

Tchoukball a “Sport for All”

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By Brian Knowlton.



I was a shrimp in grade school -- and still only 4-feet-9 when I entered junior high -- but like a lot of American shrimps I was drawn, against all logic, to the sport of giants: basketball.

Growing up in Indiana, I would spend endless hours practicing shots on a basketball court in our rural backyard. It wasn't much of a court, really just a patch of hard dirt with a backboard that my Dad had fashioned from plywood and then mounted on a telephone pole. I painted half of that pole white, some 40 years ago.

As far as I know, no one has ever finished the job. Anyway, small though I was, I loved taking long shots, from way outside, because they were harder for my taller friends (and most of my friends WERE taller) to block. To be sure, I was much too small to ever hope to make the school team; to be frank, I didn't have the "skills" anyway. But I kept playing, and much later, when I had four kids of my own, I passed my passion on to them. For years, as they got older, taller and faster, they would still sometimes invite me to come shoot around. But finally came a day when -- as painful as it was -- I had to admit that I simply couldn't keep up. I was too old, too short (though I'd grown a foot or so since junior high), and a step too slow.

When I turned 50 a few years ago, my sporting options seemed frustratingly few. I played adult softball for a while, but spent most of my time on the sidelines, watching younger folk play. I jogged -- ran a half-dozen marathons, if slowly -- but craved the quick action and camaraderie of a team sport. I just wasn't ready to hang up my sneakers. Enter tchoukball, in the form of one Pierre-Alain Girardin. My wife, who was helping him improve his English, introduced us. Pierre mentioned that he and some friends played an odd-sounding international sport invented by Swiss physician, tchoukball, in a local gym.

My youngest son, Andrew, tried it and loved it. Soon, full of enthusiasm, Andrew had lined up enough friends to start a high-school tchoukball club, doubtless the nation's first. Finally one day, tired of hearing about it, I came to watch. And let me tell you, it's hard to watch tchoukball without wanting to play. Seeing people hurl the leather ball against the resilient cords of the square blue rebound frame creates an overwhelming itch -- whatever your athletic abilities -- to jump in and give it a try. I tried it and my eyes grew wide with a wondrous thought: perhaps I might not have to hang up my sneakers after all. So many popular sports -- basketball, football, hockey -- are just not suited to those of a certain age or physique.

They encourage rough bodily contact; they favor large physical size; and they place a premium on aggressivity, sometimes even in-your-face rudeness. The win-or-die

emphasis can turn sports into the opposite of what they were meant to be: simple fun. We see red-faced soccer-parents screaming at resentful coaches and reluctant referees, while 5-year-olds -- supposedly the very reason for the sport -- cringe on the field.

Tchoukball, by its brilliant design, avoids these corrosive tendencies while preserving the thrill of quick, intense, artful and athletic play. Its entire emphasis is on creative cooperation, mutual respect, skillful teamwork; played properly it creates a certain kinetic beauty. Because players are not allowed to block or hinder others or to intercept passes, there is no real advantage to being especially tall, wide or husky -- or to being a man rather than a woman, or younger rather than older. Players on offense have to move the ball quickly into place for a good shot, so crisp and accurate passing between several players is a must. And because each team can score at either end of the floor, players at both ends are fully involved. No single "star" player can dominate. While some skills are certainly required



-- a reasonable ability to run, catch, jump and throw -- tchoukball gives no overwhelming edge to the young and, as I said, confers no absolute advantage on the tall or the muscular. Which, from my middle-aged perspective, is all good. I now play regularly on the team that Pierre-Alain coaches at a school gym in Bethesda, Maryland. We have quite an amazing assortment of players, ranging from skilled high-school athletes to graying enthusiasts like myself. We have men and women; doctors and lawyers, scientists and an opera-singer, students and teachers; and citizens of several countries.

Some people have played team sports at high levels, while some have never done so at any level. The only thing we all really have in common is a powerful love of the sport, and a certain zeal for sharing that love.

For this we owe much to the endlessly energetic Pierre-Alain, a veritable force of nature in promoting tchoukball, along with his ever-helpful and always smiling wife, Sylvie. By his unstinting investment of time, sweat and determination, Pierre has made himself a sort of Johnny Appleseed of tchoukball. He and Sylvie are planting the seeds for what hopefully will someday be a nationwide embrace of the sport, as tchoukball's peaceful spirit spreads winningly outward, like ripples from a stone dropped into a placid pool. Already Pierre has helped found tchoukball clubs in Los Angeles and Pennsylvania, as well as in Canada.

On the local level, here at the Bethesda epicenter of American tchoukball, Pierre pushes our team to work hard. Gradually, we've come together to lift our level of play. But despite the serious work, we always have fun -- yes, always. It is rare indeed that when Pierre calls practice to an end, we are ready to stop.

Frankly, I'm not sure when I will be ready to stop.

For now, those sneakers -- the ones I feared I might have to hang up -- remain firmly laced on my aging, but happy, feet.