

From The Picklehood July, 2022

It Takes A Village.....

I was part of a conversation two weeks ago that prompted me to write this month's column on the 'start of pickleball on Kaua'i.' Another local player and I were in a conversation with a first time visiting couple. In that conversation, they paraphrased a story about the history of pickleball on Kaua'i. All positive, but not very accurate. If you are a local player and have been playing for a while, you probably know the real story. Well most of it anyway. I felt, after the conversation, that with our outstanding Pickleball Association Kaua'i website, it might be worthwhile to devote this month's entry to the 'real story.' The PAK website is getting a lot of traffic from visitors as well as locals and our origins involve people who too often are not recognized. Besides, it's a good story.....

In the late fall of 2014, my wife Stephanie and I decided it was time to move to Hawaii. For me, it meant coming home. We looked at Oahu (where I grew up), the Kona area of the Big Island (Some family ties there) and Kaua'i (my mother's birthplace). We spent time on each island in December, 2014. The Big Island proved enticing, but we decided on Kaua'i and returned home to the Central Coast of California. Our house went up for sale (sold in three days). We agreed on a short escrow. Packed up our belongings (the buyers wanted our furniture) and with the help of our Paso Robles pickleball friends, packed up a 20 foot Matson container. In that container we placed six portable nets, 24 paddles and ten dozen pickleballs. Note: I was the volunteer District Pickleball Ambassador for the California Central Coast and hauled these tools of the trade from Santa Maria (south of Paso Robles) to King City (north) introducing pickleball. I loved it. You'll have to go to Central Coast pickleball websites to learn their stories and the small part I played. Anyway, the gear was ours and it was coming to Kaua'i to share with soon to be made pickleball friends. Did I mention the gear went in the container first?

The real story starts on January 15, 2015. Stephanie and I were flying to Kauai'i by way of Maui. At the time, this was a Hawaiian Airlines common route. We were sitting in the waiting area at Kahului Airport. A few seats away, we observed a man with a tennis racket on his lap. Jokingly, I said "if you played pickleball, you could pack your racket in your carry on." I said racket, not paddle. Didn't want to confuse him. Princeville tennis player Fran Graziano replied, what is pickleball? Gotcha!! He looked confused, but interested. We talked, exchanged numbers and first contact had been made. Three months later, Fran and some friends would represent the North Shore at our first ever Kaua'i pickleball clinic. Seven years later he still plays in Princeville and Kalaheo. And, I might add, he packs his paddle whenever traveling.

The story continues with the start of our Picklehood. As mentioned above, we arrived. Settled into a Poipu condo rental as we looked for our Kaua'i home (it took a year). Pickleball equipment unpacked, I started venturing over to Knudsen Park on occasion and chalked out a pickleball court on one of the tennis courts. This was February, 2015. I would hang a 3' x 5' United States Pickleball Association sign on the chain link fence facing the drive-by road. I would rally against the backboard and practice serving. If lucky, mainland visitors who knew pickleball, would see the sign, stop and hit around a bit with one of our loaner paddles. Locals sometimes did the same. Our 'original five' Koloa players (Mike Folster-Kekaha; Bob Russo-New Jersey; Dick Furtado-Truckee, CA; Geoff Sheldon-Kalaheo; and yours truly) met a couple of times a week in the morning. We had some fun games. Four of the five still play regularly. Geoff passed away in 2017. Guess we could claim the occasional discussions about play and rules constituted our island's first informal set of clinics.

Things changed April 1, 2015. But first, the lead-in.....after six weeks of pickleball play on the Koloa courts, it was time to make connections with County Parks and Recreation. In late March, 2015, I walked into the Recreation Department office in Lihue and asked if I could speak to someone about introducing pickleball to

Kaua'i. I still remember Melanie Okamoto's exact words after welcoming me into her office. "It's funny you should ask. A few of us just returned from a sports symposium on Oahu and one of the sports introduced was pickleball. We were intrigued and were just waiting for someone to help teach the game. What do you need?" Less than two weeks later, April 1, 2015, pickleball was officially introduced to Kaua'i. We had close to 100 interested participants, including firefighters from Lihue and Kalaheo. By mid-April, we were playing twice a week in the gym at the Kalaheo Neighborhood Center. Twenty two players attended that first day of play. Fifteen still play seven years later. Of the 100+ players at that first demonstration clinic, I believe close to 70% still play.

So Let's Give Credit Where Credit Is Due.....

Note: Apologies to anyone I have left off the following list. You are greatly appreciated. I struggle regularly just remembering the pickleball game score.....

.....Thanks Fran. You were the first to talk 'pickleball' story with me.

.....Thank you Melanie Okamoto and the County of Kaua'i. It's been a long and worthwhile journey.

.....Our Kaua'i volunteer ambassadors do a wonderful job. Ted Steinberg (Princeville) was our first USA Pickleball Ambassador. He stepped down in 2018. Ted still plays.

.....Lucia Bartels (Westside—Hanapepe/Kekaha) is currently our longest serving USA Ambassador.

.....Our current island USA Pickleball Ambassadors are Nolan Ahn (Lihue); Mike Wellman (KCF/Poipu) and Lucia Bartels (Westside Kaua'i). All continue to do excellent work. We are blessed.

.....Roxie and Scotty Vidinha assist Lucia at the Hanapepe venue. They are not officially ambassadors, but should be!!

.....Mario Hendrickson was Kapaa's first ambassador. He handled pickleball at the old All Saint's Gym. His real job forced him to give up his position in 2017.

.....Diane Treskon has done a wonderful job with pickleball at the Kapaa Sports Complex courts. Not an official ambassador. Someone convince her!!

.....Former ambassadors Carol and Don Kolenda handled the Poipu area and pickleball play at Kauai Christian Fellowship Church for four years. They relocated to Texas in 2019.

.....Leona Bryant assisted Carol at KCF and took over when Carol and Don moved. Leona passed away in the summer of '21. She is greatly missed.

.....Theresa Della Lana (and husband Dr. David) were Kaua'i's first pickleball paddle reps. Barbara and Mark Howard, Jules and Stephanie Cannon and Brant Fuchigami are also representing pickleball equipment companies. Good for us!! The Della Lanas moved to Santa Rosa in 2018.

.....Did I mention all these ambassadors are/were volunteers?

.....Kaua'i currently has 10 public pickleball venues. An eleventh, now in construction, will be Kaua'i's first permanent dedicated pickleball facility. It will be located in Koloa (Anne Knudsen) Park. Venue completion is projected for the fall of 2022.

.....Pickleball Association Kaua'i (PAK) is also in the planning stages of a second permanent dedicated facility. TBA.

.....Mahalo Nui Dean and Alana Fujikawa. Seven years of creating pickleball medals and awards for our many on-island tournaments.

.....Pickleball friends Eddie Beetschen and Mark Wagner have done so much for the progress of pickleball on Kaua'i. Their support has been invaluable.

.....Our 2018 visitor sign-in register at the Kalaheo Neighborhood Center Gym showed how popular pickleball was for off island visitors. That year, 275+ visitors signed our log. This was just our Kalaheo venue. Guesstimates probably put the number closer to 400 if we include venues from Princeville to Kekaha. Not bad for a little island in the middle of the Pacific.

.....The Pickleball Association Kauai Board deserves a special thank you. Their support, organization and informative website complete Kaua'i's pickleball presence. If you are reading this you can click on the 'Board' link to see the officers.

.....The non-playing family members and friends in our picklehood deserve a special mahalo nui.

.....Same for my wife, playing partner and best friend, Stephanie.

Picklehood....We've All Done Good!

Just prior to my sending this off for publication, I noticed a feel good story worth mentioning. Shows how far this "fun game with the funny name" has progressed.

.....**"The Seattle Mariners are embracing the pickleball movement by hosting 'Pickleball Night' at T-Mobile Park on September 10th. It is a celebration of pickleball becoming the official state sport of Washington.**

Rumor has it that Washington native and #1 ranked men's doubles player, Riley Newman, will be throwing out the first pitch.

The evening includes a free Mariners-themed pickleball shirt. \$2 from each ticket will benefit the Seattle Metro Pickleball Association. Well played Mariners."

Jack Hodges
District Pickleball Ambassador
State of Hawaii