

# ‘THE GREAT EQUALIZER’

*Seniors gather weekly for the ageless sport of bocce ball to improve physical and mental health.*

By Laura Dukas  
Special to Senior Living

Bocce ball is not a spectator sport. The members of Frederick Bocce would rather invite all onlookers to grab a ball and join them.

Frederick Bocce is a group primarily made up of people over 50, though anyone is invited to join the game. They play weekly in Baker Park from around May through October on either Saturday or Sunday, depending on which day has a better forecast.

“We play on Sunday when there’s a concert in the bandshell,” said Judy Briley, the chairwoman of Frederick Bocce.

The group has recently formed a nonprofit to raise money to build an official Baker Park bocce court, since they are currently playing on the grass.

They have played in the park since July 2014 and have mostly spread through word of mouth.

Skip Irwin, of Frederick, said he was one of those aforementioned onlookers who the team successfully recruited. He went to a concert in the park and “saw this really fun group of folks rolling balls on the bumpy grass,” he recalled.

Bocce appeals to him because it’s a social sport and doesn’t make participants run-down or out of breath.

Though the majority of the team members are seniors, the players agreed that the sport itself is ageless.

And anywhere from eight to 100 people can play, making it easy to be flexible and keep the game fun and light.

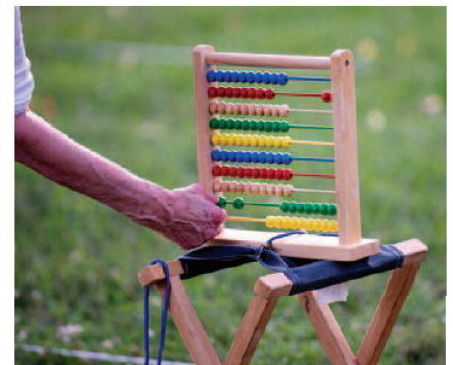
Past players at Baker Park have included young children and teens who played unified bocce in high

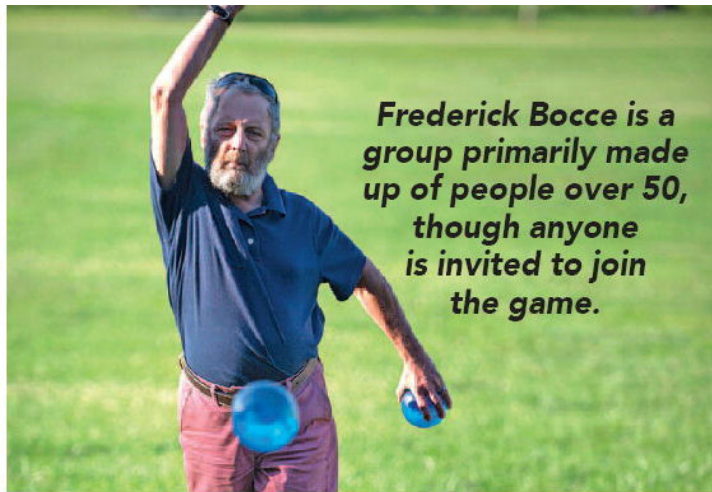
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Photos by Bill Green/ The Frederick News-Post

TOP: Gerri Mitchell takes her turn at tossing the ball onto the grassy makeshift bocce ball court in Baker Park on a recent Saturday evening.

MIDDLE: Margaret Rosato, left, and Arlene Smith take their turns at the line on the bocce ball court in Baker Park on a recent Saturday evening.

BOTTOM: The games are scored on a unique sliding scoring board.





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**Don McEntee takes his turn at tossing the ball onto the grassy makeshift bocce ball court in Baker Park.**

school and were looking to continue after graduation.

“It’s kind of the great equalizer. You can have an 80-year-old playing a 20-year-old and be competitive since it’s not a matter of strength, as long as you can see,” said Frederick Bocce member Mike Hotovy.

The rules for bocce ball are pretty simple. There is one small ball called the pallino, or target ball, and players have to throw larger balls at it to try to get as close to it as possible. Each team throws four balls and whoever gets closest to the pallino wins. You can also use your designated throw to knock someone else’s ball away from the pallino.

Briley was the person to really bring this all together. Her friend Texanna Dutrow had built a court in her backyard because she wanted her husband to get more exercise. Briley started playing at their house on Friday nights and later started a game at a party. She asked a few friends if they would enjoy playing more regularly, and the Baker Park games were born.

Team members said the game is beneficial for both their physical and especially mental health. Plus, it gets you outside in the fresh air and introduces you to new people.

“You’re having fun, you’re laughing, you’re bending your arms and legs,” said Louise Hotovy.

The idea of the new court is to make the game better and more competitive, to the point where they’d invite other teams in for competitions. The new court will also be more senior-friendly since it will be wheelchair accessible, a

smoother surface and longer, with more playing space.

The court will be able to be used by anyone in the community at any time, unless otherwise reserved.

“If they want to play in the snow, they are certainly welcome to,” Irwin said.

The Senior Recreation Council has been a huge supporter of the court and will have a designated Bocce Night on a weekly basis, fundraising chairwoman Connie Martin said.

The City of Frederick will be providing installation, electricity and water for the court, but Frederick Bocce now has to fundraise to pay for materials. Briley said this will cost about \$70,000.

So far, she said Friends of Baker Park has been very generous in their support, as have Frederick businesses, including Nido’s, Spin the Bottle Wine Company, Magoo’s Pub and Eatery, Celebrate Frederick and Rita’s Italian Ice.

“Everyone has received it in a positive way,” Briley said of the idea of a community bocce court.

The surface of the court will be made of the same material found on tennis courts, on top of a concrete pad. There will also be gravel underneath the concrete to help with rain drainage. There will also be a scoreboard and etched bricks for people who donate over \$150.

They hope to build the court in the fall.

“And it’s only going to take three weeks — if we have the funds,” Briley said.

*Tax deductible donations for the bocce ball court can be made at [FrederickBocce.org](http://FrederickBocce.org).*