



Riverbend Pickleball Group Takes Off During COVID-19 Pandemic

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - April is National Pickleball month and no where was it more evident than at Gordon Moore Park this past Saturday where more than 40 members of the Riverbend Pickleball Group came together to celebrate Opening Day 2021.

The weather was perfect for the scheduled events of the day, which included the official hanging of the Riverbend Pickleball banner, the Inaugural Gherkin Tournament, a

single-elimination tournament won by Mark and Paula Mathews of Godfrey, plus food and prizes for the attendees. Pickleball is America's fastest growing sport. Much of the game's gain in popularity is due to the addition of pickleball courts in RV parks and senior communities where the game has become a significant social event. At the conclusion of a tennis match, players tend to go home; whereas in pickleball they prefer to remain and socialize. The paddle sport with a strange name combines facets of badminton, tennis, and ping pong, and is played with a hollow ball similar in appearance to a Wiffle ball.

The game has its genesis on Bainbridge Island, WA., where three dads came together in 1965 to develop a game for their kids who were bored with the typical summer pastimes. A multigenerational game with simple rules and a minor investment in equipment makes it an ideal game for beginners to learn and is also popular with tennis players looking for a more exciting game with less physical stress on aging joints.

Unlike tennis, pickleball is a game that grandparents can play with their grandchildren," Ruby Berghoff said in her submission. "Ardene Clarke, a Godfrey resident and current USAPA ambassador for Alton and Godfrey, is credited with being the pioneer of pickleball in the Riverbend area. Ardene, along with her husband Mike, relocated to the Riverbend area three years ago from South Carolina where she regularly played pickleball. Once settled in their new home in Godfrey, she was anxious to get back on the courts but found pickleball to be nonexistent in the Alton-Godfrey area.

"As is the case in most communities, city-sponsored sports programs typically are centric to youth activities, resulting in a dearth of socializing opportunities for the adult and senior population. Ardene approached Michael Haynes, Executive Director Alton Parks & Recreation, to share her passion for pickleball. She convinced Michael to purchase a few pickleball nets, paddles, and balls, as well as some court tape to line off pickleball court boundaries on the existing tennis courts at Gordon Moore Park. Word spread quickly. It was not long before there was a thriving group of adults seeking a new way to participate in serious leisure. Ask any one of them and they will tell you it is addictive.

"Pickleball can be played indoors or outdoors. Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, the Riverbend Pickleball Group played outdoors on the dual-lined tennis courts at Gordon Moore Park and indoors during the winter months in the gyms of Catholic Children's Home and MaxSports. Due to the recent relatively mild winter, players could be spotted on the courts in December and January where attire included gloves and earmuffs. The group plans to continue to play throughout the summer and fall on the dedicated pickleball courts at Gordon Moore Park, which were recently resurfaced and lined for both pickleball and tennis."

Weather permitting, you will find members of the group on the courts just about every day of the week, morning and evening, Berghoff said.

"The group harbors a community awareness focus as well," she added. "For Christmas 2019, the group donated much needed items for the residents of Catholic Children's Home, providing gifts to residents who may not have otherwise received anything. Again, in the spring of 2020 when COVID-19 restricted their resources for personal hygiene items, Riverbend Pickleball members stepped up to help procure much needed items.

"Hope Rescues and Madison County Urban League's older children were recipients of the group's 2020 Christmas donations. Much to the disappointment of the group, Ardene and Mike Clarke are relocating back to her native Canada later this month. "

In the interim, Berghoff, an avid pickleball player and Godfrey resident said she has assumed the leadership responsibilities for the group as ambassador pro-tem.

"If you are interested in learning how to play pickleball, check out Riverbend Pickleball on Facebook at Riverbend Pickleball of Madison County or at:

www.places2play.org.

Or just head on out to Gordon Moore Park's tennis complex at. 9 a.m. on Saturday mornings for a friendly meet-and-greet orientation, weather permitting. New players are always welcome. All equipment is provided for orientation play.