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PÉTANQUE!



Get in on America's New Sport!

By Sally Ross

Are you looking for a low-stress, very social game that can be played in an hour, is easy to learn, and encourages lively debate, serious concentration,

and jovial competition equally among men and women, young and old? Pétanque, pronounced as *pay-tonk*, may be for you!

Pétanque is one of many *boules* sports across the world—including Italian bocce, English lawn bowls, French boule lyonnaise, Le Jeu Provençal and others—where players or teams attempt to get their own balls closest to a smaller target ball. Pétanque is distinctive in three ways: 1) pétanque balls, or *boules*, are made of heavy metal (about 1.5 pounds each) rather than wood or plastic, 2) players *throw* a boule with palm facing downward, rather than *rolling* a ball with palm up, and 3) players stand within a stationary circle when launching the boule. In fact, in the dialect of Provence where pétanque was invented, it is *pèd tanco*, literally “feet fixed” (to the ground).

This is where history, in various similar accounts, gets interesting. In all other boule games, including the ancient French sport of Le Jeu Provençal, the player takes steps in running up to launch the boule at a designated line. Le Jeu Provençal was extremely popular in towns along the Riviera Coast of France, such as La Ciotat where pétanque was invented. Ship workers gathered on Sundays at *boulodromes*, often just dirt or gravel areas in front of shops. Gambling among and on the best players was of course rampant, and shop owners could make a few centimes renting chairs along the playing area.

Among those seated was a former champion, Jules Hugues, known to all as Jules le Noir (for his nickname *le Noir*, or Blackie). Jules’ rheumatism crippled him so badly that he could no longer stand, though he continued to *practice* throwing boules from his chair into the ring where players left their unused boules. One day in 1910, a shopkeeper friend, Ernest Pitiot, offered to play with Jules, also from a stationary position with his feet planted or *pièds tanques* inside the ring. Others watched, and soon a competition was organized with teams and prizes. Gradually, the new game took on players. Rules were adapted and simplified. Because running was eliminated, players could be more accurate, and the court, or *la terrain*, could be shortened allowing for more games at once.

The game quickly evolved in the 20th century. A less stressful game was perfect for soldiers returning home from World War I. Original boxwood boules studded with nails were replaced by hollow, all-metal balls, and later steel. The first national organization for pétanque established rules and later national competitions, and the game’s popularity spread across France, neighboring countries and French territories, and the world.

Pétanque popped up in the Americas where French expatriates emigrated in groups. In the 1950s, locations included Quebec City, Massachusetts, and the west coast. Gradually these and other clubs organized into the Federation of Pétanque in the U.S.A (FPUSA), and in 1982 the first national championship was held on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

Finally, in 1991, pétanque came to the southeast when Belgian Philippe Boets arrived in Florida and could find no one playing the game he'd loved as a child. Philippe, already in the import/export business, realized also that if someone wanted boules, they had to fly to France and carry them home in a suitcase! Prescient and passionate, Philippe founded *Pétanque America*, the first—and still only—vendor of competition boules in the United States. At first, his new company faltered until, as Philippe tells it, "The Internet saved us. There's no other word for it. Especially because the United States was way ahead with the Internet at the time, I think we in the United States—the smallest market on the planet as far as boules were concerned—were the first to put a boules catalog online, shortly followed by our online store at www.petanqueamerica.com(<http://www.petanqueamerica.com>)."

Philippe was also instrumental in starting what is now the largest pétanque club in America when he located his business in Fernandina Beach on Amelia Island, Florida. Appropriately, Amelia was formerly a French island, and it still has lots of Provençal style in its gracious old homes and gorgeous, waterfront historic district, not unlike La Ciotat where the sport began. Almost every afternoon, pétanque enthusiasts gather at their harbor-side courts on Front Street near the marina, and random pairings take up the game they all love.

I was blessed to get to learn the game here and quickly discovered that pétanque devotees love to teach newbies to play. No one gets to just watch! No, you'll immediately be given loaner boules, taught how to hold and throw them, and be paired with someone who will willingly coach you in the intricacies of *pointing*, *shooting*, and *strategy*, and everyone will cheer you on when you get that lucky beginner's shot!



This year, the 10th Annual Pétanque Amelia Island Open was held on November 9-11, 2018, and I was there as an observer from labor-intensive beginnings to the dramatic finish. Originally created by that same Philippe Boets, this tournament, the largest in the Americas, is now run by the Amelia Island Convention and Visitors

Bureau with their partners the Amelia Island Boules Club, Main Street Fernandina, and the City of Fernandina Beach. For days ahead of the competitors' arrival, the city and President Jim Weinsier with his local pétanque club volunteers transformed four regular courts as well as the adjoining city parking lots. Piles of sand and gravel were dumped and flattened; then courts were measured and lined with timbers and string. By Friday morning, 93 precisely measured courts were ready for 186 teams of two. A total of 400 people, representing some 20 nationalities, arrived ready to play...and to party!

Friday was set aside for clinics. For \$25 each, ten of us got to spend an hour with Marco Foyot, seven times French national champion, twice the country's junior champion, and world champion in 1992. A delightful, hale and hearty guy, Marco lined us up and had us trying shots I didn't yet know existed. I knew that I was a *pointer*, one who throws the boule low so as to roll it into the perfect position, ideally next to and in front of the small wooden target, the *cochonnet* (also called a pig or *jack*). Marco introduced us to the concept that in throwing, we could actually cause the boule to bend left or right. He also encouraged us to try *shooting*, throwing the ball very high and landing it exactly so as to strike existing boules and blow them away! (A perfect shot that takes out one boule and stays in exactly its place is called a *carreau*, pronounced car-ROW). Amazingly, Marco never missed, while we were lucky to get the boule over the feet-high barrier he had set up for us!

Later fee-based workshops invited participants to play with a champion as a *team* against another champion/amateur pair. The afternoon provided a chance for 22 women-only teams to compete—a new event this year. Interestingly, in Europe, pétanque is often stigmatized as a sport for retired old men. However, this women's tournament notwithstanding, my main takeaway from pétanque in America is that it is incredibly egalitarian. At the Amelia Open, players must be at least 13 years old, but other than that, two-person teams can be of any age combination, gender, or skill level.

In fact, all Saturday matches are randomly assigned, and each team is guaranteed to play five matches. The only caveat is that your team will *not* be matched with another team from your hometown club. But it is shocking to see two beginners at their first competition matched with two French national champions! Intimidating? Yes, for a while, and of course the beginners were lucky not to lose 13 to 0 and therefore teased about having to *kiss Fanny*. (It's a long story, part of the mythology of pétanque, but almost every pétanque terrain in France has a picture or figure of a bare-bottomed woman named Fanny. Often, the team that "made fanny" must buy a round of drinks for the winning team.)

Each Saturday match at Amelia is scored by the point differential by which your team wins or loses. By some computer magic, those scores set up the five flights or *concours* of 32 players each for Sunday where teams play equally skilled teams. Winners move on (and win cash prizes), and losers still get to play each other in far less stressful matches. All this play leads to the grand finale play-off.

This year's dramatic final match was between Jean-Pierre Subrenat (a master perfumer and American pétanque champ) with Bruno Le Boursicaud (multiple champion and pétanque educator) against my hero, Chrissy Lion (Belgian by birth, now a Californian pastry chef), playing with a current young French champion, handsome Dylan Rocher (considered to be one of the world's top shooters). Chairs surrounded the terrain as these exceptional players kept the crowd shouting with amazement and cheering for both sides.

I say Chrissy Lion is my hero because she was so confident in her game and competing so equally with these men that I sent her a friend request on Facebook! Since then, she has inspired me, as she does all women, to compete at the highest levels of pétanque!

"There isn't anything more satisfying to me than beating a man at a sport! I love it when you walk on that court, and men think they have an easy win, but surprise! I don't go down that easily!" Chrissy says. "I've always been competitive in sports, but I disliked the lack of being an equal. In tennis, unless it was mixed doubles, I didn't have the opportunity to compete against men. In golf, men frowned when I would show up first thing in the morning to play and insist that I play from the 'women's tee' (ugh!)."

"Pétanque is a game you can play right along the best of them. I enjoyed the opportunity to play in Amelia Island with male French champions who were so humble and welcomed me with open arms. I am the president of our Los Angeles Pétanque Club, and I enjoy interacting with all our members, playing and competing. This sport is very social and for all ages, women and children. Women should grasp the chance to play this game since you can play at any age with or without health issues or disabilities. I took up pétanque because I had major back surgery and could no longer play tennis or golf and needed to play a sport. In pétanque, you don't have to be a triathlete and those men had better not underestimate us women!"





Equipment and Terrain

Pétanque is a very accessible sport in that equipment is inexpensive and the field or *terrain* can literally be anywhere. The best way to buy competition boules in America is online through www.petanqueamerica.com (<http://www.petanqueamerica.com>). The major producer is Obut, a French company (of course), whose competition boules meet international standards and run from \$99 to \$300 for 3 boules. But many other companies produce *leisure* or *casual boules* for as little as \$20 for 3 boules. (See www.en.petanqueshop.com (<http://www.en.petanqueshop.com>)) All kinds of accessories are available too: rings to stand in, measuring tools, carrying bags, and even necklace magnets to save leaning over to pick up your boules!

Historically, pétanque was played in natural settings such as parks or village squares. As I've mentioned, for competitions, terrains are measured out with the standard size being 13' by 40' to 50'. The ground cover is generally a combination of sand, dirt and gravel. In Georgia, the Atlanta Pétanque League plays at Roswell's Grimes Bridge Park, using their smaller bocce courts as their major location. In Athens, the Athens/Clarke County Leisure Services Department has recently built four regulation courts at Lay Park. Yet, I've seen those hearty players at Amelia Island play *wild pétanque* with no boundaries so that the game could move across courts, park land, sidewalks or even train tracks!

Playing Pétanque

Pétanque teams are generally made up of one, two, or three players. Whatever the combination, only 12 boules can be on the terrain for a game. So, if playing singles or doubles, each player gets three boules. In triples, there are three players on each team and each gets two boules, for a total of 12 boules. Of course, as in most things pétanque, the game can be adapted depending on who shows up. A two-person team with three boules each can play against a three-person team, each of whom gets two boules. Or three players, each as a single, can go tete-a-tete with each player using three boules again. Such variable games options are another trait that makes pétanque so low-key and enjoyable!

To begin the *end*, or round, the team who wins a toss goes first. The designated *pointer* places a 20" plastic ring on the ground, or draws an approximate ring in the dirt. She stands in that ring and throws the *cochonnet*, which must be between six and 10 meters away. Then she throws her first boules. It's then the other team's turn

to throw and try to get closer to the cochonnet. The next team to throw is the one that is still furthest away, alternating until all boules have been thrown. Much of the game of pétanque involves team strategizing, silent meditation with many a grimace and chin rubbing, striding up to the cochonnet and played boules to plan the next play, and studying the terrain. Importantly, once the game begins, it is forbidden to alter the terrain except to fix one divot with a toe in the dirt. Collective divots, which are common on most surfaces, just accumulate and make the terrain more challenging! Any obstacles from falling leaves to a lazy dog cannot be moved! And if there is any question about distance from the cochonnet, someone will pull out a tiny measuring stick and kneel down to determine who is closest. The first point goes to the team whose boule is closest to the cochonnet with further points being awarded if they have other boules also closer than the other team's. The scoring team places the ring and throws out the cochonnet for the next end. The game is finished when one team scores 13 points.

Thus, the game of pétanque is leisurely and generally friendly. To get a real feel for the nature of pétanque in France, I highly recommend reading *Uncorked: My Year in Provence Studying Pétanque, Discovering Chagall, Drinking Pastis, and Mangling French*, a slim book by Paul Shore that is available on Amazon. Paul was an American working in the south of France who wanted to learn pétanque but had to wait until a local agreed to be his mentor. Even then, he had to play under dark of night until he was deemed competent enough to join the locals in the public square.

I got to watch pétanque played for several days in the beautiful Luxembourg Gardens in Paris, where the locals graciously invited my American friend to play, though they weren't too sure after he proved he could indeed play well! These men and a few women of Paris took their games seriously, but with wry and spirited humor as an expected part of one's skill at the game. My non-French speaking, American friend loved every minute. As he described it, "Soon I was asked to join five men and got to play. They were quite good, but I did very good pointing and enjoyed it. I could see their doubt at the start, but pétanque players always give due to skill. Soon we were all smiling and intense in the game. One man created havoc with my pointing, hitting over 40 shots and blowing my boules away! I would smile, and he would wink. Finally the game was 13-11. I have never enjoyed losing so much."





Finding a Pétanque Club

Gradually, players and interested others across the United States are beginning to coalesce into pétanque clubs. To find a club in your area, or to learn how to start one, go to www.usapetanque.org (<http://www.usapetanque.org>), the web site of the Federation of Pétanque. The FPUSA belongs to FIPJP, the Fédération Internationale de Pétanque et Jeu Provençal, the international family of pétanque players, which serves members in seventy countries. When you join the FPUSA, you also are joining the FIPJP. Membership can lead to unique opportunities to share the pleasures of pétanque with members around the world. According to Dan Feaster, president of the FPUSA, there are currently just over 50 registered pétanque clubs in the United States with some 2,100 licensed members who join FPUSA in order to play in official competitions, be covered with insurance, and support the sport. However, says Feaster, “we estimate that there are over 150,000 casual players in the United States, many in back yard courts, and the numbers are increasing rapidly.” It seems that players are following Pilippe Boet’s original philosophy to “teach the game to one player at a time, who in turn will teach some friends, who in turn, etc. Like a snowball that keeps growing when you roll it.”

Two very active clubs have recently emerged in Georgia.

The Atlanta Pétanque League, whose motto is “boule is cool,” provides a “social space that brings people of all ages together in this often fun, frequently frustrating, always challenging French game to meet, compete...and drink and eat!” Through the leadership of president and founder, Peter Gibson, several Atlanta clubs have united to form the Atlanta Pétanque League.

Gibson began playing at the home of a friend who had a court in his back yard. One day the group decided to go down to this competition at Amelia Island. “Boy, were we unprepared!” he says. “But what it did was open my eyes as to what’s going on with this sport. People were very friendly, but still competitive to a degree, and it was very well organized!” Gibson and his Belgian wife, Isabelle, did research and found there were no organized clubs in Georgia. So in March 2018, they decided to take on the challenge. Having a background in event management and as a travel destination planner, among other businesses, certainly helped and shaped the marketing and evolution of the group.

They started with MeetUp.com that attracted three people, all French women who had played the sport before and were thrilled to see an organization emerge. All three are now on the board. One, the current vice president for Operations, was Tricia Domingo; Catherine Thille, is in charge of marketing; and Nathalie Helin, helped set up the league as a non-profit, 501(c)(3), and serves as the group’s treasurer.

According to Gibson, “The intention was always to create a community where we could enjoy a game at which some were experienced, and some were not.” When he proposed the idea to use existing bocce courts for pétanque, Mary Rummel at the Roswell Adult Recreation Center saw similarities to the creation and popularity of pickleball opportunities just a few years ago. Already in less than 12 months, there are 43 members, and club groups in Hanover West Park in Buckhead and Kennesaw/Marietta. Gibson even talked Luc and Danielle Beaudet, owners of Douceur De France, a French bakery and cafe, into putting a court behind their Marietta restaurant!

The Atlanta Pétanque League organizes inter-club events, tournaments, coaching and more. The emphasis is on pétanque as a family game, from toddlers to teenagers to parents and grandparents. “Last year, Atlanta sent 20 team players to Amelia Island as well as 30 family members and friends who came to support and to party!” says Gibson. “If you are a city or community park, local business, subdivision, school, civic, business, chamber or networking group and want to add a social element to how you meet, contact us at www.atlpetanqueleague.com to learn how the Atlanta Pétanque League can help that happen!”

The Classic City Pétanque Club, cheerfully known as Les Boule Dogs, plays at Lay Park, in the historic heart of Athens, Georgia. Ron Wallach, a retired special education teacher, who moved to Athens from California, initiated and coordinates

this club. Ron first played pétanque on summer vacations in Provence, France. He joined the Lamorinda Pétanque Club in Lafayette, California, where he was coached by French members who had played pétanque since they were 5 years old. “I played on and off, but I retired a year ago, and it was kind of selfish to start the group in Athens,” Wallach said with a chuckle. “I wanted partners.”

As seems to happen with pétanque everywhere, the word is spreading. Allen Cassady of Athens was introduced to pétanque by his friend, Rob Trevena, during an art class with OLLI, Athens extremely successful senior learning community through Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. “I’d never heard that word before!” said Allen as his team waited to play at Amelia Island. “Rob invited me to come out and check it out. Someone lent me some chrome leisure boules, a little too large for my hand, but I started, and I’ve kept coming back for the competition and socializing.” Allen, who takes lead on researching official rules in the group, has now played in three tournaments including the Amelia Open in 2018. The Classic City club sent 10 players to Amelia this year, and is proud to say that Wallach and former Athens/Clarke County mayor, Heidi Davison, won a first place prize in their division!

Wallach is thrilled with how well things are going. “Our new Lay Park courts—past the swimming pool and tennis courts—are the very first dedicated pétanque courts in a public park in Georgia.” The Classic City Pétanque Club is dedicated to sharing the joys of pétanque with all of the Athens’ community. They offer free classes and weekly pétanque play sessions for senior citizens and retirees through OLLI@UGA and the ACCA, the Athens Community Council on Aging. Beginners of all ages are always welcome! “We think they will find pétanque is an enjoyable, social activity that utilizes and develops concentration, strategizing, mindful focus, and body-mind coordination,” Wallach emphasizes. Importantly, there is no cost to play, and club members always have extra pétanque boules for you to use. Games are usually planned for Monday and Thursday afternoons 1-3 p.m., depending on weather. There are also pop-up games and scheduled training practices.

The Athens club plans to introduce pétanque to the youth of Athens with summer pétanque camps at Lay Park through Athens Leisure Services and by hosting pétanque classes and teams for area high school French Classes and French Clubs. They also want to offer pétanque classes for staff and students of the University of Georgia French Language Department.

The Classic City Pétanque website is <http://athenspetanqueclub.wix.com/play> where you can find great resources and videos for learning and developing skills. And they are also on Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/boulesathens/>

So what could be better? As any pétanque aficionado will tell you, there is still one challenge they hope to meet. Pétanque should be an Olympic sport! To that end, the Confédération Mondiale des Sports de Boules—which was created by several international boules organizations specifically for this purpose—has been lobbying

the Olympic committee since 1985 to make pétanque part of the summer Olympics, especially when the games return to France in 2024.

So get on the bandwagon while the game is new in the United States and the Southeast. It couldn't be easier and local clubs couldn't be more inviting. Or start your own club with the help of the FPUSA. Who knows, you may be a winner yourself at the 2019 Pétanque Amelia Island Open on November 8-10.







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