



SPORTS

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Petanque Power

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In 2005, Ahwahnee resident John Harris was looking for something to do in his spare time, and that quest led him to the Positive Living Center.

“It was there I ran into some old friends I hadn’t seen for many years,” Harris said. “I mentioned I was considering some type of community service and one of my old friends said I should consider a great sport ... one I probably have never heard of ... Petanque.”

John and his wife Tish, both 55, showed up the next week at the Oakhurst Petanque Club and were ‘instantly hooked.’ And 12 years later he’s more than hooked - representing the United States in the doubles competition against 40 other teams at the World Petanque Championships in Ghent, Belgium, April 13-16.

John, who moved to Oakhurst to work for Sierra On-Line in 1981, still designs videogames today when he’s not playing Petanque. Tish keeps busy “flipping houses.”

A form of lawn bowling or bocce ball, the game originated in the early 1900s in La Ciotat, in Provence, France. Petanque is usually played on rough ground where the goal is to toss or roll hollow steel balls as close as possible to a small wooden ball while standing inside a circle with both feet on the ground.

The object of the game is to score points by rolling your ball closer to the target than your opponent. The team or individual to reach 13 points first, wins. Because the game is played on rougher and more irregular ground, an element of the game is “reading the terrain,” much like reading a green in golf.

John found the game a perfect fit for him, and both John and Tish quickly moved from casual, recreational players to two of the better players in the country.

“Petanque has been very therapeutic for me, in ways I couldn’t have guessed ... not only was I the last kid picked for sports teams in school, but they would argue over it - We had him last time, you have to take him this time,” laughed John.

John credits his ‘muscle memory’ for being a big part of his success. “I feel training your body to repeat the same motion consistently without thinking about it is key.”

“We were kind of naturals at the sport from the start,” Tish said. “Having good hand-eye coordination also helps.”

World Championships

Some of John’s old schoolyard friends might be surprised to hear he is representing the United States in a World Championship sporting event.

He was selected to the team after winning the national title outside Orlando in November where 24 men's teams competed in a two-day tournament. In Belgium, he will play in the men's doubles contest with partner Peter Mathis of Sonoma, and in the mixed-doubles competition with partner Shannon Hodge from Zanesfield, Ohio.

"I know we are not at the level of some of the players in the tournament who have been playing the game since they were children," John said. "But we hope to win some games and gain a lot of experience and have a good time. It's an honor to represent our country at this event."

Tish, who will compete with Team USA in the Women's World Competition (as an alternate) in a yet to be announced city later this year, is with John in Belgium for support as his No. 1 cheerleader and will also videotape the games.

John and Tish have won numerous regional and national titles over the years - Tish went to Thailand in 2015 with the USA Women's National team.

No one is prouder of John and Tish than George Lewis, president of the Oakhurst Petanque Club.

"John and Tish made a major commitment a couple years ago to become two of the best Petanque players in the country in order to have the opportunity to represent the United States in international competitions," Lewis said. "As a friend, supporter, and interested observer, I can vouch for the fact that they have trained numerous hours and have traveled many miles in order to obtain this goal."

A movement by international Petanque players and organizations is underway to have Petanque included in the 2024 Olympic Games.

Oakhurst Club formed in 1999

According to Lewis, the Oakhurst club was born during a French-themed picnic hosted by Jan and Kathleen Claire, who wanted to introduce the game to Oakhurst.

"The picnic was held on June 4, 1999, in their back yard in Oakhurst," Lewis recalls. "The picnic was attended by 65 artists, all friends of the Claires, who, along with their spouses, were not only treated to a French 'day in the country,' but, for added atmosphere the hosts invited members of the Los Angeles Petanque Club to come show all the attendees how to play. They were so good and they brought out the true fun of playing the game that the Oakhurst club formed spontaneously from the sheer joy of that event. We were astounded that we could quickly learn the basics of the game and make some pretty good shots that first day. On Sept. 26, 1999, the Oakhurst Group had a meeting at a local restaurant, electing officers, adopting bylaws and formally creating Oakhurst Petanque Club."

Since the beginning, the Oakhurst club has had an average of 40 to 50 members, but Lewis noted membership is currently on a downward trend with about 25 active members.

"Many of our members are getting older, so some have moved away to be with family and some of our members have had health issues," Lewis said. "We are always looking for new members, especially younger ones. The cost of membership is just \$25 per year."

The club's facility is adjacent to the Boys and Girls Club, however, the February flooding has halted play there until the facility can be repaired. Club members are currently playing in the parking lot of the First Baptist Church on School Road adjacent to Oakhurst Elementary School.

"We encourage both young and old members of the Mountain Area to come out and lean the sport of Petanque," Tish said. "Anyone can learn the sport and start playing within minutes. It's a fun game and you don't have to be a great athlete to enjoy the game and have some fun - our Oakhurst club is very social and its like family."

Details: Oakhurst Petanque Club, George Lewis, (559) 676-2145, glewis55@sti.net, www.oakhurstpetanqueclub.org, www.usapetanque.org.



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