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PICKLEBALL'S POPULARITY



Palo Alto adds more courts

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Living Well

A monthly special section of news & information for seniors



Top: Monica Williams, left, speaks to a group of her pickleball students during class at the Mitchell Park tennis courts. Williams, who is president of the Palo Alto Pickleball Club, is known as the sport's unofficial "ambassador" in Palo Alto. Above: Adam Donovan is among Williams' students.

Ambassador of pickleball

With new courts on the horizon, Monica Williams celebrates the game

by Chris Kenrick | photos by Sinead Chang

She's been dubbed the goddess, the queen or the ambassador of pickleball. Whatever she's called, 77-year-old Monica Engel Williams displays boundless enthusiasm for the paddle sport and has recruited hundreds of local residents to the tennis-like game, which is played on a small court with a whiffle ball and a 34-to 36-inch-tall net. Four pickleball courts can fit in the space of one tennis court.

As president of the Palo Alto Pickleball Club and a designated ambassador of the USA Pickleball Association, Williams has led a years-long campaign to secure public courts for the game in Palo Alto. Her crusade is getting results: This September, Palo Alto is set to break ground on six new courts.

The city will convert one tennis court at Mitchell Park into four permanent pickleball courts and construct two additional courts on nearby space. In addition, two existing tennis courts nearby will become multi-purpose

courts available to both sports. The project is expected to be complete by Thanksgiving.

Williams is delighted. "It's an amazing sport because people from age 9 to 90 can play it together," she said on a recent Tuesday at Mitchell Park, where about

30 drop-in pickleballers were playing with temporary nets on tennis courts.

"It's just so healthy to play. (It's) easy on the joints, it has a social aspect and it keeps seniors moving — and that's what we have to do, keep moving," said Williams, who had not heard of the game un-

til 2013 when she played her first match while visiting friends in Arizona.

She quickly became addicted. Williams said the game replaced her earlier addiction to tournament bridge.

"I could play pickleball seven days a week," she said. "I know a guy who lost 40 pounds; it's helped people with pre-diabetes.

'I could play pickleball seven days a week.'

—Monica Engel Williams, president of the Palo Alto Pickleball Club

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Kathy Herman is among the estimated 300 people who play the paddle-and-ball sport at Mitchell Park every week.



Monica Williams shows Sipkje Dykstra how to spin a pickleball paddle during the class she teaches at the Mitchell Park tennis courts.

Pickleball

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“I love taking somebody who’s never had a sport before and teach them how to play, and you can see it change their life.”

Palo Alto resident Susan McConnell, who played competitive tennis for 20 years before being sidelined by knee problems and her aging body, is among those whose lives have been changed by the game.

“Along came pickleball, and I was back on the courts again,” McConnell told the Parks and Recreation Commission during a meeting where commissioners were pondering whether to establish permanent courts in the city. “I have to say being back on the courts again was life changing for me.”

At the same meeting, former longtime Stanford University employee Jerold Pearson said he’d been planning to move out of the area before he discovered pickleball.

“The ability to play a sport again and to meet people — I’ve created a social network — and to remain healthy and active has completely changed my plans and kept me here,” Pearson said. “It’s pretty much the main reason I’ve decided to stay.”

Williams, along with other players, have been sharing their pickleball passion at monthly Commission meetings since 2017.

Williams regularly updated commissioners on the growing membership of the Palo Alto Pickleball Club (formerly the Silicon Valley Pickleball Club), which went from a handful of players at Mitchell Park in 2013 to 400 members with drop-in

activity seven days a week.

And when tennis players expressed concerns about possibly losing space to pickleball, Williams reminded commissioners that she, too, is a lifelong tennis player — in fact, a former board member of the Palo Alto Tennis Club — and that many tennis players eventually take up pickleball.

Though especially popular with people over 50, pickleball appears to be attracting younger players as well. Palo Alto High School coach and physical education teacher Peter Diepenbrock called it “a great sport for kids that don’t have a sport by the time they get to high school. They’re able to pick it up fairly quickly in class. It’s really, really been growing in popularity over the years.”

Palo Alto resident Lee Caswell, a long-time competitive tennis player, said he caught the pickleball bug from his college-age son.

“It’s a community-building experience,” Caswell told the Commission. “When was the last time you saw a competitive game between an 18-year-old and an 83-year-old? I saw it; it happened (at Mitchell Park). It’s amazing.”

Contributing writer Chris Kenrick can be emailed at ckenrick@paweekly.com.

About the cover:

Pickleball enthusiast Monica Williams has been at the forefront of the push to add more public courts to Palo Alto’s city parks.



Adam Donovan, left, and Melinda Ballew share a laugh between games.



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