

That's How They Roll: Spring Lake Village Residents Have a Ball with Bocce

It's 4 p.m. on Thursday and it's standing room only. Cheers from the crowd pack the court. It is the Village Eagles versus the Wolf Gang. Enthusiastic spectators clearly have divided loyalties. Which team will get their bocce closest to the pallino and be crowned champion? Whichever team is the winner, the main focus is not the victory but rather friendship, comradery and just having a good time.

"Bocce is one of those sports that anyone can play," said Wolf Gang team member Billie Clinton, who has a bachelor's degree in recreation education and is one of many residents who have embraced the sport at Spring Lake Village, a senior living community in Santa Rosa. "It can be competitive but also an enjoyable social time. It represents what we are all about in the Village, having both positive emotional and physical experiences."

Bocce is played with eight large balls and one smaller target or object ball called a pallino, or "jack." The object of the game is for one or more of a team's balls to be closer than any of the opponents' balls to the pallino at the end of every frame.

It's a sport with a rich history and can be traced back to ancient Egypt almost 7,000 years ago. The first known documentation of bocce was in 5200 B.C. with an Egyptian tomb painting that depicted two boys playing. The game spread throughout the Middle East and Asia, where it was eventually adopted by the Greeks and passed on to the Romans. It was and is played everywhere, from churches and castles to the city streets and of course, right now with great passion and enthusiasm, at Spring Lake Village.



Spring Lake Village residents enjoy the outdoors with bocce games.

"We all get out and we laugh and enjoy each other's company," said Jeanette Ambroge, who like many residents picked up the game when she moved in. "Everyone is here for a different reason but as you can see, we are all laughing and having a wonderful time."

Bocce can be played upon any level surface by anyone who is willing to try. It is a game for all ages, genders and athletic ability. The Spring Lake Village court is well manicured with artificial turf adjacent to a large patio that accommodates many spectators.

Spring Lake Village fields 15 teams, plus a 16th team from neighboring Front Porch community, Friends House. Most teams don fanciful colors, hats and shirts with imaginative team names like Springers, Village Eagles, Tie Dyes, Spring Chickens, Bocce Babes, Wolf Gang, Easy 8s, Quakes and Misfits, just to name a few.

“The best part of bocce is that all can play,” said Village Eagles team member Shelly Jeffries. “We have players with walkers, canes and wheelchairs. It’s amazing how adaptable this game is.”

“Coming down here and usually having a good crowd of people standing around you, really gets the game moving,” said bocce player Mike Nelligan, who started as a spectator but is now team captain of The “I’s Have It.

He said in other sports, players want to root for the opposing team to do poorly, but at Spring Lake Village, bocce is a “different kind of sport,” one that exemplifies rooting for other players to succeed and prosper, even if they are on the opposing team.

Team captains create the schedule, interpret the rules and plan a celebration in the community’s Great Hall at the end of each season. Each Season’s champion is recognized on a plaque in the residents’ lounge.

“Spring Lake Village is a community and bocce enhances that community,” Billie said.