

# Kiwanis Magazine

Telling the Kiwanis story

## Bocce bunch

Published by [Kiwanis Magazine](#) in [Club Profile](#), [Feature Story](#), [Signature Project 2 Comments](#)In Murphysboro, Illinois, bocce is not a hobby, it's a lifestyle. And it's being used to share an important message.

*Story by Ariana Gainer*

*Photos by Curtis Billue*

Balls clink. Hands clap. The smell of grilled hot dogs and bratwursts fills the air. Homemade lemonade flows.

The sun shines brightly, as light, airy clouds float across the baby-blue sky above Murphysboro, Illinois.

“Nice roll, Bob!”

“Way to go, Vanessa!”

“Let's go, Mike!”

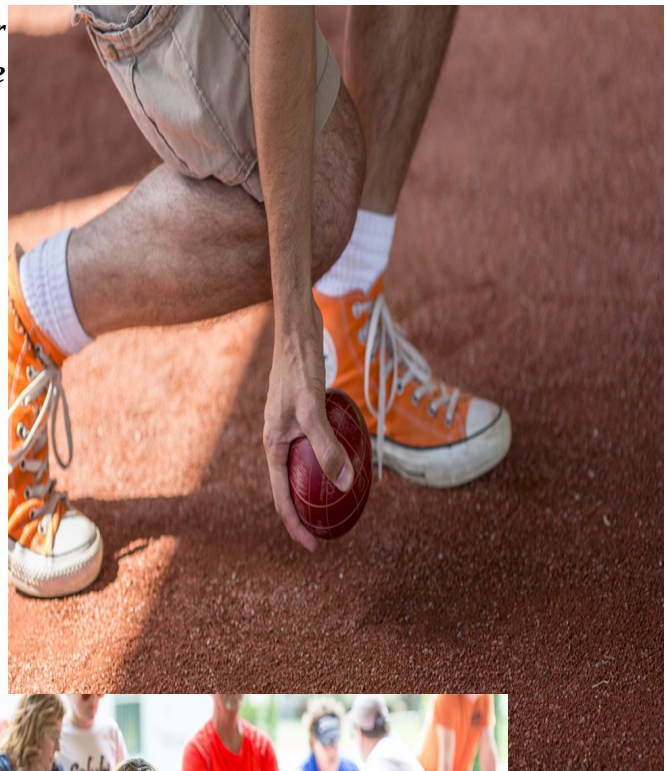
Words of encouragement mix with teasing banter and laughter.

It's bocce ball time.

In this quiet town of about 8,000 people, 238 players vie for a spot in today's tournament, which will conclude the spring league of the Murphysboro Bocce Club. Only the top 16 teams (with names like Big Muddy Monsters, Deboccery, Rowdy Cougars, Misfits of Bocce, Bocce Bandits and Squatchy Bocce) qualified.

Just a few years ago, there were no grills, players or conversations here.

And no bocce.



The Kiwanis Club of Murphysboro took over a deteriorating park to build their bocce courts. Where there used to be a collapsed community swimming pool, there are now rails, backboards and brick dust.

“Bocce,” the Italian word for bowl, is played between two teams of two to four players each. The game begins when a member of one team tosses a white golf-size *pallino* (Italian for *cue ball*) across the court. The point of the game is for players from both teams to toss larger softball-size balls as close as they can to the pallino.

One team is represented by red balls and the other, by green balls—reminiscent of the Italian flag to honor the game’s heritage. The teams take turns bowling, and the team with at least one ball closest to the pallino scores a point for that round. Some competitors throw underhanded, some overhanded. Some focus only on the pallino, while others strategize by knocking the opposite team’s balls away from it.

### **So, why bocce in Murphysboro?**

Ask anyone in town. Murphysboro became known for bocce ball because of the undiscouraged efforts of one man: Bob Chambers. A former president of the Murphysboro Kiwanis Club, Chambers was seeking an activity that would bring the community together.

“Bob never let the idea die,” says club President Vanessa Lirely.

Chambers’ idea ran into a number of obstacles. One neighbor said no one would use the courts because no one would know what bocce was. Another neighbor was sure teens would vandalize the park. Today, those neighbors are a couple of the league’s top players.



“It’s about building relationships,” Chambers says. “I thought, ‘How can we build community? What can we really do to make a difference in the community? What can we do that’s different and has some impact?’”

Chambers adopted the idea from a neighboring town that had an active bocce league.

“Maybe this would be an activity our community could rally around too,” he thought. So he and the rest of the Kiwanis club petitioned the park district for permission to use part of Riverside Park to build the courts. Because the club was well known in Murphysboro, the city trusted them with revitalizing the park. The Murphysboro High School Key Club also assisted with the project.

Thus, the Murphysboro Bocce Club was born—and it literally is a part of the neighborhood. The courts are surrounded by players' homes. Unlike an exclusive country or polo club, the bocce courts truly are for the community.

### **Rich history, bright future**

Founded in 1843, Murphysboro is an old community with a rich history and long-standing traditions, and locals take pride in them. The Kiwanis Apple Festival has been going strong for 65 years, and that is only one of dozens of annual festivals the town hosts. A St. Patrick's Day festival, Brewfest and the Wine and Jazz Festival present other opportunities for neighbors, families, friends and co-workers to enjoy one another's company.



Bob Hall, a longtime Key Club advisor and Kiwanis member, has been around to see many changes in the community, and the introduction of bocce ball is one of his favorites.

“We turned an eyesore into a wonderful opportunity for the community,” Hall says. “Families can be together and be outside. It’s something everyone can take part in and experience a feeling of community.”



### **Small town, big heart**

“Bocce is fun for all ages,” says Melissa Voss, secretary for the bocce club. Her husband, Herb, serves as the bocce club president. “I’ve met tons of people through playing. There’s community spirit and pride. We’re a diverse group of people playing together and interacting.”

On the walls surrounding the bocce courts are dozens of ads, which businesses have purchased to support the Kiwanis club and the courts. From the chamber of commerce to banks, it seems the entire town either supports or plays in the bocce league. And the park space is not used only for bocce. The

Kiwanis club also hosts music festivals and community fundraisers to support local causes. If there's a worthy purpose, the bocce players will play for it.

Not all the players are Kiwanians. But if they're not, they likely have a history with the organization. Maybe they were a part of Key Club in high school. Maybe a sister, mother or best friend is a die-hard Kiwanian. Maybe they are a beneficiary of the service work the club does in the community.

Regardless, most people have a story about Kiwanis. One of those people is 9-year-old Thomas Capel.

Thomas has lived in the neighborhood surrounding Riverside Park since he moved to southern Illinois from North Carolina. One day, he wandered over to the park and met bocce player Mike Ewbank.

"I introduced myself, and then he shook my hand," Thomas proudly recalls with a toothy smile.

Ewbank invited him to play.

"Bocce is the best sport in the world," Thomas says unequivocally. After some thought, he adds, "I can't forget about wrestling and baseball though. I like those too."

Thomas says he likes the food and the lemonade, and, of course, the people he has met.

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*This story originally appeared in the September 2016 issue of Kiwanis magazine.*





## 2 comments

- *Vanessa Lirely*

Thanks for visiting our town and writing this story. We enjoyed meeting you and look forward when you can visit again and play a bit of bocce. 😊

- *Melissa Voss*

Such an amazing article! Thank you so much for sharing our story and capturing so eloquently the fun and comradery that bocce has brought to our little town. We are so very grateful for the Kiwanis organization and its wonderful volunteers in our community!