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WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT?

She Wants to Win at Pétanque More Than You Want to Win at Anything

For one California player, the French game similar to bocce and lawn bowling is more obsession than leisure activity

By *Jen Murphy*

July 14, 2019

Janice Bissonette realized her obsession with pétanque had reached a new level when she started practicing her throw-and-release motion while walking her two schnauzers. “The neighbors think I’m over-friendly, crazily waving as I go around the block,” she says.

Native to France, pétanque is similar to British lawn bowling and the Italian game of bocce. The object of all three games is the same: to land as many of your balls as close as possible to a target. In pétanque, the balls are metal and tossed palm down. A flick of the wrist on the release of the toss gives the boule, as the ball is called, a slight backspin. Ms. Bissonette says the only way to master it is by building muscle memory.

This is not a casual activity for her. “One of the biggest misnomers is that this is a lazy sport for old people,” she says. “It might look inactive, but I can do up to 100 squats a game and log 10,000 steps over the course of a tournament. Anyone can learn to play, but it takes training to master.”

She first learned of the game while attending a picnic with her husband, Paul Bissonette, in 2009. The Fresno, Calif.-based couple started playing socially before friends introduced them to the sport’s competitive side. They began practicing with a local club and in 2012, Ms. Bissonette entered her first competition and medaled. “I was hooked,” she says. “I started watching YouTube

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videos of famous French players like Julien Lamour and Bruno Le Boursicaud to improve my technique.”



Ms. Bissonette shoots her boule. PHOTO: NICK GONZALES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

A part-time CPA, Ms. Bissonette, 53, serves as president of the Fresno Pétanque Club and national sport director of Federation of Pétanque USA, which has about 2,000 members. The U.S. competition season typically runs from mid-March through October. On average, Ms. Bissonette plays

in 20 tournaments per season around the country.

The game can be played as singles, doubles or triples. She occasionally competes in doubles with her husband. “He’s not as into it as I am,” she says. “It’s really my passion.” Last year she nearly earned a spot at the World Championships, finishing second in the national qualifier tournament.



Ms. Bissonette, in red, and other club members survey the terrain during a game. PHOTO: NICK GONZALES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Workout

Ms. Bissonette practices pétanque two to three hours a day, five to six days a week with her local club. She starts with 30 minutes of tossing warm-ups and plays a minimum of three



Ms. Bissonette serves as president of the Fresno Pétanque Club and competes on the national circuit. PHOTO: NICK GONZALES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

pair of Brash walking shoes. Her yoga studio charges \$17 per drop-in.

The Playlist

When she runs, her playlist includes Santana, Pearl Jam, AC/DC, Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin and Maroon 5.



Pétanque might look easy, but Ms. Bissonette can perform up to 100 squats during a game. PHOTO: NICK GONZALES FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

How to Up Your Pétanque Game

Pétanque comes from the French term *pieds tanqués*, which loosely translates to feet tied together. Unlike in similar sports, both feet must remain on the ground in a designated circle as players try to throw the boules at a target ball that sits between 20 and 33 feet away. The boule

thrown closest to the target scores a point. Most games are played to 13 points. The metal balls are about the size of an orange and weigh around 1.5 pounds.

“You don’t squeeze it with your fingertips like you do in baseball, you cradle it with your fingers so it doesn’t touch the palm and you don’t use your thumb,” says Dan Feaster, the Copalis Beach, Wash.-based president of Federation of Pétanque USA.

Players throw the ball palm down. “The real nuance is in the hand and wrist,” Mr. Feaster says. “The arm comes forward, and as it does the wrist flicks to create an arch in the throw,” he says. “I teach people to look at your manicure at the end of your throw so you follow through.” When you toss, he says, don’t aim for where you want the ball to go, but where you want it to land. “In your mind, draw a picture of the shot and where it will land and roll,” he says.

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Corrections & Amplifications

Janis Joplin is among the artists that Janice Bissonette listens to. An earlier version of this article incorrectly spelled Ms. Joplin’s first name. (July 15, 2019)

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