

From the Del Norte Superior Court to the pickleball court

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When Bill Follet retired after nearly two decades as a judge on the Del Norte Superior Court, he was quick to find another court assignment.

His wife, Maureen, talked him into playing pickleball. The sport is best described as a combination of ping-pong, badminton and tennis.

“I played tennis a little bit when I was young, then maybe once a week during the summer when I was on vacation,” said Follet. “I thought this might be easier than tennis.”

That said, “Even though there is not as much running around, it still takes a lot of reaction time.”

Now, he’s hooked.

“It’s a competitive-type of fun,” said Follet, “the kind that gets you to play harder. But, not so competitive that you can’t have a great time.”

The sport requires the most basic of equipment — a paddle bigger than one for ping-pong but smaller than a tennis racket, a plastic ball with holes similar to a Wiffle ball, and a reliable pair of tennis shoes.

One of Follet's playing partners at the Peterson Park courts, Jeff Reed, said the limited equipment is but another draw for pickleball. "It's an easy sport to take with you," Reed said.

He and his wife, Kathy, play at least three times a week now - sometimes three times a day - and often are joined by others in the seniors community, including the Follets.

The Follets have joined a growing group of pickleballers in Crescent City at the Del Norte Pickleball and Tennis Association. Regional ambassador Phil Freneau said pickleball's popularity has outpaced that of tennis — the local association now has more than 90 pickleball members, and just five tennis regulars.

"Pickleball has gotten remarkably popular," said Freneau. "It's the fastest-growing sport in world."

As evidence, he said, "Look at the increase in membership here, and in the national association. No other sport has that kind of growth attached to it."

Once formed in 1999, the association built an indoor court at the Del Norte County Fairgrounds. About four years ago, they added a pickleball court.

"Twenty people joined," said Freneau. "Then we got another 40 people. In six months, pickleball membership was up to 60 people."

"We realized we needed another court, so we converted one of the tennis courts. 'Too bad, sorry,' we told the tennis players, 'but we need that.'"

It's a simple matter for players and other organizations to set up their own courts, added Freneau. "It's small enough that you can literally put it in driveways. The Seawood Apartments put one in on their basketball court. The RV parks are even installing courts."

Said Freneau, "It's so user-friendly, unlike tennis, which you have to spend years learning." He played tennis in college and even taught as a tennis pro. Now, he's all pickleball.

Most of the older players play doubles, although many younger players ages 30 to 50 play in competitive solo leagues.

For the last two years, the Del Norte Association has hosted a well-attended tournament. The first year included only local entrants. By the second year, Freneau had to turn people away.

He recommends going online to locate pickleball tournaments.

"There's even a pro circuit. I ran across a former pro tennis player who realized he can make more money professionally at pickleball than tennis," Freneau said.

"I played about a year ago in a singles (tournament) against a former Davis Cup player in the open division. Since there's no age limit, it's hard for someone age 65 to beat someone 25."

The Del Norte Association offers regular clinics at no charge. Joining the association costs \$175 a year for unlimited use of the facility. For up to 1.5 hours, you can own the court during free time.

For that matter, you can play at 2:00 in the morning if you're so inclined, said Freneau. And non-members pay only \$5 to play.

The association's indoor facilities are shut down for two months during the summer to make room for the Del Norte County Fair. On Sept. 1, there's a big social at 1 p.m. to welcome participants back indoors, and then a month of potlucks and informal matches.

"They have a lot of volunteers who keep the courts in good shape," said Follet, "especially at the fairgrounds. And the socials are a lot of fun.

"You get people who are really good, but you also get a lot of players who are happy to play with someone who's a little more pedestrian."

Meantime, "Peterson Park was never getting used. The skateboarders were trashing it," Freneau said. "So two or three years ago, we asked the city to put in painted lines, take the tennis nets down and keep up pickleball nets over the three summer months.

"That's going to be one of our future projects, to get grants and make it nice. It has cracks in the court surface now, but is doable."

For more information about the Del Norte Pickleball and Tennis Association, visit www.dntennis.net/index.html.