

San Francisco

Dreaming of Reaching the Olympics with the Sport of Grandfathers

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Benji Tosi and Marco Cuneo Bring Fresh Blood to Bocce by the Bay

In a city full of yoga mats, designer mountain bikes and 24-hour gyms the size of Roman coliseums, Benji Tosi and his friend Marco Cuneo are an unlikely pair of San Francisco sportsmen. Unbeknown to its fitness savvy public, the "City by the Bay" boasts two of the nation's top competitors and World Championship players in the ancient sport of bocce.

Tosi, a tall and lean 29-year-old, looks like someone you might find shooting hoops or head-butting soccer balls with other 20-somethings; instead, he spends most days (and every weekend) with a crew of Italian immigrants twice his age on the pebbled lanes of Aquatic Park Bocce Club. "It's therapeutic," he says, "and it's something I can share with my friends and family. It brings me joy."

Up until a few years ago, Tosi had never set foot on a bocce court in his life – now he's vice president of Aquatic Park's 50-member club and pumping new life into an historic gem.

Tucked beside a Maritime Museum and the city's famous Ghirardelli Square, the little clubhouse and five-lane course are easily overlooked despite the welcoming group of Italians that gather to play. A 50-year-old San Francisco institution, Aquatic was once a thriving cultural establishment where residents of the city's Italian districts—North Beach and The Marina—could gather and "spend some time away from the ladies," as Mario, one of the older players, recalls.

In those days, Aquatic Park was a men's only club, which may have contributed to its eventual membership decline, although Tosi believes it was simply the younger generation's lack of interest in such an antique pastime. For Tosi, bocce's history is part of the enchantment.

"It was the sound of the balls hitting each other that intrigued me," he explains, "So I started asking questions." After stumbling upon the bocce court while parking cars as a valet for a neighboring Vietnamese restaurant, Tosi returned to watch and learn from the club's senior members who play nightly. "I developed a rapport with the Italian immigrants and they mentored me. I looked really out of place, but then I met Marco [Cuneo]."

Cuneo, 32, has played at Aquatic since his father, a nine-time national champion, first put a brass ball in his 8-year-old hand. He has twice ranked 5th in the world – a first for an

American player. Though a recently "retired" professional competitor, Cuneo still serves as a member on the board of directors for the National Bocce Federation. According to Cuneo, "There aren't enough young people playing now...and the young people who do play don't take it seriously enough. Many go [to the Nationals] unprepared, show poorly, and then take the whole thing as a vacation. It is disrespectful to the players who came before them."

Last fall, Cuneo and Tosi were selected for the U.S competing team at the World Volo Championship in Torino (Italian's bocce capital). Volo, a form of bocce played with metallic balls (often designed in weight and size to the shape of each player's hand) features stricter rules requiring an advanced level of precision. "It's kind of like pool versus billiards," Tosi explains, "You have to call your shots."

At the championships, players compete in different events. For Tosi, this year, it was speed-shooting (tiro progressivo in Italian)—a kind of bocce relay race where competitors run from end to end, aiming at a pair of 100 mm white target balls. Designed by the bocce federation as a potential qualifier for the Olympic Games, speed-shooting could be bocce's answer to its seemingly lackluster character in an extreme sport world.

Is Tosi on the "cutting-edge" of bocce? Come 2008, could he find himself an Olympian competitor in Beijing? As Tosi says "It's all up to China."

As for the fate of Aquatic Park, that's all up to Tosi, Cuneo and the city of San Francisco.

For more information on Aquatic Park and bocce volo, visit www.boccevolo.com.



Benji Tosi and Marco Cuneo competing in Tunis, Tunisia.

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