

The History of the Venture Out Pickleball Club

Pickleball was not the original use of the courts at Venture Out. In 1991, the “Paddle Tennis Club” was formed and played on the old carpeted lawn bowling green. In 1992, with the help of the Tennis Club who provided some old equipment, the VO Social Board funded \$1,200 for net posts, nets, fencing, etc. to get two (2) courts ready for paddle tennis play.

In 1994/95, a new game called “Pickleball” was introduced to the Paddle Tennis Club and folks could play both sports on the similar-sized courts with the help of a few new painted lines. In 1998 the Club moved to the old tennis courts 3 and 4 on Aztec. A regulation surface was built and the club boasted 69 members, 39 of which were Paddle Tennis members. By March, 2000 there were 91 members and more and more were playing the new Pickleball game. Two courts were just not enough, and in the summer of 2001, four (4) new courts were added on Aztec. Two original members, Ken Biberdorf (a Past President) and Ewald Kunstle (Mr. Pickleball!) stated:

“Located between the pull-throughs and Aztec, these courts are a guest’s first view of a sporting activity as he/she enters VO. The obvious FUN, ENERGY and VITALITY provide a great first impression of life in our Park!”

Both sports could be enjoyed by the growing number of residents and in 2001-2, the central area between the courts was improved, following a design by Ed Orlovsky. Bicycle racks, benches and pavers were added at a cost of \$8,500. The Club also received \$10,000 for a shed and landscaping in the area, the labor provided by talented Club members. During the construction, two circular planters at either end of the area caused some concern when residents thought that they were Barbeque Pits!!! However, the flowers planted there every year by the Club added to the appeal of the area.

Due to the increased demand for pickleball by November, 2002, one court was designated solely for pickleball. January 18, 2002 was the “Grand Opening of the Paddle Tennis/Pickleball Courts” at the old location. By 2003, interest in Paddle Tennis died out among the 140 members. Lessons were taught and interest increased for the new sport of pickleball. Another two (2) courts were added in 2009 at a cost of \$44,000, providing the now over 300 members with more opportunities to play, and on February 21, 2012 the Club was officially renamed the “Venture Out Pickleball Club”. More and more people have learned to enjoy pickleball, shown in the following chart of membership in the past 15 years:

2008-09	282 members
2009-10	345 members
2010-11	357 members
2011-12	392 members
2012-13	424 members
2013-14	499 members
2014-15	485 members
2015-16	516 members
2016-17	533 members
2017-18	575 members
2018-19	609 members
2019-20	646 members
2020-21	370 members
2021-22	649 members
2022-23	753 members
2023-24	729 members

(source: K. Blitgen, Membership Chair)

More courts were needed to accommodate the growing popularity of Pickleball. In April, 2013, discussions began about adding two (2) pickleball courts in the Northeast corner of VO. After they were built, these courts were used for Ladder and Group Play, but with close to 500 members, even these courts did not seem to be enough! Thus in 2014, work began on the design of the new NE Sportsplex, and members are now playing on our 11 new courts in this area. Members have heard outsiders say that our courts are the best-designed pickleball courts around, and our current 600+ members are enjoying this wonderful facility.

Our Pickleball Tournaments have also played a vital role in increasing the popularity of the sport. Tournaments have benefitted the funding in the Venture Out Social Club immensely and assisted in funding many improvements to our park. It all started in 2002 when the first “All-City Pickleball Tournament” was held. The women made and provided the food for the tournament, and participated in other fundraisers such as: selling Club shirts and developing and selling Cookbooks (that raised over \$5,000). Since then, this tournament has become an annual event (along with the East Valley Tournament that is held in the Fall), where VO’s tremendous volunteer support has made them so successful. These tournaments are very popular and registrations have been known to fill up in 90 seconds!

We are proud of our first-rate pickleball courts and very thankful for the guidance and leadership of our past and present members who have contributed selflessly to teach pickleball and develop what we have today! Names such as: Gene Hrdlicka (1st President), Ken and Sharon Biberdorf, Ewald Kunstle, Ed and Lily Orlovsky, Dick Martin, Bob Robillard, Gary Robbins and Earl Hill (USAPA Ambassador) to name just a few.

Thank You to ALL Venture Out Pickleball Club Members – Past and Present!!!!

Submitted by Wendy Rath