

COMMUNITY SPORTS

Pickleball's growth — in appeal and skill — on full display

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The USA Pickleball Association Pacific Northwest Regional Championships were held Friday through Saturday at Pine Nursery Community Park in Bend. The event drew 480 amateur entries — not counting the 85 professionals playing in the Professional Pickleball Federation's Northwest Championships.(Joe Kline/Bulletin photo)

A.J. and Irene Fraties have helped organize plenty of tournaments since they and several friends founded the Bend Pickleball Club in 2010, but none quite like the event staged over the weekend in Bend.

The four-day USA Pickleball Association Pacific Northwest Regional Championships, which concluded Sunday at Pine Nursery Park, drew 480 amateur entries — which the Fraties said is the largest field of any pickleball tournament ever held in Bend — in 60 different singles and doubles divisions based on age and skill level. The crowd of weekend warriors from across the West played at the same time as 85 professional players from the fledgling Professional Pickleball Federation, which held its Northwest Championships in conjunction with the USAPA event.

"I haven't had a chance to watch much, because I've been working at the ref desk the whole time," said Irene Fraties, who served as the referee coordinator for the tournament and won a silver medal in the mixed doubles 4.0 70+ division with her husband.

"The pros are drawing a lot of attention, they're getting lots of people to watch. And they are amazing."

It is not your grandpa's pickleball — unless your grandpa is really good at pickleball.

"You have the level we play, which is a good level, but then you see the guys that are playing pro," said Kevin Schmalz, 60 and of Cameron Park, California, who won gold in the men's doubles 3.5 50+ division with Daniel Pelton. "These guys are phenomenal players. My God, I hope I play that good some day."

Both Schmalz and Pelton, 54 and of Granite Bay, California, said they have been playing pickleball for about three years.

"I used to be a tennis player, and obviously I'm getting older, and my joints just don't (let me) play tennis anymore," Schmalz said. "I was down in Arizona and saw people playing pickleball, and now I play three to five times a week. My golf game has suffered."

Simone Jardim, one of those professional players the rest of the crowd raved about, is even newer to the game. Two and a half years ago, the native of Santa Maria, Brazil, was the head women's tennis coach at Michigan State when one of the program boosters encouraged her to try out this new game.

"At first I was like, I'm not sure, I don't even have that much time," Jardim recounted.

She agreed to give it a shot when Daniel O'Toole, another professional pickleball player, paid her a visit at the Michigan State tennis facility, and she learned the game with a playing group that includes three current PPF players.

"Not many people are lucky enough to have that kind of level (of competition) right off the bat," said Jardim, now 37.

A year ago, Jardim decided that the stressful and travel-heavy life of an NCAA Division I tennis coach "was getting old" — especially while raising her two young children — so she quit her job and the family moved to Naples, Florida, where she began the U.S. Open Pickleball Academy.

"It's different from a lot of other sports, it's very social," Jardim said. "You also get all different ages. You have kids here, and then you have older people. I have kids I play with, a 3- and a 7-year-old, and then I have clients that I teach that are 70-something years old. It's pretty cool."

Professional pickleball events, such as the Tournament of Champions in Brigham City, Utah, have offered prize money for several years, but the PPF is attempting to establish a tour to showcase and support some of the game's top players. Bend is the fourth of six stops for the inaugural PPF season.

"What we wanted to do was create an opportunity for professional players to compete more often for prize money, but in addition to that create a player's association that would help our players build a practice around pickleball," said PPF president Carl Schmits, who was in Bend for the event. "So organizing clinics, exhibitions, where they could possibly make a little extra money, also help advance the sport in areas where it might not have visibility. You really want to attract as many spectators as possible, which is a different element that we're really trying to promote. This can be a spectator sport, as well."

Schmits said hopes are for the PPF to grow to 18 tournaments next year, and for prize money to double from \$15,000 or \$17,000 per tournament to a minimum of \$30,000.

The hope is that large, excited crowds like the one at Pine Nursery Park this weekend become the norm.

“The U.S. Open this year had 1,200 people participating, almost 1,300 people. It was a party, it was crazy,” Jardim said of a pickleball tournament held in her new hometown of Naples. “It’s growing. The sport is growing and it’s exciting.”

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