

FROM PASSION TO POSSIBLE: ONE PETANQUE CLUB'S JOURNEY

by Robert Force

My house is full of strange knick-knacks and historical jetsam like my chunk of the first transatlantic cable and a section of the wooden main bearing of the USS Oregon. A touring musician for almost 50 years, I always had a few hours to while away after sound checks and before the show. I'd hit the streets on my pre-gig prowls, on the lookout for odd-things to discover, ponder, and eventually squirrel away.

There I was in an "opportunity" shop in Killarney, Ireland, and could not believe my luck—for sale was a set of eight, baseball-size, hollow steel balls for only \$25! What a find! Most musicians on tour don't readily add 12 pounds to their luggage, but I did. Over the next several years they entertained my friends and I in cross-county games of heaving them as far as we could while trying to get closer to that small ball.

A few years later, I was on tour with a stop in Cincinnati. My French hosts for the weekend had several sets of dented, steel balls in old leather-strap carriers sitting by the back door. "What do you do with these?" I asked. "I'll show you," replied Gerry Teyssier. Over the next three days he taught me pétanque while effortlessly beating me 49 games to one. I do believe he just let me win the last game.

"As a young man he was a champion in France," dryly commented his wife, Eliane. "He has taught you how to waste time. So now you must also learn to drink cognac and pastis, smoke cigars and argue about who won the point." In between my music commitments over the weekend, we did exactly that.

I began to read about pétanque and discovered one center for the game had evolved around a guy named Philippe Boets of Pétanque America in Amelia Island, Florida. It was a short drive away from Gainesville where I had an upcoming gig. Once there, I set

off to meet Philippe. He was closing his small warehouse for the day and invited me out for a drink.

The next day I bought my first set of competition boules and took them to the beach to try them out. While I was there I thought I'd bathe my new boules in the Atlantic and then do the same at home on the Pacific—East to West—transcontinental pétanque—a good way to begin with the real game. Out went the cochonnet. In came a seagull and carried it off. Back I went to Philippe, certain I had been in the presence of a miracle. “Happens all the time,” he said, selling me a sack of cochonnets.

Back home again in Port Townsend, Washington, I began looking for places to play and people to play with. At that time a young couple, Virginia Marston and Ned Herbert, were in the process of starting a custom-brew taproom just up from the tideline of the town's southern beach. Located on an old towing and impound lot, it was hard-packed, strewn with rocks and clamshells. Perfect! They wanted to put in horseshoes but their insurance wouldn't let them. I thought pétanque could be an alternative to further their outdoor-game vision utilizing a corner of their seaside lot. I pitched the concept and demonstrated how it could work. They said, “Yes.” I cannot emphasize enough how valuable their help was in getting this game started—both for investing in building the court and for providing a visible home for the game locally.

The Pourhouse Taproom quickly became a hit, featuring local and regional craft beers on tap with good products, prices, and service, as well as a great location. And, off in the corner, alongside the beach, an emerging, dedicated group of people began to gather around this new game of “pay-tonk.”

In only a few months, the game took off. Each one teach one. The Pourhouse began to sponsor league play that next summer, two evenings a week. Twenty bucks got you in and the money went to charity. Teams formed. We fumbled our way forward with the sole intention of having a good time over beer with new friends and a shared attraction

to this funny, challenging game. The Pourhouse League was central to the early success of the club. It gave the game a chance to be seen on a regular basis; it drew spectators. Fannies were good-naturedly eased with the balm of Gilead, winners bought the beers. Bonhomie all around! The local newspaper took an interest and wrote lengthy articles extolling the nature and growing popularity of the game. Never underestimate good ink!

The players attracted to the game came from every age group and occupation. Professionals rubbed shoulders with laborers. Young and old happily bought beers for each other, reveling in new friendships. The “Scott scuff,” the “Rob roll” and other invented terms entered our vocabulary. We were outposts (literally and figuratively) in the Grand Game of Pétanque. This core became our strength. Every day, unless the rain was coming in sideways, we played.

The lovely, Salish Sea (Puget Sound) treats us to seals and cranes and eagles foraging on the beach (seagulls hunting for piglets?). Twice a day the tide goes out, exposing expanses of hard-packed sand. In 2012 the Low Tide Open, a *sauvage*, play-on-the-beach tournament was born. Here’s the recipe: warm sun, cold beer, camaraderie, a cheerful hand-shake and “good game,” after every bout. Give the money to the Food Bank. Play for fun and grins on a low-low tide. Get sandy. Bring plenty of boule towels. Celebrate the place you are in.

Around 2010 I joined the FPUSA as an independent member. It didn’t take long before the thought slowly crept in, “Hmmm... seven more people and we can become a registered FPUSA club.” Given the interest at the Pourhouse, that didn’t seem too hard.

Enter the FPUSA in the form of Dan Feaster and Nan Walter. Not only did they supply us with sample bylaws and a constitution, they also journeyed up here and taught classes on the fundamentals of the game. They guided us through the process of

becoming official on paper. Next came the proverbial catch-22. To exist—before we could solicit membership club money—we had to have a bank account. To have a bank account—we had to exist.

We went several months trying to attract a community non-profit to sponsor us. Although possible, they all wanted part of those dollars for administration fees. In my non-musician, don't-quit-your-day-job career, I had been a college administrator with more than a working knowledge of the sometimes-baffling processes of bureaucracy. Just take it one step at a time.

Here was our process: Eight people said yes to FPUSA. A constitution and bylaws were drawn up reflecting FPUSA guidelines. An advisory vote was taken to adopt the documents. The guidelines in the documents were used to elect Board and Club officers. The Board met and documented the meeting with minutes. The bank was presented with the FPUSA's and our own constitution and bylaws. A copy of our Board Minutes was provided for their files that named the people voted onto the Board. Essentially, we became a local, non-profit organization without any of the other paperwork. In our bylaws, it states who the Treasurer is and which other officer can sign checks (the President). Our official name, Port Townsend Pétanque Alliance, is on the docs. We used my home address. Yes, they also used my SSN. They took a deposit and we signed up to receive checks.

When the checks came, we wrote one to the FPUSA for membership dues and filed our paperwork. We removed our hats and sunglasses and took pictures. We signed Sports Waivers. We divulged our ages, citizenship, addresses, and e-mails. We did, what is called in my musical contracts, “all the necessary and ordinary practices conforming to the industry.”

As we grew, wonderful as it was, the Pourhouse's one-court terrain was clearly not going to be enough. After considering many sites—the fairgrounds, community

centers, parks and former schoolyards, we decided we could grow pétanque in our community, and in the nation, by creating at our local, in-town state park, a terrain dedicated to the sport. I don't think we thought it was ambitious; it just seemed reasonable.

We decided to create a proposal to present to our town's newly established Public Development Authority. In partnership with local and state government, they had just taken over the administration of the historic 454-acre state park, Fort Worden. It looked like the future, and survival, of state parks in Washington was going to be in private/public partnerships and we wanted to be a part of that.

Fort Worden has rentable housing for families and groups, RV and tent camping, two colleges, an art school, a state art organization, Centrum, and miles of beaches. Whales swim offshore. All the amenities and elements were present to wed edu-/eco-tourism with standard vacationing—offering something for everyone. Why not boules?

Just two hours' northwest of Seattle, we are a small community of 7,500 people living in the county's only incorporated city, the Victorian seaport of Port Townsend. Another 25,000 live in the rest of Jefferson County, stretching from the Salish Sea to the Pacific Ocean, right through the heart of Olympic National Park across the water from Victoria, Canada. This area gets well over a million visitors a year. Our proposal would certainly address this aspect of developing the local economy and tourism.

Dan Feaster and Nan Walter again stepped in to aid, giving us copies of the terrain proposal made for Fort Bragg, California. Nan even drew the site map and court arrangement for our proposal. We reworked their document and came up with one of our own that reflected community values and visions both for Fort Worden and for our sport. Club members got the proposal on the PDA Board's agenda and we made our pitch.

The PDA Board not only said yes to 16 international-regulation courts in two, 160 × 60 foot terrains (expandable to 20 smaller width courts), they also initially approved \$2,500 to support building the facility. Back we went to the drawing board to begin raising funds of our own. We also ran into a new level of rules, regulations and guidelines.

Fort Worden is a registered historic site. Not only did we need state review to modify any of the ground, we also needed bona fide architectural and engineering documents—nothing on the back of a napkin. We needed city review and permission from all the neighboring households. We needed five, state-wage paying licensed contractors to bid the job. We needed a licensed archeologist to oversee the removal of soil. And we needed lots more money. Dave Robison, CEO of the PDA, came through in a big way with a grant specifically earmarked for recreational development at the Fort. The lion's share of \$25,000 went to the project, bids went out and, combined with the \$7,000 the club managed to raise, the bouldrome became a reality. Start to finish—one year.

Last year we hosted regional triples at Fort Worden and this year we will host a regional doubles. The club sponsors and teaches community play two days a week from early spring to late fall. The club has supplied the Fort's concierge desk with boules that can be checked out by visitors. A portion of the new terrain was double-purposed for bocce to partner with the area's Special Olympics families and teams. There is no charge to enter the Fort or to play boules.

This year our Low Tide will see its sixth year of competition. The League play enters its fifth year at the Pourhouse. Three other nearby communities have created terrains for boules. As a club, we've grown to 42 members and had players place highly in national tournaments. This year proposals have gone out to local school districts in order to bring the game into the schools. One local high school has had pétanque playoffs

between their Spanish and French classes (the Spanish won). It all builds excitement and awareness, growing the game locally with an eye to the future.

Synopsis: 14 years ago, this musician guy bumps into boules in Ireland. He plays some made-up version of a game with his friends for the next three years. He then gets “schooled” in the actual game of pétanque by a French master. Bit by the bug he starts hunting for resources and discovers Amelia Island. Six sets of boules and two years later he finally finds boules that fit his hand and playing style. He joins the FPUSA. One year later (five years ago) he introduces the game to the owners of a new seaside bar. An FPUSA club is chartered. Four years later, 16 international regulation courts are built in a local state park. A compulsive hand-raiser, he then gets elected to be a Northwest FPUSA counselor. The next year—this year—the bouldrome hosts it's second FPUSA tournament and proposals have gone out to local school districts to bring the game into the schools.

That is our story. We truly hope some of our experience, as well as our proposals, pictures, processes and procedures can illuminate your path as you bring boules to your corner of America. I do not need to tell you how wonderful this pétanque thing is: age, differing ability, gender, strength, profession— all are balanced to create a truly level, yet still competitive, playing field. Within it can be found both camaraderie as well as a delicious and satisfying solitude. Each boule can be an eternity. And when the game is over, there is always the next game.

Bon chance!

Robert