

## BOCCE WITH A FRENCH ACCENT

### The game of petanque is played on a field in South Toledo

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BY RYAN E. SMITH  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

It looks like a baseball diamond, tucked next to a former school in South Toledo. It even has the chain-link backstop and the dirt-filled infield.

So what are a bunch of people with metal balls and measuring tapes doing out there? Speaking French, no less?

"Attention vos pieds!" one of the players says to another who isn't paying attention.

*Watch your feet!*

The player hops to the side, just in time to allow one of the gleaming balls to roll past toward a nearby grouping of other spheres.

Forget about the American national pastime; once a week these grounds are appropriated for a popular French game called petanque (pronounced peh-tonk), which celebrates its 100th birthday this year.



Petanque players toss metal balls in an attempt to get as close as possible to the cochonnet, left. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

Similar to bocce, the game usually involves teams of two or three people tossing balls with the aim of getting them closest to the *cochonnet* (French for piglet), a smaller ball that is thrown first.

Every Thursday during the summer, a small group made up mostly of francophiles and French expatriates comes here next to the Common Space Center for Creativity on Reynolds Road to play. They're from the Alliance Francaise, a group that encourages the study of French language and culture and offers classes.

The game's leader is Pierre Cervetto. This grandfather of eight was born in southern France, where people begin playing petanque as soon as they can walk, and he moved to the United States 50 years ago, following his sister. He's as passionate about the game as he is intent on ribbing other players with friendly jokes and providing running commentary (which is as likely to come in English as it is French or even Spanish).

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"Once you know how to play, you want to play," he said. "It's like an addiction."

The game's origins are shrouded in mythology, according to Frank Pipal, secretary of the Federation of Petanque USA.

The story goes that 100 years ago in southern France, there was a tournament of a similar but more physically demanding game called "jeu provençal" that required players to throw the balls longer distances. An older player who couldn't cut it anymore picked up a couple of balls and started playing a shorter version of the game nearby.

Others took notice and - voila - petanque! The name means "feet planted" in the dialect of Provence, which differentiated it from the original game where stepping forward was permitted.

The result was a game with near universal accessibility. All you needed was a few balls (or "boules," as the game is also known) and open space.

"Little kids can do it and disabled people in wheelchairs can play it. Women and children can play it," said Mr. Pipal, of Kenwood, Calif. "It's a real common man's game. It's a real blue-collar working guy's thing."

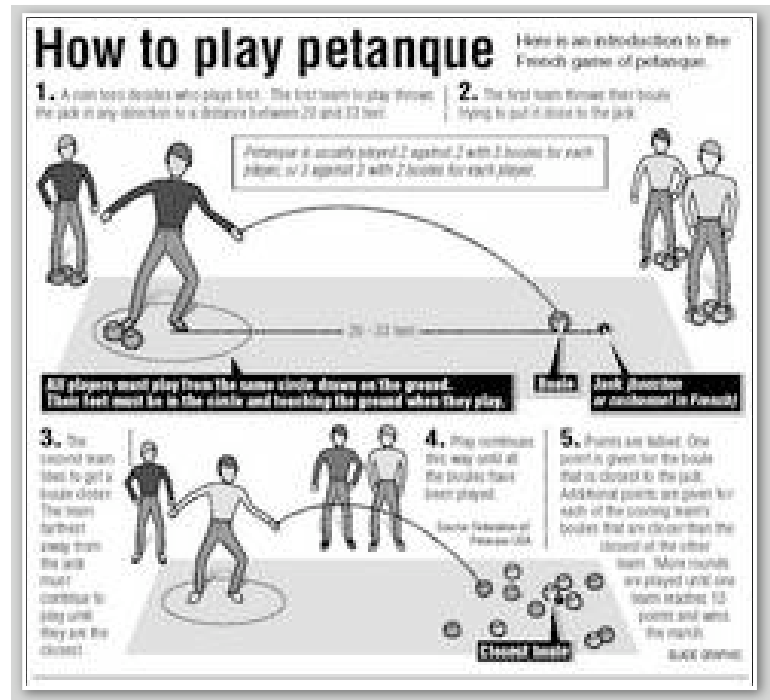
One thing distinguishing petanque from bocce is the weight and size of the balls. Bocce balls are larger and heavier.

Liliane Dockett, who was born in Paris but now lives in Lambertville, said petanque is serious business in her native land.

"I remember it as a child in France. In every park there are boules players and they take it very seriously and [there's] usually very little talking," she said. "It's very, very serious. Competition is harsh."

Here in Toledo, the group takes things a bit more lightly. Players aim to win, but they joke around with each other as much as they play.

"We kid one another, nothing serious," explained Richard Dockett, Liliane's husband and the only native-born American playing one Thursday last month. "We enjoy the game. After that, once in a while we go into the office and have a drink of wine and that's not bad either."



Of course, all it takes is a situation where it's hard to tell which team's ball is closest to bring out the competitors in everyone. Mr. Dockett carries a tape measure to settle such disputes, but he's not the only authority.

"Try metric!" jokes Maurice Buchwalter, 86, of West Toledo one time as he whips out his own tape measure.

On this night, there are only a handful of players, but sometimes the group draws as many as 12. Many bring their own styles, tossing the balls with a high arc or rolling them like bowling balls, sprinkling in some French phrases while they do so.

Even though the game isn't particularly popular in America, you might be surprised by who plays. For example, former Ohio Gov. Bob Taft enjoyed playing petanque on the lawn behind the governor's mansion, his wife, Hope Taft, told Columbus Monthly magazine in 2001.

And then there are the nudists.

"One of the funny things is that apparently it's really big in naturist colonies all up and down Florida," Mr. Pipal said. "Apparently, they've really latched on to it as kind of a sport that fits their needs."

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: [ryansmith@theblade.com](mailto:ryansmith@theblade.com) or 419-724-6103.

[< previous](#)

[next >](#)