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The next big competitive sport ofpickleball?

By John T. Miller



Luke Brightbill, a junior at Acalanes, returns a serve at a recent practice with other Bay Area high school students. If the students want to enter tournaments they currently must compete against adults. Photos John T. Miller

for tennis.

Locally, when the tennis courts at Orinda Community Center Park were last resurfaced in 2013, two new pickleball courts were lined in - one on either side of the existing tennis midcourt line. Interest died out shortly afterward, but Drew Diefenbach, who runs Paragon Tennis at the site, was encouraged a couple years ago by some friends to include pickleball in his lessons.

Diefenbach, a graduate of Miramonte High School ('03) has a master's degree in sports psychology from JFK University, coaches tennis at Acalanes High School, and is a USTA High Performance Coach. He now runs pickleball clinics through the city of Lafayette at the Community Center multi-use rink, which serves lacrosse, roller hockey, basketball and pickleball. When not used for clinics, there are six courts for public use at the Center.

"Pickleball is definitely the number one choice," says Diefenbach, "and the interest has grown tremendously since last year." Diefenbach has traveled and competed nationwide in the sport and has organized leagues, locally.

Pickleball has been offered as a unit in the high school P.E. programs locally for the last 15 years, but the students use the full-sized tennis courts for lack of a pickleball layout.

Pickleball was founded in the summer of 1965 by Joel Pritchard, Bill Bell and Barney McCallum on Bainbridge Island, Washington. Within days, Joan Pritchard came up with the name "pickle ball" - a reference to the thrown-together leftover non-starters in the "pickle boat" of crew races.

An alternative version has it that the game was named after the Pritchard's dog, a Cockatoo puppy named "Pickles." According to the Pickleball Portal, the story has it that once they started playing, the dog would pick up the plastic ball and run off the court with it.

There are holes in this theory, however, since the dog didn't arrive until two years after the game was invented. Perhaps the dog was named after the game?

Diefenbach is hopeful that the game can be presented as a high school sport in the area - much like lacrosse was last decade - and plans to start up a club team at Acalanes to gain traction. "The students could play coed and it could provide a lot of unity in the school," he says. "There's some top-notch high school players in the area who have to compete at the adult level in order to enter any tournaments."

What, you might ask, is the next big sport to hit the competitive circuit? The answer could just be pickleball.

A large portion of the population may still be wondering, pickleball?

But for over an estimated 4 million people, pickleball is an exciting new sport that is fun to play and growing in popularity and competitiveness. As of 2019, the USA Pickleball Association tracked nearly 8,000 pickleball locations, with an average of about 110 new locations being added every month.

The game is a cross between tennis, volleyball, badminton, and ping pong and is played on a court that is one-fourth the size of a tennis court. Singles and doubles play use the same size court, employing a plastic ball that resembles a sturdy whiffle ball-with about 40 holes-and a paddle that looks like an oversized ping pong paddle. The paddle can be made of plastic with a graphite skin layer, or of carbon with the cheapest paddles made out of wood. The net is slightly lower than



Brightbill demonstrates size of paddle and ball. Photos John T. Miller

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