

Pétanque's the best, bar none

DAVE BARRY

I discovered the perfect sport. You don't have to be in great shape to play it. You barely have to stand.

You're thinking: golf. Wrong. Compared to the sport I'm talking about, golf is brutal, sometimes forcing you to physically walk 15 feet from your cart to your ball. Whereas the sport I'm talking about involves almost no walking, and in fact little movement of any kind, except for signaling the bartender. The most strenuous part of this sport is pronouncing its name: "pétanque."

It's a French word, roughly pronounced "pay-TONK," but you have to get really nasal on the "TONK." The only people who can say it correctly are the French, who lift weights with their sinuses.

Pétanque was invented in 1907 near Marseille, at a bar. As far as I can tell, it is never played far from a bar. It's sort of like bocce, except it's played with steel balls, called "boules." You keep your feet together and throw your ball underhand, palm down, using a motion that I can only describe as "French." The object is to get your balls closer than your opponents' balls to another little ball, called the "point" ball. When a team has scored 13 points, it's time to go to the bar.

I saw pétanque played in November in Miami Beach, near the pool bar of the Hotel Riu, which hosted the first-ever U.S. Open Pétanque Tournament, sponsored by Barton & Guestier, which sells (surprise!) wine. The tournament was organized by Philippe Boets, who is the president of Pétanque America although he lives in France and is, personally, Belgian.

Boets has tried for years to promote pétanque in America but has been hampered by two factors: (1) Americans have, inexplicably, failed to catch Pétanque Fever, and (2) the French, being French, don't care. Nevertheless, Boets has a positive, upbeat attitude. I interviewed him at the bar.

"How does a player qualify to compete in the U.S. Open?" I asked.

"You pay 15 bucks," he said.

Boets noted that this is an excellent time for Americans to take up pétanque, because you immediately have a shot at becoming one of the top players in the nation. You could brag about this, and people would be very impressed. ("You play WHAT? Is there something wrong with your sinuses?")



There were 40 teams in the U.S. Open, consisting of 80 players, representing a wide range of ages and genders. They played on the beach, watched by an appreciative crowd that ranged, at times, up to five spectators. Before play began, the competitors were briefed by the head official, Louis Toulon.

"If le small ball touch le wood, is no good," he said. "We try to have two games this morning before lunch."

After the briefing, Boets pulled Toulon aside and asked him about a pétanque situation that Boets swore had come up recently when he was playing.

"What happens if a dog runs away with the point ball?" Boets asked.

Toulon thought about it. "What you do," he said, "is you shoot the dog."

Probably he was kidding.

Also on hand at the U.S. Open was Marco Foyot. He's a large, shaggy, surfer-dude-looking Frenchman who has won many pétanque honors, including the world championship. He is called "the Michael Jordan of pétanque," primarily by himself. In fact, as far as I could tell, the only thing he can say in English is: "I am the Michael Jordan of pétanque."

He was amazed to witness a pétanque tournament in Miami Beach. At one point he made a sweeping arm gesture encompassing the players, the ocean, the Miami Beach police cruiser parked there in case of, I don't know, a riot by the five spectators, and said: "*C'est la Planet Mars!*" (For the record, this is true of Miami Beach even when they're not playing pétanque.)

I hung around with Marco for a while, acting as his extremely incompetent interpreter. When tourists would come up and ask what was going on, he invariably instructed me to inform them that he was the world pétanque champion. I am pretty sure that, if alien beings were to land and encounter Marco, the single thing he would most want them to know about the planet Earth is that he is its pétanque champion.

After a while Marco gave me a little pétanque lesson, and for the record: He is really, really good at it. Wherever you are right now, reading this article, Marco could throw a steel ball underhand from wherever he is and hit you on the head. We both realized that, if we had played an actual game, he would have creamed me.

So we went to the bar.

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