

Dunlap's First Pickleball League Serves Up Competition and Community

A sport that was virtually unknown to Walter Schaben and Carlie Noska just two summers ago is now bringing a new organized recreational opportunity to the community.

The first-ever Dunlap Pickleball League will begin this week, giving locals a chance to enjoy competition, exercise and social interaction on the city's recently expanded pickleball facilities.

For Schaben and Noska, the idea grew from a chance encounter at the court.

"One day, we went to the park and a couple people were playing," Schaben said. "Joe Weber and his fiancée, Alec Hast and his wife, and Connor Garrett and his wife were there. We walked up and they asked us if we wanted to play, and Carlie and I instinctively were like, 'Yes.'"

Neither had played pickleball before.

"They gave us the basics," Schaben said.

Not long afterward, Noska purchased a pair of second-hand paddles, and the couple began looking for opportunities to play.

"We thought it was fun and we tried to figure out who could consistently play with us," Schaben said.

He credits Trevor Biley and Jenna Von Sossan with helping grow the sport locally. "They are the pickleball people in this town," Schaben said. "They know what's going on. They know the rules. Anytime we want to play, they show up and play. We still learn things from them."

What started as an occasional activity soon became a regular hobby.

"We've been playing ever since," Schaben said. "We try to get out there as much as we can."

Now, the pair hopes to share that enthusiasm with others through the new league.

"I want more people to play," Schaben said. "The more people who play, the more games I get to play."

He also admits there is a competitive side to his motivation.

"I want to beat them," he joked.

The league will run for 10 weeks, with teams competing on Wednesday evenings. Players will record wins and losses throughout the season before concluding with a seeded tournament. Entry fees will be pooled and awarded to the top-performing team.

The format is designed to be flexible and welcoming, organizers said. Teams consist of two players and may be either coed or all-female. Substitute players will be allowed when needed.

"If somebody misses the deadline or wants to join after we get started, we're going to make it easy to get them added," Schaben said. "The goal is to get people out there." Noska said creating a structured schedule should help more people participate.

"We've been inviting our friends for a while," she said. "Having a league, a set date and time, is easier for everyone to know, 'OK, I'm going to go out and do this.'"

Beyond competition, Noska hopes the league creates another way for residents to connect.

"For people our age, there's not a whole lot to do other than go to the bar or go play golf," she said. "It's nice to have something else to do that's outside with our friends and not in front of a screen."

The pair also hopes the league encourages greater use of the city's pickleball facilities. Dunlap recently added a second dedicated pickleball court after growing interest in the sport created scheduling conflicts on the dual-use basketball and pickleball court.

"I'm thankful to be in a community that has built not just one nice court but two of them," Schaben said. "I'd love to utilize them and get people to appreciate and utilize them."

The league is intended for players of all skill levels, including beginners.

"I think the sport is extremely beginner-friendly," Schaben said. "It's easy to play but difficult to master. You can play with anyone — young or old — and still have a blast."

To help newcomers, Schaben and Biley plan to review basic rules during the league's opening night, and Biley and Von Sossan are creating a sign explaining the fundamentals of the game.

Interest has already extended beyond Dunlap, with several players from Woodbine expressing interest in participating.

Organizers said spectators are welcome to attend matches, and they hope the league continues to grow in future years.

"We'll fine-tune it as we go," Noska said.

Schaben agrees.

"I'm a practitioner of learning as I go," he said.

For now, both organizers say the objective is simple: get people active, build community connections and have fun.

"My goal right now is to get people out and excited about it," Noska said. "We have these two really nice courts. Let's use them."

Contact Walter Schaben by emailing Schaben16@hotmail.com with questions or interest.