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Kicking off romances

Happy hour follows sport

By Kathleen Wereszynski Murray
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Johnny LeHane and Melissa Schnecke played kickball together as counselors at a day camp in Union Vale.

"I guess you can say kickball helped bring us together," said LeHane, who married Schnecke several years later.

Now, more and more adults are making connections through the playground sport, thanks to the World Adult Kickball Association, which LeHane founded with three friends in Washington nearly a decade ago.

The Hudson Valley native recently moved back with his family and decided to introduce the social-athletic organization to a hometown crowd.

Coed adult teams from the group's New York Independence Division will kick the iconic red rubber ball of their elementary school days at the Dutchess County Fairgrounds, then kick back at Rhinebeck Grille — the designated division bar — on Thursday evenings this summer.

Farther south on Route 9, members of the New York Mid-Hudson Division will play at Bright Horizons at Casperkill, followed by happy hour at Mahoney's Irish Pub & Restaurant.

Each division, whose players must be at least 21 years old and have health insurance, also has at least two parties: a mid-season party and an end-of-season party complete with awards ceremony.

This mix of nostalgia, exercise and alcohol-infused social gathering has netted the kickball association more than 20,000 registered members across 20 states. U.S. Marines have started the Fallujah Semper Fidelis Division in Iraq. The kickball group even has a division in India.

Kickball has also sparked romance for the after-work crowd that plays it.

"We do have some people who met at kickball, got engaged, married and had kids," LeHane said.

National sponsorship

For the 34-year-old father of two, the association's success has meant leaving a management position in AOL's Connectivity Operations in 2004 to work full time as the league's chief marketing officer.

LeHane maintains his organization's national brand image and oversees sponsor bar designations and

brand partnerships and events. The association is affiliated with Miller Lite, Simply Wireless GameTime Management and Mikasa Sports USA.

The Hudson Valley native, who declined to disclose the association's annual revenues, often works from his laptop at local coffeehouses.

"We took a ridiculous idea and applied good business sense," LeHane said.

Kickball is played on a diamond-like baseball field. Three strikes equal an out and four balls equal a walk.

Players can peg a runner below the shoulders or throw him or her out at a base.

The association has copyrighted its official rules, which include specifications for pitching — "no bouncies" — and catching, the playing field and equipment and referees.

The kickball association claims a 220-pound male will burn 582 calories and a 135-pound female will burn 357 calories during a typical 50-minute kickball game.

During a recent pickup game at Casperkill, a group of twenty- and thirty-somethings seemed to be laughing a lot more than working up a sweat.

"I think I pulled all my quads at once," joked LeHane as he rounded the bases.

He drew little sympathy from Pam Ivers, a 39-year-old LaGrange resident.

"Where's the violins?" she said.

Ivers, president of the Poughkeepsie division, said there's no reason why children should have all the fun.

"It puts everybody back to fifth grade," the married mother of a 7-year-old said. "Our kids all thought it was so funny that we were doing something they do in PE class."

Kickball rookie Lida Viruet, 39, who was born in Puerto Rico, said she was having a blast at her second-ever practice.

"It's a game for all ages," said Viruet, a Poughkeepsie resident who is single. "It's my way to get out of the house and do exercise. Being coed and meeting people sounded great, too."

Playing hard

Peter Palladino, 40, of LaGrange, hasn't played since fourth grade, but he picked it up again fast.

"When I play, I play hard," he said.

Ivers shot back: "He's like that kid on the playground who will cream you."

LaGrange resident Diane Lloyd just came to check out the scene.

"It sounded like something I might still be able to do," said Lloyd, who has fond memories of playing kickball at her Catholic grade school in Queens.

The married mother of three seemed to be enjoying the chance to socialize.

"It's a way to get out of the house and be with adults," she said.

German-born Siobhan Solberg, who studied music performance at Bard College and teaches children, was learning how to play for the first time.

"What do I do?" Solberg yelled after catching the ball at third base. "I'm from Europe. We don't play kickball there."

The 23-year-old single Rhinecliff resident said she was searching for a team sport to play this summer and has recruited her friends to play in the Rhinebeck division.

LeHane said adult kickball has helped players network, make friends and meet soulmates.

"It's a primary post-collegiate social experience," he said. "That's when you really start to lose those social connections."

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