and U.S. Rep. Joel Pritchard.

"Pickles" was a dog who'd chase errant balls and hide them in the bushes. So don't knock the name.

It could have been "slobberball."

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MORE INFO

Interested in playing pickleball? Call Nancy Jordan at 574-5565 or e-mail her at pickleballgal@msn.com.

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