

## Pickleball picking up steam in Venice

By **SCOTT LOCKWOOD**  
SPORTS EDITOR

Christopher Colon was walking around Venice island for his daily exercise routine when he decided to stop into the Venice Community Center to get a drink, charge his phone and take a break from the searing heat that's gripped the Sun Coast all summer.

During his break, Colon caught a glimpse of what he called an interesting game that several people inside the Center's main hall were playing. The game was pickleball, and it's one of world's fastest-growing sports.

"It looked interesting because I have a background in pingpong and a little bit of tennis," said Colon, 35. "That's what this is basically a combination of. I went home that day and ordered a paddle, came back the next Monday with it and stayed here and played for six hours straight."

Pickleball is a combination of tennis, racquetball and badminton. Players play with solid rackets using wiffleballs on a court that's the same size as a badminton court.

"It's not as fast as badminton or pingpong because of the wiffleball," Colon said. "It's fast and it's quick reaction, but you don't have to move as much as you do in tennis because of the smaller court."

The sport has become a focal point on Colon's weight loss journey. After his first day of playing — his first day of sports activity in five years — he needed muscle massages to get around.

Colon is showing rapid improvement, both on and off the court.

"I started playing with the beginner's group and they told me to move to the advanced group on the same day," Colon said. "I just decided I was going to go hard and get back in shape. I knew I had a week to heal, so I'm going hard again and my muscles will eventually be able to take it."

Program director Dorian Hardy said that as many as 80 people play in the Monday sessions at Venice Community Center, which hosts three sessions of pickleball on Mondays. Beginner-level players take to the courts from 8 a.m. to noon and advanced players go from 1 to 4 p.m.

"We have people who play that are aged 20 to 80 — maybe even more," Hardy said. "It's a very good sport because you can play as a beginner and it gets tougher and tougher the more you play. I've played it three times and I'm already in love with the sport."

Hardy said she expects the number to go up since an evening session from 5 to 8 p.m. has been added.

"It's been really successful," Hardy said, "even from the beginning because it's so big here and it's nice and cool compared to the outside weather."

Venice resident Ed McCaffrey, 74, a 12-year veteran of pickleball who says the sport keeps him in shape, agreed.

"It's great to play indoors because you're not out in the blistering heat and you're not chased away by the rain all the time," he said. "It's a very quick and low-to-the-floor game ... and I think



Ed McCaffrey returns a shot during a recent game of pickleball at the Venice Community Center.



The husband and wife pickleball duo of Pam, front, and Greg Grant take on a pair of challengers this week in open play at the Venice Community Center.



SUN PHOTOS BY JEFFERY SCOTT FRAYER

Christopher Colon has only been playing pickleball for a couple of weeks. He said he stumbled upon the sport while stopping into the Venice Community Center for a drink while taking a walk and has been hooked since. It's also helping him on his weight loss journey.



Christopher Colon, right, and Brian King high-five after a match during open pickleball play at the Venice Community Center.



Peter Plescia digs out a low shot during pickleball open play at the Venice Community Center.



Pam Grant, left, and Linda Jeroy exchange fist bumps after a hard-fought pickleball match this week at the Venice Community Center.



Greg Grant keeps his eyes on the ball while returning a serve in a pickleball match this week at the Venice Community Center.

a very exciting game. It's giving some people some exercise that are probably not exercising at all."

McCaffrey has been one of the more experienced players on the court this summer and has helped a lot of newcomers learn pickleball.

"There's a level for everybody that's here," McCaffrey said. "Some of the novices think they can come in with the big boys, but they're in for a sad awakening."

Pam and Greg Grant had played pickleball for less than a year when they

joined the games at the Venice Community Center. Pam Grant, 64, said the pair learned the game from friends who had been playing for a long time.

"When we first came down here we didn't even know what pickleball was," she said. "It's just now starting off where we're from in Kentucky."

"It's been a lot of fun and you meet a lot of people. There's a lot of good players down here and it's better to play against good players because it makes you better."

Greg Grant, 68, said he

plays a lot of tennis, and that helped him learn pickleball at a rapid pace.

"It's a lot easier to pick up than tennis," he said. "Quite a bit of tennis, like the strokes, the quickness and the movement, transferred over. Obviously, the shots are a little different and you have to hit the ball a different way."

Hardy said that pickleball sessions will continue through the summer, and that if she could find a weekday in the Venice Community Center's busy fall and winter schedule,

she'll continue to offer playing time.

"It's definitely a craze right now so we'll see where it goes in Venice," Hardy said. "It's definitely growing in leaps and bounds."

McCaffrey said filling those fall and winter sessions with players wouldn't be an issue.

"Let's make this a year-round sport," he said as

he hurried away to play another match. "They'll fill it up really good."

Greg Grant had a message for those who may be curious about the sport.

"I'd tell them to come out to the Community Center and just watch," he said. "It's not a very expensive sport and it's good exercise that will keep you healthy."

Email: slockwood@venicegondolier.com