



Reflections of a River Rat:

Is an evening of pickleball
a concession to older age?

I'm beginning to feel like I've been accosted by Sam-I-Am at a pickleball court. The aging athlete, the prideful 65-year-old basketball player who competes regularly against 40-somethings, is resisting.

"Not in a box. Not with a fox."

"Not in a house. Not with a mouse."

"I would not play it here or there."

"I would not play it anywhere."

"I would not play pickleball."

"I do not like it, Sam-I-Am."

But I'm wavering. Or is fluctuating? Perhaps vacillating?

Pickleball, we "serious" hoopsters have contended, is for old folks, the ones that would circle our basketball court like vultures with paddles, waiting for our morning game to end so they could erect their nets and begin dinking.

“If you shoot any worse,” my buddy Randy Lockhart occasionally wisecracked, “you can always join the pickleball game.”



Randy Lockhart

There was nothing subtle about that barb. It was usually followed by something about a quad cane or needing Velcro rather than shoelaces. It wasn't directly mocking pickleball players; it was intended as needling among friends.

My pickleball indecision started innocently enough. I made a rare joint appearance at the local YMCA with my basketball widow, Mary. It was unusual because she is left to exercise alone while I'm out reffing basketball four nights a week. I started my shooting routine; she wandered off to her exercise workout.

My half of the court was a sea of teenagers because pickleball nets were clogging the other side. Annoying. Then Mary reappeared five minutes later to ask if I would play doubles with two of her friends.

Sure, I thought. I reasoned that we'd have to start this shared exercise thing in a couple of years when she retires. This would be our third attempt at pickleball, but the baggage was affixed to my memory like a Titanic lifeline.

We first tried it seven or eight years ago in Florida at the behest of our former neighbors. Stevie Wonder had a better chance of returning a serve. Our paddles flailed enough to usher in a cold front.

Our second attempt came in Reading, Pa., with our daughter and son-in-law. Mary slipped and fell on her behind; I fanned hard enough on a return attempt to tweak my shoulder. It led to a couple of weeks of misery. We agreed to leave the kitchens to verbose jerks like Gordon Ramsay.

Kitchen? Is that where the pickles come from? Nope, it's a reference to pickle boats in the sport of crew whereby the spare rowers are drafted to fill out a pickle boat. It fits with pickleball inventor Joel Pritchard gathering some ping-pong paddles and plastic balls to invent the game for his children on Bainbridge Island, Wash., in 1965. Pritchard's invention, America's fastest-growing sport, is now played by 5 million people.

Ogdensburg's pickleball scene is thriving, with plans to build courts at Morrisette Park amid a Greenbelt renovation. Wadhams Hall has space inside its gym, but the indoor hub remains Washington Elementary School apartment complex. On most days, three or four groups have filled the timeslots from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. The adult education program at OFA uses the small gym in the summer and fall, accommodating snowbirds before they return to their games in warmer climes.



Ogdensburg players Debbie McDonald, left, and Jen Pickman celebrate a runnerup finish at a local pickleball tournament.

pickled myself.”

“I’ll admit I was skeptical when I first played until a former women’s USA team tennis player that lives in my community smashed the pickleball and hit me in my gherkins after a brutal battle at the net. I sang falsetto for a few days.”

Many players arrange matches through a pickleball planning site --

<https://playtimescheduler.com/login.php> -- and Ogdensburg Pickleball Forum and North Country Pickleball Club maintain Facebook pages.

Its growing popularity aside, pickleball seemed like a concession to age until I started watching my daughter, Claire, and son-in-law, Brian, play in an indoor singles tournament. This wasn’t the YMCA group with middle-aged paunches and knee braces. This was the real deal.

On a 95-degree day, the Hershey, Pa., tennis facility lacked air conditioning. The wall thermometer climbed to 85 degrees and the humidity was oppressive. Heck, you sweated just by watching. They clawed their way to the semifinals but leg cramps became an issue. The eventual champions benefitted from tennis backgrounds, knowing how to set up opponents, then rifle passing shots down the lines. Impressive.

Lockhart, king of the one-liner, has been hooked by the game in Florida. He said he canned the barbs because his opponents carry paddles.

“I play down here 2-3 times a week! Does that mean I lose my man card? I proudly say that I have pickled a team (won a skunking—11-0) and never been



Randy and Beth Lockhart have become hooked since moving to North Fort Myers, Fla.

Our third attempt left me teetering on acceptance. We started to learn the service order. We violated the two-bounce rule. We whiffed on several shots. We hit a few winners. We emerged with some respect for the game.

This was a workout, not the 2.5-mile run of the morning hoops game and the bruises from post play, but there was plenty of movement and a competitive element. The basketball and golf clubs will stay in the truck, but maybe I'll find room for a paddle. I'm wavering.

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