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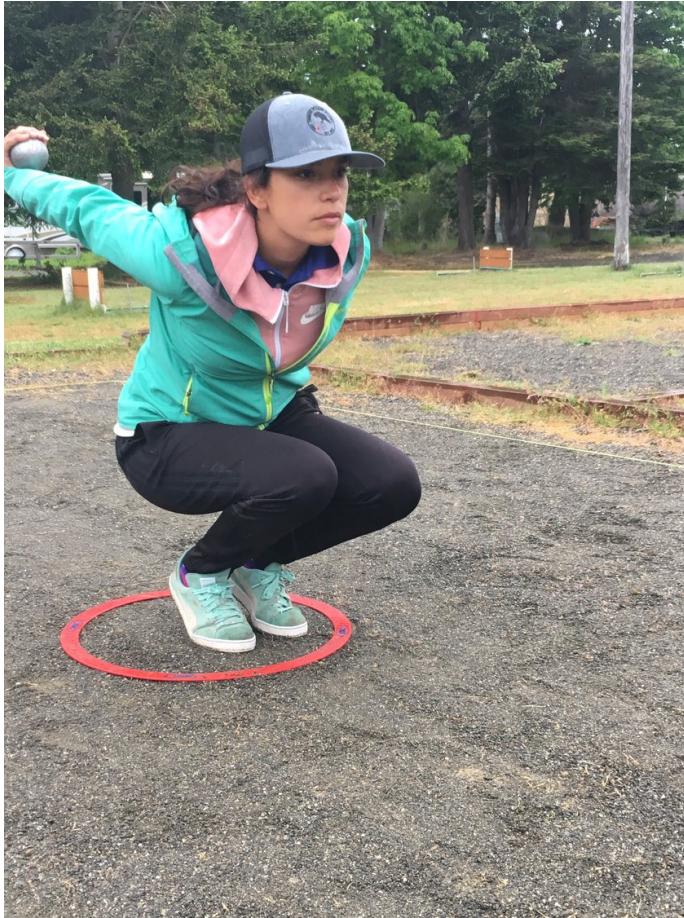
Wednesday, May 22, 2019

MAIN MENU



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## Hoist by their own Petanque



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**Bekah Howe prepares to toss the cochonnet.**

LEADER PHOTO BY JANE STEBBINS

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## Jane Stebbins Special to the Leader

Tucked away in Fort Worden is a gravel patch where twice a week, dozens of members of the Port Townsend Petanque Alliance gather to improve their skills and socialize while they compete in a 120-year-old French game of mental tenacity.

Bekah Howe, a Port Townsend native, cups a metal ball about the size of an orange—a boule—in her hand and stares intently down a long gravel court. She slowly sinks into a crouch, bringing her arm behind her, eyes intent on a smaller ball, a “cochonnet” or jack, about 20 feet away.

Slowly, she brings her arm forward, pitches the boule into the air, hoping to land it as close to the cochonnet as possible.

The boule thunks as it hits the sandy gravel. Rolls. Stops, about a foot in front of the smaller ball.

She smiles; game on.

Team members say Howe has perfect form. That has led to her and her husband, Silas Holm, to the national championship in mixed doubles. On the same day last October in Fresno, California, Howe also won the women's single competition.

In September, Holm will compete in the men's triples world qualifier in Austin, Texas, from which the winner will represent Team USA in the international competition.

"I want to give the caveat that we're both really new at pétanque," Howe said. "We both have a lot to learn."

"I try to have a beginner's mind," Holm said. "If I lose, I try to learn from that. I try to be a beginner all the time."

Robert Force, who is credited with bringing the game to Port Townsend seven years ago, said the couple's national titles are quite the accomplishment for as few years as they've put into the game.

Holm found pétanque at the Pourhouse and introduced it to Howe, who he says has taken it up at a serious level. Team members acknowledged her "perfect form" in pointing - getting the boule closest to the cochonnet - and shooting, which involves knocking an opponent's boule out of the way to secure a closer spot.

The two agree Holm, the alliance's sports director, is skilled at reading the terrain and making accommodations in his boule toss for rocks and other imperfections on the ground.

The couple spend about 10 hours a week practicing, honing their strengths and strengthening their weaknesses.

That work has paid off in 14 tournament wins for Howe and eight for Holm.

### **Playing the game**

Force, a dulcimer player, was on tour and staying with a French family in Ohio when he was introduced to pétanque (peh-TONK).

They were all 10 to 15 years older than Force, and beat him in 49 of the 50 games they played. Force still maintains the guy let him win. But he was hooked.

"It is easy," Force said. "Then it's how long until you develop consistency. The question is, can you do it every time? Can you do it six times out of 10? It occupies a part of my brain that likes to look at angles, trajectories and influences."

It's played on many public squares and parks and designated terrains in France. And in Thailand, where the queen was so enamored with the game she required the military to learn it for teamworking skills, now has the second-most number of players in the world.

Its similarity to other sports makes it easy for people to pick up.

"It's kinda like horseshoes, shuffleboard, croquet, curling and even pool," Force said. "How you strike the ball a certain way affects the balls around it. The geometry of the game attracted me."

Much of the appeal - to him and many others - is that anyone can play. Old, young, male, female, able-bodied or not.

Pétanque is somewhere in the family tree of bocce, or lawn bowling, and branched away when in 1910 a bocce player who used a wheelchair couldn't get around as easily, said Dan Feaster, a three-time national champion from Grays Harbor County who plays on the local team. To make it easier for the man in the wheelchair, the group decided to include a circle - today, a plastic ring 14 to 20 inches across - in which each player must stand when pitching their boule.

t was said one played “pieds tanqués,” or “feet stuck.”

### **A new sport was born**

In 2012, Force convinced Pourhouse owners Ned Herbert and Virginia Marston to let him use some of their outdoor space as a pétanque court, or terrain.

Curious people started asking.

“First we had one person, then five, then 10 - now we have almost 50,” Force said of the team roster. “It all started because of the (Pourhouse owners) saying ‘yes’ and putting in a court.”

The game

It’s caught on, too, likely because it’s so simple - and yet so challenging.

“It’s a lot more involved than it looks,” Feaster said. “It’s heavily nuanced. You have to be able to apply your skill level to the strategy. It’s a tricky game.”

He said it’s come a long way since Roman warriors played similar games with rocks to bide the time.

A coin toss determines who goes first and also selects the terrain on which the game will be played. Some are sandy, others peppered with gravel large enough to judge a ball out of play. In international events, they might be on gentle hillsides pocked with larger stones, offering even more challenges.

The player stands in the ring and tosses the cochonnet onto the terrain. Then comes the mental game.

The boule is cold and just heavy enough - everyone plays with a boule that fits their hand and comfort level - that a player can go all afternoon. Unlike bocce or bowling, the boule is cupped with the fingertips facing the rear of the terrain; the arm merely serves as a pendulum - unless the player plans to put some spin on the boule. The fingers open to release the boule into the air.

Therein lies strategy.

The boule can be thrown in a variety of ways: using force, height and spin, depending on what the player wants it to do.

Force inspects the terrain after the cochonnet has landed. He determines where he wants his boule to land, and reads the bumpy ground to determine how it might roll, what subtle dips or pointed rocks might put the boule off course.

“It’s like a person putting,” he said of golf. “The most important thing is only to look at the place you want it to land, not the result you want,” Force said. “If it hits that one spot, the ball is pretty much going to do what I expect it to do.”

### **Back to the ring**

“Like any sport, you literally concentrate on nothing,” Force said. “The point is to remove from your consciousness everything but the feel for where you want the ball to go.”

He throws; the boule arches, landing with a thud and slowly rolling closer, closer, until it settles about 6 inches from the cochonnet.

“Pro shot,” Force said, standing up, grinning.

His opponent that day at the Pourhouse, Jean Errica, stepped into the ring, leaned over and rolled his boule. It overshot Force's boule, so he tossed another. It tapped Force's boule away from the cochonnet, leaving him with the point. Force decided to shoot; he lofted his boule higher and, with a crack, it struck Errica's boule, knocking it away from the cochonnet and taking away his point.

"When you hit the ball you're trying to hit and it's displaced and your ball is exactly where that ball was - that's the hole-in-one of the game of pétanque," Force said.

It is not uncommon for two players to be seen standing at the end of a throw, hands on hips, staring at the array of boules on the ground. A tape measure is often used - "down to the width of a breath" sometimes, Force said - to determine the winning point.

The game is played until a player reaches 13 points.

"My favorite part - OK, there's three," he said. "I enjoy the camaraderie; that's with another player. Two, I enjoy the complexity; that's the sport. And then I get the me and me'; I get to that place of stillness, that composure, that meditative moment. You come to that place where your mind is blank, not distracted. The silence and action is at once sublime and meditative. You're in the zone; you're just there."

Force plays competitively with Rob Gruyé, who is at a comparable skill level, but complements the team in that he's left-handed. It can give the team that extra edge when a boule needs to be tucked into a tight spot near the cochonnet, he said.

Teammates learn quickly the others' strengths and weaknesses and fashion their strategy around those.

Howe and Holm agree the best thing about the game is how it's accessible to anyone.

"I love that the game can be casual or competitive," Howe said. "I love that it's played among such a diversity of people: young, old, women, men, in a wheelchair; everybody can play."

But then players start to improve. Good form is developed, bad habits are nipped in the bud, and the mental game takes precedent.

"I think the hardest thing to learn is to get out of your own way," Force said. "Once you develop a set of skills, you let the set come through and don't overthink the shot. Hit the landing place and don't think about anything else when you're doing it."

### **growing pains**

The burgeoning club, however, started to outgrow its space at the Pourhouse - although a cadre of players still line up to play almost every afternoon.

So four years ago, Force started looking around: vacant land, parking lots - and Fort Worden came to mind.

Along NCO Row was a flat area he thought could accommodate numerous courts, he said. But he knew the powers-that-be at the park probably wouldn't be too keen on contributing so much land to a sport that's played by so few and so sporadically.

So he pitched a proposal for multi-purpose, multi-generational activity courts. The Special Olympic bocce team uses the courts - and when hundreds of players descend on town for either it or pétanque, Fort Worden reaps the benefits, as well.

The fort invested \$20,000 into the project; the Alliance another \$6,000. Tournaments have attracted enough people to enable them to raise about \$10,000 for building restoration needed there, Force said.

## National acclaim

Holm and Howe learned to play on the Pourhouse terrain, perfecting their skills by watching YouTube videos.

At the beginning level, it's all about trying to get close to the jack," Holm said. "Then it moves to, 'Well, we can shoot (intentionally strike another boule).' At the highest level it's all about hitting the carreau en place - the perfect shot."

The terrain at Fort Worden suits the needs of the numerous teams in competition, but the popular bar on the beach provides a more social ambience that attracts people to the game.

Force said it's a phenomenal feat that someone who has only played for seven years takes home the national medal.

It had always been a goal of Holm's to win a national tourney, but he and Howe got off to a rough start that morning, losing two of the three rounds they played. But they pulled it together in the afternoon, Howe said.

"I was over the moon happy," she said. "We were struggling in the morning and we pulled it together in the afternoon to win."

"Teamwork," Holm said, grinning at the memory. "I felt fantastic. It was one of my biggest goals, to win nationals with Bekah. For us, as a couple, to win national champions? I felt elated. All the hard work paid off. We did it."

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