

PUTTING THE SERVE IN SERVICE

The Southern Nevada Pickleball Club is bettering the community through its work on the courts. BY AMANDA LOUDIN

AT FIRST GLANCE, the regular Tuesday/Thursday pickleball sessions at Las Vegas's Dula Community Center look like any other. But dig a little deeper and you'll learn that many of the players on the court were in the military and are there to not only play pickleball but also build community with fellow veterans. Those twice-weekly sessions are a driving element of the Southern Nevada Pickleball Club's (SNPC's) multipronged mission: to increase participation in the sport, address the needs of seniors, build a youth pickleball presence, and provide programs for veterans in need of adaptive services.

The SNPC was founded in 2019 by three avid players—John Sloan, Earl Stitt, and Patti Chess—and in its short time as an official club, it has grown to 225 members, obtained 501(c)(3) status, and put its mission into play. "I had wanted to start a club for several years, and when Earl approached me with his idea for an adaptive program for vets, I thought that was the secret sauce to get things off the ground," says Sloan. "He's a veteran himself and personally used pickleball as therapy, so he understands its value this way."

When Sloan and Stitt approached Las Vegas officials about their idea for an adaptive program, the city signed on, providing the gym space and equipment. Stitt connected with an area pickleball instructor, recruited an army of volunteers, and reached out to local veterans' organizations. Now on any given Tuesday or Thursday, you can find 15 to 20 veterans enjoying the game with the help of the SNPC.

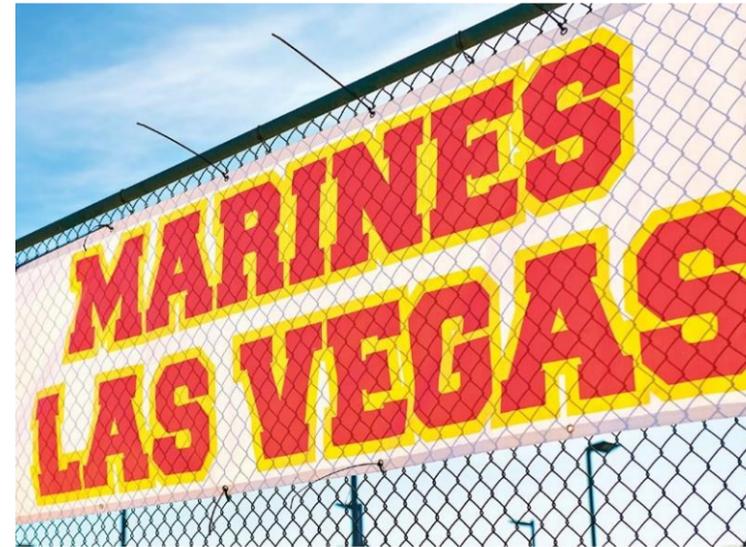
Sloan says that the social nature of pickleball is one of the game's features the veterans appreciate. "It's unique in that way—full of laughter and friendly interactions," he says. "For veterans, especially those who are dealing with PTSD, it can be a nonthreatening, safe environment." The adaptive program is designed around six-week sessions; at the end of each one, players receive their own paddles. Many



O SAY CAN YOU SEE
The Toys for Tots tournament began with the national anthem



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MANY VETERANS GO ON TO BECOME REGULARS OR VOLUNTEER FOR THE NEXT SESSION, PAYING IT FORWARD.

DREAM TEAM
From left: SNPC treasurer Augie Costanzo with founding members Chess, Stitt, and Sloan.

go on to become regulars or volunteer for the next session, paying it forward.

In addition to creating the adaptive program, the SNPC has helped foster youth participation in the sport. To date, the club's volunteers have teamed up with more than 20 middle schools and two high schools while also working toward establishing youth club teams. Adult outreach is a driver, too: The SNPC is active on the local league scene and supports the New Dinkers of Las Vegas, a group that provides free lessons to beginner picklers.

While the pandemic has slowed some of the SNPC's efforts, the club's impact on the Las Vegas region is clear: Whether at local tournaments, helping with the Toys for Tots program during the holidays, or inspiring the area's young people, the SNPC is fulfilling

its mission. "I've been playing for 12 years, and it's amazing how people gravitate to and embrace the sport," says Sloan. "We've got a great active group underway."

There's little question the veterans involved would agree. One of the program's regulars, Melissa "Rowdie" McMahon, perhaps best demonstrates the program's impact. After serving as a nurse while deployed in Afghanistan, McMahon suffered such intense PTSD that she rarely left home, limiting her world to her husband and a few close friends and relatives. Once she joined the adaptive program, however, McMahon's "safe" family extended to her fellow pickleball players. In her words: "Thank you, SNPC. You've given me an irreplaceable and priceless gift."

