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CITYSCAPES

Pickup Games and Pickup Lines at Paddle Tennis Court

By DAVID FERRELL

Not so long ago, when the women all wore bikinis to play paddle tennis in Venice, Michelle McGee was one of them. She met her husband that way.

Michelle was 21, wearing a skimpy thing held together by rings. Danny Conn saw her moving and lunging under the summer sun and told a friend: "See that girl over there? I'm going to marry that girl."

His resolve produced not only a wedding, but a quantifiable expansion of Venice's thriving paddle tennis scene—namely, the couple's son Billy, 5, who "swings a mean racket," according to Michelle.

The racket even has something of a story behind it. Lighter than the standard wood model, it was custom-made for Billy by Brian Lee, another of the many fanatics who have turned Venice into a hub of the paddle tennis universe.

Like so many who hang out at the 11 miniature courts adjacent to the sand, the boardwalk and the heavy metal of Muscle Beach, Lee represents a singular thread in a very tightly knit subculture. At 39, he is a five-time national champion who teaches the sport and manufacturers one of its major racket lines out of a garage. The company, PowerPaddle, was founded 15 years ago by his father, Walt.

Walt Lee is remembered with a plaque on a white-painted bench on Court 11. That is where, five years ago, one of the sport's most zealous devotees collapsed and died.

"He finished the match . . . hit a winner for match point, and sat down on the bench and had a heart attack," Brian remembers. "He played every day for the last 15 years of his life. It totally took over his life."

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On a flawless, breezy afternoon, Henry W. Conner, 87, sits watching the action. The courts are full and the boardwalk is crowded. A man in a straw hat pounds a tambourine for God. Someone else stops and rummages through a trash can. Skaters roll by and young hucksters show off wriggling plastic hands, disembodied on a display board.

Conner, who still plays the game, points out Lucy Taylor, who has won close to 100 trophies in 28 years of competition, over on Court 11—the Walt Lee court. And Conner recalls how a few hundred people, nearly all of them paddle tennis players, showed up for Lee's funeral at the beach.

Just a few paces from Lee's beloved courts, someone clambered atop a lifeguard stand and played taps, then Brian Lee helped to scatter the ashes of his 60-year-old father in the surf.

"We were not supposed to do it, but we did it anyway," Conner remembers fondly, as if no mere city ordinance could have spoiled such a tribute. "That was quite a little thing. We were proud of that."

A few courts to Conner's left—out toward the sea—the spirit of battle lives on. Sharon Gallant, 38, trades smashes and barbs with Mike Mulrooney, 44, a national mixed-doubles champion.

After one of Mulrooney's underhand slice serves, Gallant charges the net. Mulrooney lofts a winner over her head.

"Yeah! Suffer!" he rejoices.

"Nice shot," she allows, grinning.

Mulrooney has been playing since he was 5 on these courts, which cover about a third the surface area of standard tennis courts. The action is quicker here, with opponents' shots returning at handcuffing speeds and sharp angles—and yet the miniature game is easier to learn, players say. Mulrooney, playing four times a week, has honed his skills to elite levels. He finally captured that first national championship last year, after two decades of trying.

"I've never played (real) tennis," he confesses. "I've played here at Venice all my life."

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Not only is there a United States Paddle Tennis Assn., founded in 1923 in Culver City, but there are now major tournaments in Florida, New York and at a number of sites in California, including the Santa Monica State Beach Club, the California Yacht Club in Marina del Rey and the South End Racquet and Health Club in Torrance.

Still, Venice remains a focal point. To many players, it offers a nonpareil mix of sand, sea, camaraderie and action, both on the court and off it. Players without partners can find pickup games almost anytime. The ever-passing crowds on the boardwalk provide a sort of pageantry that cannot be found elsewhere.

One habitue pushes his dog in a baby carriage; another—a homeless man—sashays about in a black miniskirt, babbling words that only he understands, observes Carl Tabor, 35, an aspiring movie producer.

Although the women of paddle tennis now seem to favor less-revealing athletic wear over bikinis, Tabor has no complaints. He marvels over the young ladies who happen by—tan, proud examples of California beauty. Some of the best pickup games, he says, are the ones that take place outside the painted white lines.

"If you can't pick up women from this, there's a problem," he said. "If I followed up on all the phone numbers (I've collected) . . . if I called them all and started to date them all, I'd never have a quiet evening by myself."

Photo:
COLOR, To many players, Venice offers a nonpareil mix of sand, sea, camaraderie and pageantry.

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