

Kids are all right

More players in their 20s and 30s are getting involved in Bocce

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STOCKTON -- You can imagine Benji Tosi sliding into the driver's seat of a purring Cadillac Escalade or Porsche Boxter in his job as a parking lot attendant along the touristy area of Ghirardelli Square in San Francisco. He checks the rear-view and side mirrors to ensure oncoming traffic is at bay, when he notices something strange:

Across the street, older men play a friendly game he has never seen.

Maybe it was the salt air that permeates Aquatic Park -- where Van Ness Avenue and Beach Street dead end. Maybe it was the call of the seagulls that inhabit the park or the tall-mast yachts docked in the harbor. Or, maybe it was the sheer simplicity of the game of brass balls, pallinos and grass lanes.

In any case, he walked across the street and began his association with the sport of bocce.

"As we play, we watch the ships roll by," said Tosi who, at 28, is one of the young guns of the USA Bocce Federation. "I worked at night so I could learn during the day, when all the older guys were out playing. They taught me."

As spectators roam the Italian Athletic Club, where the 2004 USA Bocce Championship is being contested through Saturday, it becomes evident that any American-ranked player under 60 might be considered young in the niche sport. Internationally, however, the sport is filled with strong players in their 20s and 30s. That concept seems to be reaching these shores, where a few of the best players are under 35, doing battle against their more senior competitors. And winning.

Tosi earned a gold medal in the 2003 precision shooting competition in Chicago and was given a berth on the national squad that competed against teams from 27 other countries in the world championships.

"If I had just been a spectator I would have learned more in that tournament than I did in the previous two years," Tosi said. "But it was an honor to compete against the best in the world."

Tosi's friend is Marco Cuneo, 30, who won the men's volo, or brass balls, title Sunday. Cuneo's family lineage in bocce goes back at least four generations. Cuneo has won nine national titles since 1997, including the '97 team championship with his father shortly before the elder

Cuneo passed away. Marco Cuneo placed fifth in the 2003 world volo tournament.

"It's fun to watch a guy like Marco compete. He's really good," said Robert Coffron, 31, of Los Gatos . "It's a pervasive older sport, but if you can get players young enough, they can compete overseas."

That's the business plan of Cuneo and Tosi, who serve as president and vice president of the Aquatic Park Bocce Club, the north San Francisco group that attracted Tosi nearly a three years ago. They desire to recruit more young players.

"The more kids can see games like these, the better chance we have of training and teaching them," said Cuneo, who also won two cadet national titles. "Mostly, they see the social bocce ball -- the wine drinking and the camaraderie. But if they could see the competitive aspect, they'd like it."

John Dine, 34, of Antioch enjoys the balance between competition and comradeship. He's instilling both qualities in his two children.

"I started 10 years ago, so I started late," Dine said. "Everyone else started when they were 2."

Apparently, those players didn't reach the pinnacle of their sport's success until much later. Now that bocce is beginning to trend younger, it can only be viewed as positive for the long-term success of the sport.

