

# A PLACE TO CALL HOME



*Local pickleball clubs will soon establish their own facility in McCall to host games and tournaments*



**W**hen the sun shines down on a beautiful day, the tennis courts fill with players. Echoes of a racket's thwack and the sharp skid of shoes on pavement fill the air as the players catch their breath and break a sweat.

At the same time, just a few courts over, laughter can be heard between the hollow bounces of a Wiffle ball. These players are part of a sport that has been growing in popularity for several years in Valley County and throughout the world.

"Some of the tennis players call us a circus, and I just laugh, because that's exactly what we are," says Hope Ayres of the Valley County Pickleball Club. "I love that we can be out there together, having fun, and laughing."

Ayres is the club's community liaison and project coordinator. Throughout the winter, she spends her time in Arizona, playing pickleball in the warmer weather. All morning, she stays active, laughing with her friends, and falling deeper into the addictively fun sport.

Pickleball combines elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis as players use paddles to volley a pickleball, which is essentially a more durable Wiffle ball. Originally invented as a children's game in the 1960s on Bainbridge Island, Wash., the sport has since grown to host several annual tournaments both on the national stage and internationally.

The sport is played by two or four players on a badminton-sized court—



pickleball every day. And it's a great way to keep your mind active—it's a great sport."

Overall, pickleball's accessibility has contributed to its rapid growth within community centers, physical education classes, public parks, private

to justify becoming an official non-profit club."

As the club grew, they filed for 501(c)(3) status and became a nonprofit in 2014. At this point, the club operated out of Donnelly and had established their first painted pickleball court.

By 2019, they had paid for and painted four courts; all fit within the space of one of the two tennis courts in Donnelly. The club had grown beyond 80 members, hosting free community lessons, small tournaments, and social events.

"It was working wonderfully," says Ayres. "We had 16 to 25 players playing every day."

about a quarter the size of a standard tennis court—with paddles similar to table tennis, except they're a little larger. A net divides the court in half similar to tennis, except it's a couple of inches shorter.

There are several ideas behind why pickleball has been called one of the fastest-growing sports across the country.

"It doesn't matter if you're 8 or 88," says Larry Keene, current club president. "[We] call it a healthy addiction. Anybody can play and there are clubs here in Valley County."

While some other racket sports can take hours upon hours of lessons and practice to enjoy to their fullest extent, anyone can pick up a paddle, play pickleball, and have a blast, all in the same afternoon.

"Pickleball is so easy to learn, whereas I took tennis lessons for months and could barely hit the ball," Ayres says. Physically it keeps me in shape, I don't have to go to the gym to work out because I'm playing

health clubs, YMCA facilities, and retirement communities.

"Every place we went to play pickleball, everyone was so friendly and so welcoming. They want you to come in a join their group," Ayres says. "It's a very, very, very social game, and it's really good for those of us who are of a certain age and can't run as fast as we used to."

### The Pickle In Valley County

Within McCall, Donnelly, and the surrounding areas, pickleball first began to grow in popularity during the late-2000s. Ayres first began playing with her community in 2008. At the time, there were no dedicated pickleball courts, so players would have to put down tape over a tennis court to mark the boundaries of play, and then remove it immediately after they finished playing.

Within the next few years, this community realized it would be beneficial to establish a pickleball club to support local players, run tournaments, and establish dedicated courts.

"Just a handful of players were enjoying the fast-growing game of pickleball," the club writes in a statement about their history, "By July of 2011, there were enough local players



Now with about 100 paid members and fellow clubs popping up all around the county, Ayres and her pickleball pals decided it was time to find a place to establish a facility to call their own. They intend to break ground in 2022.

There will soon be an eight-court pickleball complex complete with restrooms and parking, owned and maintained by the community. Ayres says they intend to begin working on the project this summer through fundraisers and tournaments.

"Hopefully we'll get a lot of the groundwork down this summer, as far as funding. Then, I think we'll start actually pouring concrete in 2022 ... if we can get the money," Ayres says with a laugh.



The pickleball court project will be for all players in the Valley County pickleball community, from the active group in Cascade to the Mountain and Meadows pickleball club.



### What's The Dill With Pickleball?

The first thing most players will mention they love about the sport is the comradery surrounding it.

"It's such a social game, you quickly make lots of friends. We have more friends than we know what to do with all due to pickleball," Keene says. "In addition to that, the game becomes more fun especially as you move up and start getting better. It's such a technical game; you're always being challenged."

While not everyone falls in love with the game, Ayres has yet to find someone who hasn't at least enjoyed pickleball after trying it for the first time.

"My favorite part is being able to get outside with people; that social aspect is the best part," Ayres says. "It's also so fun because it doesn't take a lot of skill to start playing; it's just a matter of hitting things

low and slow and over the net. Because it's easy to learn it's a lot of fun, and people don't take it too seriously unless you get into the tournament rotation."

Alongside the Valley County club, the Mountain and Meadows Pickleball Club has cultivated several local partnerships. With the club's support, the Aspen Village Home Owner's Association built four dedicated courts, the Elk Creek Church hosts indoor pickleball games, the city of McCall Recreation Department started winter pickleball games at their school gymnasiums, the Meadows Valley High School hosts games at their gym, Cascade Rec has pickleball nets, balls, and paddles to check out for use, and the Shiloh Bible Camp holds indoor games.

As pickleball continues to grow within the county and throughout the United States, Ayres and her community have helped spread the sport internationally. Pauline and Robb Frank, who are McCall locals, participated in humanitarian work at an all-boys Christian school in Pyin Oo Lwin, Myanmar.

During 2019, they regularly updated a blog, highlighting the lives of the boys as they learned English, performed chores,



and played pickleball. The Franks introduced the sport to 100 students who all fell in love with the sport.

"We got an amazing response," Ayres says.

Quickly, the pickleball community rallied together. Ayres reached out to the USA Pickleball Association and secured help from Steve Manolis.

They were able to provide paddles, balls, and nets for the kids, while Pauline and Frank worked with Brother Ling John, the "selfless, energetic director of The Christian Brothers LaSalle Juniorate School," to buy shoes for children.

The supplies arrived in a matter of weeks and created a lasting, positive impact in the lives of children living on the other end of the world. All this is thanks to the joy and fun of pickleball, and the kindness of the community behind it.

"It was an amazing response; we sent out two nets—those are \$150 apiece—eight paddles, and several dozen balls," Ayres says. "That's what the pickleball is all about,





everyone involved is doing everything they can to help people get started.”

Locals can also join in on the fun later this year when the club launches its official website, [Valleycountypickleball.com](http://Valleycountypickleball.com), where they'll organize fundraising events, tournaments, lessons, and school programs.

“There is so much activity in this area, from mountain biking and road biking to

fishing and lake sports, and everything else you can imagine,” Keene says. “Pickleball is just one more activity, but there is no better way to meet people and to get a good core group of friends. It's a guaranteed way to increase your social network and number of friends so mix pickleball into your routine, not only for your physical well-being but your social well-being too.”

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