

## **HISTORY OF BOCCE**

### **Two Boys in a Drawing**

Bocce is based on one of the oldest diversions known to man—throwing something at a target. In the case of bocce, a small ball called a pallino is thrown onto the court. Players then bowl larger balls toward the pallino to see who can get the closest. A painting of two boys playing a similar type of game was found in an Egyptian tomb and dated to 5200 B.C.

From Egypt the game apparently made its way to Greece and then to Rome. Roman soldiers played a game like bocce during the Punic Wars in the Third Century B.C. In this version of the sport, stones were used instead of balls. Later, the Romans played the game with coconuts they brought back from Africa. Emperor Augustus (31 B.C.-14 A.D.) played the game and became the first in a long line of notable public figures who enjoyed bocce or a closely related type of sport.

### **Quite a Distraction**

Bocce shared a fate common to many games of the Middle Ages—it was banned by both kings and the church. In 1319, Roman Emperor Charles IV outlawed the game because it took people's attention away from military matters. King Carlos of Spain would issue a similar ban. Perhaps they were right. Legend says that English Admiral Sir Frances Drake was playing Bocce when he was told that an attack by the Spanish armada was imminent. His response: "First, we finish the game, then we have time for invincible armada."

Just a few years before Sir Frances supposedly spoke those words, the Republic of Venice had also outlawed bocce in 1576. Those caught playing the game were fined and in some cases sent to prison. The Catholic Church also condemned bocce because it led to gambling. Any game that people find competitive and enjoyable will overcome even official attempts to stop play. Bocce was no exception. It found a following in the streets, alleyways, parks and town squares of Europe, particularly in Italy and France.

### **Just What is Bocce?**

Today's version of bocce has elements of bowling, horseshoes, shuffleboard and billiards. Bocce can be played on nearly any type of surface from grass to asphalt to sand, though officially it's played on packed dirt or gravel. The game requires strategy and accuracy and can be enjoyed by players of all ages and athletic abilities.

A bocce court is 10-13 feet wide and between 60 and 100 feet long. Boards that are four and one-half inches tall surround the court. Two to eight players can compete at a time. The pallino, sometimes called the jack or pig, is rolled onto the court. This ball becomes the target. Players

roll larger balls to see who can come closest to the pallino. Players can move the pallino with their balls or knock opposing balls further away. This is where the strategy comes in.

Throughout history, some notable names have been associated with the game of bocce. Galileo and deVinci reportedly enjoyed the sport, as did Queen Elizabeth and George Washington. Washington is said to have built a bocce court on his Mount Vernon estate in the 1780s.

When famed Italian soldier Giuseppe Garibaldi was not busy fighting battles to unite Italy, he was an avid bocce ball competitor. In his military travels, he took the game with him and introduced it to new parts of the world.

## **An Olympic Dream**

In 1896, a bocce Olympiad competition was held in Athens but it would be the middle of the 20th Century before any type of official organization grew up around the game. The first international bocce organization was formed in 1946. The Federation Internationale de Boules (FIB) started with four member countries: Italy, France, Switzerland and Monaco. Today, 39 nations belong to the FIB. Formal local clubs were first organized around the town of Rivoli, Italy and the first official Italian league was formed in 1947. The first world championships were held that same year in Geneva. Two competing international organizations were started in the 1980s. The Confédération Bouliste Internationale (CBI) was started in 1982 to promote bocce among European clubs that did not use metal balls. The FIB, CBI and a third organization formed to promote the French version of the bocce called petanque were all trying to gain Olympic recognition. The Olympic Committee balked at working with three separate groups, so an umbrella organization was formed in 1985. The Confédération Mondiale Sports Boules (are you keeping all of these names straight?) works solely toward the goal of getting bocce and its related games into the Olympics.

## **Bocce in America**

Italian immigrants brought bocce to the United States and the game was most popular in urban centers that had large Italian-American populations. In the 1970s, the US game had a growth spurt, particularly in California. The Martinez Bocce Federation has 1200 players who play on 14 permanent courts. The game is also popular in RV parks and campgrounds.

In 1976, Chris Gerardo established the United States Bocce Federation. The United States has sent competitors to every world championship since 1977.

Phil Ferrari, a US national singles bocce champion, has formed the World Bocce League to promote the game. According to the WBL, more than two million Americans play bocce regularly and 25 million have tried it at least once. The WBL is working to introduce the game to youth and to disabled veterans. Bocce is already part of the Special Olympics and the World Corporate Games.

The ancient sport of bocce suffers from an image problem. “It conjures up this picture of old Italians with a glass of wine and a stogie,” says Mario Pagnoni. Male octogenarians long held a monopoly on the game because of tradition. “One of the problems was, old Italian men didn’t let women or kids play,” Pagnoni says.

But those days are gone. The sport, which involves rolling the four-inch bocce ball as close as possible to the pallino, a smaller target ball, is now surging in popularity. According to the World Bocce Association, it is ***currently the second most popular participatory sport in the world***—and women are driving the charge. “If you’d asked me 20 years ago, I’d say 5 percent [of players] were women,” says Traci Peters, organizer of the American Bocce Association national championships. “Now I’d have to say it’s 50-50.” Players are also getting younger. Though the average age at the tournament was 65, local YMCAs have established youth tournaments, and sporting-goods stores now offer glow-in-the-dark and water-filled bocce balls to attract younger players.

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