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Kickball has gotten even better since third grade

By Jeanine Benca
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"BOOM!"

Even that hollow rubbery sound the ball makes when you kick it is hilarious. Players say there's just something thoroughly ridiculous, shamelessly immature and unequivocally awesome about the latest trend in recreational sports.

"I feel like I'm in third grade again," 55-year-old Danville resident Mike Barry whispered giddily, snickering like a schoolboy before bouncing onto the field at Danville's Sycamore Valley Park on Wednesday night.

It's kickball.

That probably bears repeating. Kickball -- the long-forgotten game where you got to kick-the-heck out of a big, hollow, reddish-brown rubber ball, yell a lot, sweat, and race hyperactively around the bases -- harkens back to elementary school P.E. class.

Sort of like softball but requiring half the skill, most would agree it didn't get much better than kickball.

But now players around the country -- more than 20,000 in 20 states -- have found a way to improve upon the game they recall so fondly from their youths.

They have added grown-up banter to the mix. And beer.

In Danville, the first official season of the town's adult kickball league is winding down. And other East Bay cities, taking their cue from East Coast leagues that have sprung up in the past decade, are on the bandwagon. An adult league has been going strong in Livermore for several years and in Oakland a developing grassroots league is underway.

Residents of Piedmont, San Ramon and Walnut Creek also have expressed interest in starting leagues, city officials say.

It is not hard to see why.

Kickball is a "throwback" to grade school, said Orion Walker, 33, full-time director of the Northern California division of the World Adult Kickball Association.

Peoples' first reaction to his job tends to be surprise -- mostly that such an organization exists. Believe it or not, he tells them, WAKA is an actual, for-profit company based in Virginia.

Their second reaction tends to be unadulterated glee, said Walker, a self-described geek from Southern California who started playing in one of WAKA's Hollywood-based kickball leagues several years ago.

"It was all about nostalgia. Lots of people would bring their '80s mixed tapes to the fields. We got a taste for it and kept coming back," he said.

Started on a whim about 10 years ago in Washington, D.C. by a few post-college bachelors, WAKA originally was intended as a singles mixer for young professionals. But the concept took off, spreading across the Midwest and eventually erupting in Southern California and San Francisco.

"We were basically trying to figure out a way for us to socialize with people, network, meet new friends, have an excuse to hang out," said WAKA founder Jimmy Walicek. Since those days, he has settled down, gotten married and moved to the suburbs. But the goal of WAKA, Walicek says, has remained more or less the same.

"We kind of consider ourselves 51 percent social and 49 percent kickball," he said.

In recent times, kickball has fanned out to East Bay suburbs, where it is being enjoyed by kids-at-heart of all ages.

"I was a geeky kid and a geeky teenager and a pretty geeky 20-something. At 33, I'm still pretty much a geek," Walker said with a chuckle. "For me, it's a way of sort of taking back the schoolyard."

On Wednesday, Barry, a happily married Danville dad and captain of the Chevrolet Dublin team, faced off with 22-year-old Jeremy Hernandez, head of the Safeway Smashers.

"We're playing against people in their 40s," Hernandez said, eyes wide, marveling at the concept. When Hernandez first suggested the kickball league to his co-workers at Safeway's corporate office, they weren't sure what to make of it, he recalled.

"What game do you want to play?" he recalled his friends asking, cocking their heads to the side.

But now that they've started, they aren't likely to stop.

"It's really social. Everyone's just out to have a good time," he said.

Ditto, said Barry, who managed to convince all of his neighbors in the Wood Ranch subdivision to join up.

"It's so much fun," he said, staring at the field. "The people on my team can't wait to be here."

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For kickball rules and league information visit the World Adult Kickball Association Web site: www.kickball.com