

## meet your neighbors

By Jonathan Pappalardo Photos By Katherine Jackson

Great Island  
Pickle Ball  
Group



Gail and Frank  
Sakata

Blake  
Cruckshank

# PICKLEBALL

## hits Great Island

The numbers are staggering: 2,500,000. That's the approximate number of people playing Pickleball in the United States as of 2015, according to the Sports and Fitness Industry Association. Those numbers have grown from approximately 100,000 players just five years earlier. It's no wonder the SFIA now recognizes Pickleball as the fastest growing sport in America.

### What is pickleball?

According to the United States America Pickleball Association, the sport will celebrate its 53rd anniversary this year. The game was invented in 1965 on Bainbridge Island, a short ferry ride from Seattle, by three dads — Joel Pritchard, Bill Bell, and Barney McCallum — whose children were bored with their usual summertime activities. They gave their kids rackets and a ball and told them to go to a tennis court and have some fun.

Although those kids were essentially the first people to play the sport, the adults quickly took over and have remained the sport's main constituency to this day. Pickleball is a paddle sport, combining elements of tennis, badminton, and ping-pong, and is played with an acrylic paddle and a small plastic ball on a 20' x 44' court for both singles and doubles. According to USAPA, "the net is hung at 36" at the ends and hangs 34" in the middle. A non-volley zone extends seven feet back from the net on each side, commonly called 'the kitchen.'" The name is said to have come from Joel's Cocker Spaniel Pickles, who loved to chase balls and hide them in the woods.

### Pickleball comes to Great Island

Blake Cruckshank is responsible for the pickleball fever that has swept through Great Island. He introduced the sport to the community three years ago, after picking it up in an hour at the suggestion of a friend. "I was on the tennis courts one day with a friend of mine, he said, you ever play pickleball? He showed me and I just took it up. From there, I got some other people and said you have to try this."

According to Blake, pickleball is played in Great Island most days, although he says it's not difficult to find people to get a game going mid-week at a moment's notice. He says the social aspect of the game is huge, with players often teasing one another during the average 20 minutes of gameplay and ladies 82-years-old and older are out there playing pickleball, often better than people much younger than them.

In Great Island, pickleball does have its limitations. The courts are outdoors, which prohibit play during the colder months, which can begin as early as September, and during inclement

weather. Players have taken to playing in Kingston, where there are indoor courts, and the game schedule is far more organized.

### Pickleball as a competitive sport

Amongst the players in Great Island, pickleball has become far more than a way to pass the time on a Saturday morning. It's grown extremely competitive, with players signing up to compete in tournaments, where they often do very well.

Great Island residents Gail and Frank Sakata were avid tennis players for 25 years when they discovered pickleball through Blake. They quickly took up the sport and put their tennis rackets in the closet for good. Gail and Frank enjoy the social aspect of the game, they play in both Kingston and Great Island, and find what pickleball has afforded them in the past few years to be very rewarding.

With their background in tennis and the ease with which they picked up pickleball, Gail and Frank had the courage to enter into competition. They've entered into tournaments in both Massachusetts and Connecticut, including the Nutmeg State Games in Middletown, CT. The tournaments in Connecticut are open to all players, mixed and doubles. Gail and Frank have both won gold medals in various competitions, with Gail winning in ladies doubles and Frank winning in mixed doubles for his age group.

### Pickleball for all

For those interested in taking up pickleball, lessons are available at the Village Racquet and Fitness Club on the tennis courts at different times of the day. It was there that Nancy Corson first took up the sport. "I heard that pickleball was a fun game, so

I took lessons at the Racquet Club where I learned the rules including how to score. Here at Great Island, several advanced players have gone out of their way to help me improve my game for which I am very grateful. One could say I have become addicted to pickleball."

Donna Weidner was diagnosed with endometrial cancer in 2015, went through surgery and radiation, and had to have chemotherapy a year later before entering into an immunotherapy trial only to find one of her tumors kept growing. During this time her husband, Kerry, had been playing pickleball and now that she's stable, she has taken up the sport herself, in just the past few months. Donna plays pickleball for the enjoyment of it, three days a week. Like Nancy, she says advanced players have helped her improve her game.

### Everyone is encouraged to play pickleball

It's evident from talking to the residents, that a major benefit of playing pickleball, apart from the social aspect and tournaments, is the lack of stress the game puts on joints. Frank says there's no worry of Tennis Elbow or other such conditions when playing the sport. Blake, who suffered from Prostate Cancer and the effects of treatments while getting pickleball off the ground in Great Island, says the court is much smaller than ones used for tennis, so players don't do as much running during gameplay.

It's also simple to find courts wherever you may be, like on vacation, with a simple Google search. But at the end of the day, the game is all about enjoyment. "It's fun, low cost, and doesn't take a lot of time," said Frank. "There's always players. It's social, there's team spirit and it helps to keep yourself active and moving."