

THEY'VE GOT GAME

Shuffleboard is a game of strategy that knows no age limits

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BY RYAN E. SMITH
BLADE STAFF WRITER

Senior citizen Betty Lloyd thinks that shuffleboard has a public relations problem: People seem to associate the game with old people.

"It really got a stereotype that it shouldn't have ...," said the Akron-area woman who is treasurer of the USA National Shuffleboard Association. "We've often said maybe the name shuffleboard should be changed."

After all, calling the players "shufflers" doesn't conjure up images of young, lithe, graceful athletes. That hasn't stopped some people from pushing for it to become an Olympic sport, and it hasn't stopped Bob Sudomir from making his mark on the modern game.

Only 35, the Canton man is already in the Ohio Shuffleboard Hall of Fame. He's won the national singles title four times, including last year, and the doubles title once. Competing in a tournament earlier this month at Toledo's Jermain Park, the teacher with the close-cropped hair was by far the youngest entrant — and perhaps the most feared.

"He intimidates most people, including me," said Bob Cooter, 68, of Kettering, Ohio, who is no slouch himself, having set a state record last year for points earned by winning or placing in tournaments.

In today's game, Mr. Sudomir is seen as the exception. Many of the competitors, retirees who fall in the over-60 crowd, have to settle for being young at heart.

That's just fine with Linda Woda, a Perrysburg woman who took part in the Toledo tournament. At age 69, she has a bad knee, a bad back, and a big smile.

PHOTO GALLERY

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"I'll take on anybody," she said, beaming.

Part of the allure for players is that the game is a strategic one with few physical limitations, making it perfect for young and old, male and female. One player in the local tournament even showed up to play in a wheelchair.

"It really is a sport that anybody can play, but it takes a lot of strategy and a lot of finesse," said Mr. Sudomir, who is president of the Ohio Shuffleboard Association and ended up being the men's winner in the recent competition. "I like the strategy."

Shuffleboard is played with long sticks, or cues, that are used to push discs across a flat concrete court. The goal is to land the disc in a scoring grid while keeping the opponent from doing the same. Some games played to a certain number of points can last several hours.

While the pastime is popular in Florida, where many local snowbirds picked it up, it was born indoors and became popular with English aristocrats as early as the 15th century. Later, an outdoor version became popular on the decks of ocean liners and cruise ships.

Modern shuffleboard was introduced around 1913 at Daytona Beach, Fla., and spread quickly from there, particularly in retirement communities. Today, international competitions include teams from places as far-ranging as Japan, Brazil, and Australia.



Jim Varda of Osceola, Ind., makes a shot in a tournament at Jermain Park in Toledo. (THE BLADE/DAVE ZAPOTOSKY)

In Toledo, the local club consists of about 25 shufflers who play every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at Jermain Park during the summer beginning at 10 a.m. The group also will host the national mixed doubles tournament beginning July 28.

While some take competition very seriously, local club president Janet Gorsuch, 71, of Sylvania, said she likes the game for the exercise, fellowship, and fun.

It helps too that the sport is relatively inexpensive. The entry fee to the Toledo tournament was only \$5.

"It's a lot cheaper than golf," said Clark Bennett, 81, of Adrian.

In fact, the biggest hardship at Jermain Park appeared to be the benches facing the shuffleboard courts.

"It gets hard after a while," Mr. Bennett said, explaining the cushions and carpet squares placed on the seats. "We've got another one in the car that's worn out."

As for the future of the game and how much it will involve today's young people, players like Mr. Sudomir are hopeful.

"There are efforts out there to make it something that people are introduced to at a younger age," he said.

Mr. Sudomir learned to play the game in Lakeside, Ohio, about 40 miles east of Toledo. That community and the Columbus suburb of Upper Arlington sponsor annual kids' tournaments, he said.

Here in Toledo, the local club has worked with some physical education students at Notre Dame Academy.

"They have great fun," said Pam Edgell, the school's athletic director and a physical education teacher.

Even if more young people do take up the game, it doesn't mean they're automatically going to replicate the success of Mr. Sudomir. Just ask Demian Robbins, 37, of West Toledo, the youngest official member of the Toledo club who is always taking on older opponents.

"They kick my butt all the time," he said.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: ryansmith@theblade.com or 419-724-6103.

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