

Rye Brook welcomes pickleball to the village

BY JAMIE KERNER

Pickleball, often referred to as America's fastest growing sport, has made its way to Rye Brook, all at the hand, or paddle, or Ashok Pahwa.

Pickleball is a low-impact paddle sport played on a badminton size court with a solid paddle, a ball slightly smaller than a Wiffle Ball and a net similar to one used for tennis. The rules resemble that of other paddle and racket sports in some sense; however, they are also modified and amended to individualize the sport. The game can be played with two to four players on either an indoor or outdoor court.

From squash to racquetball, tennis, badminton and pingpong, Pahwa had played racket sports throughout his life. However, when life got in the way, the Deer Run resident had to abandon such activities in the best interest of taking care of his body. In search of an easier sport, he was introduced to pickleball and began playing six months ago at the Eastern Greenwich Civic Center in Old Greenwich, Conn., as he could not find a place to play in Westchester.

"I thought I'd just go and try it out one day and I got hooked and played practically every day for three months," Pahwa said, adding that his newfound love for the sport was the foundation for his mission to bring pickleball to Rye Brook.

He approached the Village of Rye Brook's Recreation Department at an advisory board meeting in early March with the idea, and they were very interested, according to Pahwa.

"They were intrigued in being able to offer something for adults," Pahwa said. "A lot of what they do right now is Little League and minor league and it's aimed at children, which is great, but they thought there was a gap for adults and this fit that need."

Within the last month, Pahwa and the Recreation Department worked together to host a pickleball demonstration and a clinic at Rye Hills Park.

The demonstration was held during Rye Brook's birthday celebration on June 16. Rye Brook residents and attendees were introduced to the sport and had the opportunity to see how it is played. Additionally, a pickleball racket, courtesy of Gamma Pickleball, was raffled off and won by Hidden Pond Drive resident Frederick R. Shulman. The clinic was held a week later on June 23, and Rye Brook residents and neighboring community members in attendance learned the basic rules and procedures of the sport before then getting the opportunity to play for themselves. According to Pahwa, 26 people attended the clinic, and the demonstration saw a similar attendance. Due to continued resident interest in the sport, Rye Brook Recreation is working to offer a pickleball program starting this fall. Parks and Recreation Superintendent Robert Bertolacci said the village will be providing the forum for pickleball, though the details have not yet been ironed out.

"Right now we are studying the demand for such a program," Bertolacci said in an email. "In the fall, we will be offering an instructional program and have the court available for free play on the other days."

The demonstration and clinic were both free public events and even provided players free use of pickleball equipment, all of which was donated to Rye Brook's pickleball efforts. According to Pahwa, they received over \$1,000 worth of donated pickleball equipment.



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USAPA ambassador Betsy Underhill (right) watches Elm Hill Drive resident Leslee Albalah serve the ball at the pickleball clinic at Rye Hills Park on June 23.

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"We had no equipment, so I talked about the idea with Mel Siegel who has owned and operated Sportech at Rye Ridge Plaza for over 25 years," Pahwa said. "He rose to the occasion and got Gamma Sports and Wilson Sporting Goods to donate equipment to us."

Just like Pahwa, when Betsy Underhill, a USA Pickleball Association (USAPA) ambassador who led the June 23 participatory clinic, first began playing pickleball, she immediately got hooked.

"It is just a game that kind of ropes you in," Underhill said. "It's so much fun, it's so social."

As a USAPA ambassador, Underhill works to promote pickleball, welcome people into the sport and help keep it growing. In addition, the Greenwich, Conn. resident works to help connect

pickleball players visiting from out of state with courts, facilities and venues to play at in the area.

Pahwa, a sales and marketing professional, utilized technology and digital marketing to spread the word about pickleball in Rye Brook.

"I created and distributed Press Releases; posted on Facebook, Tweeted, Posted on online Pickleball forums," Pahwa said in an email. "Mel emailed people on his list. Robert mentioned Pickleball in a post card his [department] mailed out. Many retailers in Rye Ridge Plaza posted our flyer in-store."

Pahwa also said that Underhill was a big help, as she shared information about the initiatives to bring pickleball to Rye Brook with a list of people in the area who are interested in the sport.

To allow community members to continue playing pickleball past the participatory clinic, Pahwa brings the equipment to Rye Hills Park

from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. every weekday morning and from 10 a.m. to noon every weekend morning. According to Pahwa, these games see an average attendance of 10 players on weekdays and 20 to 25 players on weekends.

The games are played on the park's basketball court, with the outline of the pickleball court marked out with heavy duty masking tape. The Parks and Recreation Department has also put up a fence around the court to keep balls from flying away. Players are asked to park their cars at Crawford Park and walk to the courts at Rye Hills Park, which are about 150 feet south of the Crawford mansion.

For more information, contact RyeBrookPickleball@gmail.com.



Hidden Pond Drive resident Frederick R. Shulman (left) and USAPA ambassador Betsy Underhill smile with a Gamma Pickleball racket at the June 23 pickleball clinic. Shulman won the racket at the pickleball demonstration during the Rye Brook Birthday celebration on June 16.

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