

America's Fastest Growing Sport – PICKLEBALL!

Local Players in a Pickle for Court Space



Bonnie Scott smashes a perforated yellow ball across the net to her dad, Russ Mineo. He hammers it back. On the sidelines, seven-year-old Towler, the family's third generation, practices a few shots of his own. Bonnie, the co-owner of the Downvalley Tavern in El Jebel, is ranked as a gold medal (4.0 level) pickleball player. Russ nabbed a bronze (3.5 level) win during a Western Slope tournament in Delta over the summer.

This sunny Saturday morning, the family has come out for several hours of the fastest-growing sport in the U.S. – pickleball.

A pickleball looks more like a whiffleball than a pickle and players use rackets similar to ping-pong paddles. Here on the Darien Tennis and Pickleball Courts in Carbondale – renamed two years ago to include pickleball – lines have been painted inside the tennis bounds and the nets have been pulled down to accommodate pickleball. Most

ARTICLE BRIDGET GREY | PHOTOGRAPHY THOMAS SANDS

of today's players are members of the recently formed Roaring Fork Pickleball Association (FRPBA), which tallies 154 members.

They're evangelical about the sport. "There are about 30 people here this morning, and sometimes it's more like 40," says Mineo. "Pickleball is exploding. There are 400,000 players in the U.S. and 120,000 registered with the USA Pickleball Association (USAPA). This valley hasn't begun to catch up with the demand."

"It's really popular," says Scott. "But also a bit frustrating. It seems like more pickleball players are turning up than tennis players, but we don't have the courts."

Glenwood Springs has three indoor and four outdoor courts. Carbondale opens the Darien Courts to pickleball on Monday, Friday and Saturday. River Valley Ranch has installed two courts. Basalt's Crown Mountain Park has some courts. Aspen has installed four new courts while Snowmass Village has two indoor courts and four outdoor, converted tennis courts. It's not enough.

As Scott begins to explain the process of convincing local towns to build more outdoor courts, Brad Nicholson chimes in. "Look at Delta, Montrose and Grand Junction," he says. "They give the sport incredible support. They've all built courts and have more in the works." Half a dozen picklers nod in assent as Nicholson says, "Our towns don't have to even *fund* the courts. Just give us the space and we'll raise the money for nets and lines!"

Pickleball's explosive growth has been in part fueled by baby boomers like Mineo. A volunteer USAPA ambassador, he plays six days a week. In a year and a half, he has lost 22 pounds and stopped taking blood pressure and cholesterol medications.

Sonny Darien, 80, a retired high school coach who has taught both tennis and pickleball, says, "Anyone can play. The learning curve is easier than it is for tennis, and anyone who plays any racket sport can pick it up quickly."

Sonny's wife Bernie, also 80, agrees, "After 15 minutes practice, people start returning the ball. There's less ground to cover. Some people think it's a dinky sport for old people, but they wouldn't if they watched the 18 to 24-year-olds. They're very physical, very strategic. Great to watch."

Many locals travel to tournaments and play together. In June, Scott placed first in while playing doubles in Montrose with Janine Burke of Grand Junction. Christy Maron of Carbondale and several New Castle residents – Karen Wellington, Daria Harlow, Andrea Murr and Ryan Harlow – won medals in that tournament, as did Glenwood Springs residents Jerry Hayes and James Main and Paul Liang of Grand Junction.

"There's a lot to like," says Scott. "It's a sport where men are not necessarily better than women. That makes it easy for couples to play together. It's a blast playing with my parents. It's fun and social. People playing pickles seem more mellow than the people I play USTA tennis with. Last week, a woman got frustrated with my tennis partner just because she tied her shoe too many times! Oh, come on...!"

"Pickleball is fun," Pat Nicholson agrees. "You can play with people at all levels. You're out in the open and it's a beautiful spot. How much better can it get?"

"Yep," agrees Mineo. "I'm addicted."

