Playing pétanque: French pastime requires skill, concentration, and a little bit of wine

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TSSSSST! Beer cans are cracking open, laughter is echoing through the trees and the French language is escaping the lips of participants gathered around the pétanque courts of Lafayette’s Girard Park.

Last weekend, March 9-11, was the 10th Annual International Lafayette Pétanque Tournament. Every year the tournament beckons pétanque players, ranging from beginners to the most prestigious. Some traveled from France, others from a much closer address. Despite whether they traveled by plane, foot or car, the total mileage doesn’t seem to impact the bond they all share.

“This is the first year I’m going to say this,” said Mike LeBlanc, the organizer of the tournament, as he laughed. “No trash talking!”

The yearly partakers all laughed and snapped back at LeBlanc like a group of 30-something siblings.

“No trash talking?”
“I want my money back!”

The unity of their laughs seemed almost melodic, as if they were all connected by something deeper than just the game of pétanque. Whether someone had been coming for years, or they were a first-timer, there was no grandiloquence and no tension, just love for each other and their beloved game.

Although the pétanque tournament would usually begin the Saturday morning after a fun-filled Friday night to open the event, the rain decided to postpone the tournament until Sunday.

Even after a rain-filled Saturday, the pétanque enthusiasts arrived to the park at 8:30 a.m., like children on Christmas morning. As the competitors began warming up, Rudy Vallée, a member of the Nelson Ranch Pétanque Club in Austin, Texas, passed around his enticing homemade rum cake.

The first tournament was initiated in 2009 by Colin Castille, a Lafayette denizen, who is also recognized as the man behind the pétanque court construction in Girard Park.

“My wife is from France and she introduced me to the game,” Castille said. “You need a court to play and I didn’t have any room in my yard to put a court. So I asked Girard Park if I could build the courts here, and they said yes. So I built the courts, but nobody would play. There was nobody playing because nobody knew the game. It was just me out here.”

That’s when Castille decided to have a tournament to draw more people to the game and his court.

“I really didn’t even know the exact rules when I wanted to start the tournament,” he admitted. “So I emailed Obut, the company that makes the pétanque playing balls, and said ‘Can you give me the rules? I’m having a tournament.”

After Castille reached out to Obut, the company responded and said it would send someone to Lafayette to help him run the tournament. Obut didn’t send just anyone, however, it sent 12-time world champion, Bernard Champery.

“I talked to this man on the phone who was going to come and he asked if he could stay at my house and I said yes,” Castille continued. “So he comes and we became really good friends. I called Obut again and said, ‘Hey thanks so much for sending that guy. He’s really nice, and man, he is an unbelievable player.’ And the guy at Obut said, ‘Well he was the world champion for 12 years.’ But he never once mentioned that to me.”

After Champery taught Castille the ropes of running an efficient tournament, the attendance the following years grew steadily.

Five oak trees surround the court made of crushed granite mixed with clay and slathered over pea gravel, surrounded by rot-treated lumber that makes up the perimeter of the playing courts.

Castille explained the game as “very similar to Bacci.” The baseball-sized metal balls weigh roughly one to one and a half pounds, and the target, called the cochonet or “piglet” in French, is between 12 and 30 feet away. The goal is to throw the ball as close to the cochonet as possible, getting closer than your opponent.

“Now, if your opponent throws the ball and it’s on the cochonet, you have no other option than to move his ball out of the way,” Castille said. “That’s what Bernard is the best at. He can hit a mosquito 50 yards away. I mean, the guy is incredible. I don’t know how he does it.”

The players’ fingers wrap around the steel ball and their eyes lock in on the target. They bend their knees, as they swing back their arm. The crowd is silent, as the ball is released from a player’s hand and travels toward the target on the crushed granite court.

“You can play in flip flops and (with) a beer in your hand,” said Deborah Amy, the tournament’s registrar.

Thierry Amisse, a member of the French Legation Club from Austin, however, seems to take it a little further than that. Standing barefoot on the crushed granite court, wearing a pair of traditional auubin pétanque pants, Amisse seems to have a savoir faire like no other.

As Amisse prepares to throw out his chrome boule, he slowly bends his knees, lowering his chest toward them. His right arm, holding the boule, slowly travels backward while his left arm moves up laterally, with his wrist facing the granite and his fingers pointed toward the shady oaks, resembling a karate move.

“It’s 30 percent skill, 30 percent is concentration and the other 30 percent is technique,” said Amisse.

And for the remaining 10 percent?
“Oh, that’s used to drink wine,” responded Amisse, as he raised his eyebrows.

Although the contestants had their game-faces on during the midst of the competition, the milieu of the tournament exuded magnanimity. When the final games came to an end, players embraced and congratulated each other on giving their best effort.

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Pétanque is an extremely interesting sport, however, it is not the sport itself that makes the tournament so interesting, but the people.

“Pétanque is like heroin,” said Michael Barney, a professional bagpipe player. “After you play one time, that’s it. You’re hooked. It’s a crippling addiction.”

Editor’s note: The interviews for this story were conducted in 2017.

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