

From The Picklehood

March, 2023

Here in Hawaii we love to ‘talk story.’ Anytime. Anywhere. We share history, ideas, opinions, facts. A great oral tradition. The practice is one of the wonderful social aspects of our pickleball get-togethers. Besides playing, of course. Inherent in this casual conversing is a tendency to—casually—detour from actual facts. Fun talk story sessions can be defined as ‘side eye’ sharing with the intent to entertain and embellish. Innocent, as long as we know the source and are willing to fact check afterwards.

In the past couple months I have heard—first hand—topics related to pickleball being discussed on the courts. Good discussions most of the time. Factual most of the time. Conversations related to rules, scoring, island venues, best pickleballs and paddles, shoes, free on island lessons, drop-in guidelines and the like. When I hear something I know needs to be corrected, I chime in. Usually from an adjacent court or a sideline seat. I eavesdrop because I have this thing about pickleball information being correct. It’s my job. I’m not always right, but I will make sure I say that and hope some of us will look up the facts *ex post facto*.

This leads to my March column. A couple of weeks ago I overheard a conversation about the HISTORY of pickleball. A couple of people, not wanting to appear unknowledgeable about this game they love so much, contributed inaccurate information. I detected ‘side eye’ sharing so I chimed in.

Long story short, I am including the following facts I know to be true. You are free to share in any future discussions about the history of the game.

....Pickleball was introduced in 1965. 58 years ago. In the overheard discussion, the information shared was ‘I heard it started about 20 years ago.’ The others didn’t disagree.

....The game started on Bainbridge Island, Washington in 1965. In the overheard conversation, Arizona was the agreed upon state of origin. Phoenix was the agreed upon city. See what I mean!!

....The game’s inventors were Joel Pritchard, Bill Bell and Barney McCallum. Good to know, but not vital. The three dads came up with the game to create some summer fun for their kids. Pritchard was a Washington state senator.

....The game was not named after the family dog ‘Pickles.’ Pritchard’s wife, Joan, is probably responsible for the name. She was a competitive rower and said that at collegiate races, the last race of the day involved the left over non-starters for each team. The race was affectionately called the ‘pickle boat race.’ She likened the non-starters to people who were not quite good enough to be included in other racket sport groups. People like the urban legend better. Fact is, Pickles did not become a part of the family until 1967...two years later.

....USA Pickleball has a rules committee that reviews ALL rules annually. Changes are frequent and have changed significantly from the early days of pickleball, where the rules makers relied heavily on the game of badminton. An example....you used to be able to straddle the baseline when serving (like badminton). Also, don't confuse Professional Pickleball rules with the amateur game. They are different. Read the amateur rules.

....The first permanent, dedicated pickleball court was constructed on Bainbridge Island in 1967 by a fourth person who helped found the game, Bob O'Brien. In 1976, the first known pickleball tournament was held at South Center Athletic Club in Tukwila, Washington. Most of the participants were college tennis players who knew little about the game. 1984 saw the origin of the United States Amateur Pickleball Association. By 1990, pickleball was being played in all 50 states. In 2001, the game was introduced for the first time in the Senior Olympics. Arizona was the state. 100 players participated. 2009 saw the first National Pickleball Tournament in Buckeye, AZ. 2010 saw the sport become official internationally. In 2022, The Sports and Fitness Industry Association named pickleball the "fastest growing sport in America." Today, there are over 11,000 pickleball venues in just the USA. Worldwide, that number doubles.

....in 2022, the three largest racket sport tournaments in the world were all pickleball tournaments. In November of 2023, the Pickleball National Championships will field more than 3,500 amateur and professional players. No other racket sport tournament comes close in numbers.

....Pickleball ambassadors are volunteers. Not paid. No budget. Countless hours promoting the game. The growth of this game is directly related to their efforts. To date, the U.S. has over 2,000 volunteer ambassadors.

....In 2015, we conducted the first sanctioned Pickleball Tournament in Hawaii. It was the part of Hawaii's Senior Olympics program and was the first time pickleball was included. The location was the Holua Tennis Center in Kona. 58 players entered. Kaua'i Gold medal winners included Judy Honda, Alana Fujikawa and Jack Hodges. Fran Graziano took home Bronze.

....I include this final bit of good information. As the tournament director for the Hawaii Pickleball Senior Olympics in 2015, I brought together all players on day 1 to give instructions for the three day event. After announcements, I asked a series of questions related to how long people in attendance had been playing pickleball. Less than one year?.....about 15 hands went up. One to five years?....about 30. Five to ten years?.... the remainder, I thought. One hand

went up in the back and Laurie Loney, Maui Pickleball Ambassador, shared that she had been playing almost 50 years!! We were stunned. She told us that one of the above mentioned founder dads, Barney McCallum, and friend Bob O'Brien, visited Maui every year, and in the late '60's, they rented a home near the Loneys. Laurie's neighbor and good friend, Megan Crouse, had a paddle tennis court and both McCallum and O'Brien introduced the game to the Crouse's and Laurie's dad, Roger Knox. Laurie, at age 8, began playing the game as well. She has never stopped. Neither has Megan. I don't know of anyone in Hawaii who has played the game 50+ years....and we are blessed with two.

So there you have it. We are all ambassadors and now you have a few checkable pickleball facts and figures you can use....a beginning date; a place of origin; the inventors; the incentive; dispelling a myth; important dates; growth of the game and Hawaii's connection. Maui, by the way, was the first Hawaii island to feature pickleball. Neighborhood play at beautiful Keawakapu Beach, Kihei. The term 'pukaball' (often used instead of pickleball) was coined by Laurie's dad. Puka, in Hawaiian, means holes.

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