

# The Game of Balls

After 7,000 years a group of friends finally made obvious what's so great about the game of bocce.



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## ISTENING TO SARAH

**DELUCAS**, it all started when she and a group of friends were cooped up indoors for a hurricane party. And someone said, "Let's start a bocce league."

"Like most great ideas that come about, we were just drinking at someone's house," the part owner of Major League Bocce says.

Okay, maybe it wasn't that simple. This free-thinking group was actually looking for a socializing sport. Something beer-league friendly that players wouldn't take too seriously. But as DeLucas explains, once bocce was suggested, it seemed obvious.

"I was relatively new to Washington, as were some of my friends. We played in a kickball league. We liked the concept of social sports; it was fun to go do a recreational activity and then go to the bar after games and socialize. But we didn't really like kickball. There were a lot of rules and regulations that we thought were a little ridiculous. And we were like, we

should just do our own thing.

"My friend grew up playing bocce, and he thought we could totally do this, it would be really easy. First of all, it's very easy to set up, because you don't need to play on a specific field. Softball, kickball, you need a baseball diamond. Soccer, you need a soccer pitch. Bocce you can fit in any sort of green space and just play.

"Also, bocce is super social, you're hanging out with everybody, your team, your opponents, you're all standing around talking. It's also very easy to pick up. For kickball or softball you have to learn certain abilities, how to throw a ball or kick a ball or bat a ball. People don't necessarily have those skills."

Fortunately, there were people in the hurricane room with business acumen too, like DeLucas and her friend Rachael Preston, who has an MBA from the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan.

"Everyone took on different things," Preston adds. "My thing was to make sure we had ar-

ticles of incorporation to file with the city, another partner had taken on starting the bank account and we had to pay a few hundred dollars to get our permit.

"Then we e-mailed everybody we knew and said, 'Hey, come play bocce with us!'"



That is how Major League Bocce, the umbrella of official bocce leagues now in ten cities, was formed in 2004: a group of D.C. friends stuck in a house during a hurricane, looking for an activity that would enable people to compete and mingle at the same time. The league website notes that when it came to finding a social sport, "Bocce was the obvious



choice as athletic coordination was hardly a prerequisite for play."

Indeed, when you can hold a beer with one hand while playing (don't actually do that, though, you could damage the court), you know it's a sport for the rest of us.

Just in case you're one of those rare folks in South Jersey who doesn't have Italian roots in your family tree, the rules of bocce can be learned in about ten seconds. Here they are:

- 1) A target ball, called the pallino, is rolled out onto the court.
- 2) Two teams take turns rolling balls as close to the pallino as possible.

That's pretty much it. Oh, there are rule variations; there is an International Bocce Federation that defines regulation court sizes for tournaments and rules about things like what to do if a ball strikes the backboard. Major League Bocce does have its own set of statutes for game situations, obviously. But if a person can grasp those two basic rules, they can play bocce.

A bocce league is like a bowling league. Participants can drink beer while playing, often wear shirts bright enough to direct traffic, and range from every level of skill. But bocce has some key advantages over bowling too...like not having to rent community shoes that are cleansed only with a mysterious spray, for one. Nor is the scoring anywhere near complicated enough to require a computer program; a team gets a point for each ball closer to the pallino than the other team's closest ball. On to the next round. And after the game, enjoy an adult beverage at the bar.

That simplicity and community is the beauty of it. In just over ten years, the Major League Bocce people have helped make obvious the benefits of a game that has existed for millennia without ever being an Olympic event.

**F**or a sport that has never seen a city government hand over billions of taxpayer dollars to build a venue, bocce has some serious staying power.

The first recorded drawings of men throwing balls... well, round rocks, anyway... at targets have been dated as far back as 5200 B.C. in Egypt. Early versions of the game spread through Greece and then Rome in the years of the Roman Empire. The Romans brought coconuts back from Africa for bowling events... arguably the first recorded instance of coconut migration.

In the days before Abner Doubleday, the game of balls enjoyed quite a bit of popularity. Even celebrities of their day like Hippocrates and Galileo were known to sing the game's praises. There was no restricting factor like social status; anyone with round rocks could play, and so they did.

Much like Elvis, for a time the game was

## Start Your Own Bocce League

Unlike in fantasy sports, where you're leaving your success in the hands of athletes that have bad days, in a bocce league you have control of your destiny. Major League Bocce enables players with the right amount of "social stamina" to set up their own league. League owners can create a website, post scores and standings, and even activate a system to collect dues. As one league owner said, "If you can use Facebook, you can run your own league with Major League Bocce."



The league FAQ lists some tips on setting up your own tournament play, including the equipment you'll need to set up a court, where to find the best place to play, the number of people in a typical league and a recommended season length. If you need to know more, the folks at the website are glad to help.

And if you're a bar owner in South Jersey who'd like to bring in some bocce players, give Sarah DeLucas a shout. "I really want to try and get something going in New Jersey; I looked last fall at the Collingswood/Haddon Heights area, but we just weren't able to get it off the ground. It would be spectacular if someone came to me," she laughs.

The league website is [www.majorleaguebocce.com](http://www.majorleaguebocce.com).



Kamali Brooks and Martine Pelletier, the Major League Bocce employees who set up the courts.

even seen as a threat to society. It had become so popular that nations began to worry that it was weakening their armies... the appeal of throwing balls drew participants away from military exercises like archery practice. Even the Catholic Church frowned on it, citing it as a form of gambling that could interfere with Bingo nights.

But the game was kept alive in Great Britain; there is a legend that Sir Francis Drake once refused to face the Spanish Armada until after

a game was finished. Later, Giuseppe Garibaldi, among his many accomplishments upon unifying Italy, popularized the sport as we know it today. Its growth eventually led to the game being brought to the U.S. by Italian immigrants. The name "bocce" is the plural of the Italian "boccia," meaning bowl, as a verb.

According to the United States Bocce Federation, there are 25 million bocce enthusiasts in America today. That might be a stretch, but the sport has definitely grown outside of the Italian-American community, the rapidly growing popularity of Major League Bocce being just one example.

**F**rom its humble beginnings in a Washington hurricane party, Major League Bocce is now in ten cities; other than in D.C., it's growing fastest in Philadelphia and Boston. There were 1,500 participants in the Philadelphia division in 2015; Preston estimates that 60% of them are returning customers, a number she is confident will grow even larger. "We're always testing out different things, trying to see what is the most attractive for people," Preston says.

That expansion took place in just two years, from 2012 to 2014. "We spent 2015 playing catch up," Preston laughs...and now there are plans to reach out to the West Coast.

Players can sign up any time. Each season of the year features a season of bocce. During the spring and summer in Philly, it's played outdoors at places like Cavanaugh's River Deck or



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in Dilworth Park; in the fall and winter the crew sets up indoors at the Field House or Cavanaugh's Headhouse in Center City. Each season consists of six weeks of regular season play, followed by two weeks of bracket-style elimination playoffs.

Like the owners say, it's easy to set up anywhere, and there's always a place to roll and enjoy an adult beverage afterward with fellow bocce enthusiasts.



Bocce Night at the Field House in Philly

Drinking establishment partners love the mutual benefit too...simply dedicating a space for a bocce court brings in a dedicated group of customers for eight weeks. Beer brands have gotten into the act as well. Dogfish Head is now a major sponsor with the Philly group, making swag prizes another incentive for players.

And it all happened because some Washington natives took their kick-ball too seriously.

Preston and DeLucas have quit working for the man and are now full time co-owners of Major League Bocce. It's been stressful, DeLucas admits, but both are really proud of the growth and success in other cities. It's doubtful that either of them ever dreamed that finding the ideal fraternizing sport would turn into full time employment. The two have become successful entrepreneurs just through wanting to have a good time with friends.

For centuries, the game of balls has had a way of hooking people like that. ■

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