

Letter To The Editor: Pickleball Explodes In Riverbend Region In 2022

by Ruby Berghoff
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2022 has witnessed an explosion of pickleball in the Riverbend area. More than 40 members of the Riverbend Pickleball Group gathered at the new pickleball courts at Glazebrook Park on Monday, October 10, to celebrate World Pickleball Day with a bountiful breakfast potluck and plenty of pickleball to work off the extra calories.



Not since the beginning of athletics by the Ancient Greeks in 776 BC has there been a sport take the world by storm like pickleball. Founded in 1965 on Bainbridge Island, Washington, pickleball is touted to be the fastest growing participation sport per the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA). This attributed to its appeal to all ages, simple rules, quick to learn, a short game and affordable.

Pickleball has no season. Unlike soccer fields, tennis courts, baseball fields, and splash pads that are used only a few months of the year, outdoor pickleball courts are in use year-round, sunrise to lights out, weather permitting. And pickleball has no age limits. It is played in elementary school PE classes and is an event in Senior Olympics. What other sport brings grandchildren and grandparents, even great-grandparents, together on the court?

We, the members of Riverbend Pickleball Group, on behalf of all pickleball enthusiasts in the Riverbend area, would like to thank our community leaders for creating delightful places to play today's fastest growing sport. Kudos to Michael Haynes, Director of Park and Recreation, City of Alton, who, nearly five years ago, was the first in the area to see the potential for pickleball. Mike paved the way to establish six dual-lined courts on two unused and deteriorating tennis courts at the Simpson Tennis Complex in Gordon Moore Park, thus being the genesis of the Riverbend Pickleball Group.

Surrounding communities grasped the pickleball craze and, to-date in 2022, 17 dedicated pickleball courts (a court with one set of lines for pickleball) have been added in the neighboring communities. Mike Babcock, Wood River Township Supervisor,

obtained funding to convert the unused tennis courts at Kutter Park, located in Cottage Hills, to six dedicated pickleball courts. The courts were recently designated “Court of Heroes” in honor of local fallen first responders Captain Jake Ringering and Officer Tyler Timmins. Bethalto Mayor Gary Bost redeveloped an area in Bethalto’s Central Park to include three dedicated pickleball courts. With the support and encouragement of Godfrey Mayor Michael McCormick, and a contingent of Godfrey resident pickleball players, the Godfrey board of trustees voted unanimously to include eight dedicated pickleball courts, rather than the initial planned four, in the recent Robert E. Glazebrook Community Park expansion.

As part of its Historic City Center District development, the Jerseyville Economic Development Council upgraded Lion’s Park to include three dedicated pickleball courts as well as other recreational offerings. Quickly realizing that three courts would not be enough to accommodate the rapidly growing number of pickleball players, six additional, dual-lined courts with portable nets were lined on the adjacent basketball court. The City of Wood River, looking to revitalize the underused 14th Street Park, also known as East End Park, recently started construction for four dedicated pickleball courts.

Pickleball is not just an outdoor sport, there are indoor enthusiasts as well. Dustin Heiser, Wellness Center manager at Senior Services Plus Alton, has been a constant advocate for pickleball as a form of exercise for members. When approached a year ago, Mike Moore, Public Works Director for Village of East Alton, was immediately on board to transform the gym at Keasler Recreation Complex to include three dual-lined courts. And new owners of The Max Sports in Alton, Patti and Corey Stanford, continue to support pickleball with three dual-lined courts in the gym.

While acknowledging those who have paved the way locally for pickleball, I would be remiss to not mention that not everyone is pleased with the invasion of pickleball into our communities. It is well documented that there are opponents of pickleball who find the repeated “pop”, “pop” sound of the hard plastic ball contacting a composite paddle annoying. To those neighbors we apologize and assure you technology is addressing this concern with modifications in the construction of paddles. We also apologize to those who have found our laughter and bantering on the courts to be an annoyance, going as far as to ask us to keep the noise down – or else... Per SFIA findings, 32.7% of core players are 65-plus. We won’t be around forever so let us laugh and have fun while we can – or come join in the fun.

Pickleball, a game for all ages, is celebrating 57 years of fun and camaraderie. On behalf of all past, present, and future pickleball players, thank you Civic Leaders and auxiliary personnel for giving us an opportunity to exercise, both physically and mentally, to socialize, and most importantly – to laugh and have fun playing pickleball!

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