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Early-Onset Shuffleboard



Jim Stem for The New York Times

Jordan Sanford, 25, takes his turn at the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club on a Friday night. Members of his set say they like both the game's novelty and the accompanying rock music.

By DOMINIC PATTEN

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St. Petersburg, Fla.

IT was late on a Friday night and in deference to the full moon R.E.M.'s "Man on the Moon" played through speakers attached to an iPod. A group of tattooed and goateed men and women was beginning to form, punching messages into their cellphones, lugging coolers and stubbing out cigarettes.



Jim Stem for The New York Times
Phillip Clark, 30, a recent convert to the game.

It could have been any gathering in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, but there were palm trees lining the nearby sidewalk, a warm breeze coming in from Tampa Bay, and the activity that was about to commence was shuffleboard. "It is one of the few sports that you can play holding a beverage," said Chris Kelly, 39, as he brandished a cue in one hand and opened a Coke with the other.

Once heralded as the "Mecca of shuffleboard," for the past two decades the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club complex has been showing signs of its age, 78 years, and irrelevance. The elegant covered bleachers, which held the hundreds who came out to watch the club's many tournaments and were the setting for the 1985 movie "Cocoon," are now ruins with peeling paint, broken windows and splintered wood.

As St. Petersburg expanded and many club patrons died or moved away, membership, which peaked at 5,000 in the 1980's, dwindled to around a hundred players, many of whom are over 80 years old. It doesn't help that today's baby-boomer retirees prefer more active sports.

"People used to play shuffleboard because it was cheap," said Walt Wedel, 77, the president of the U.S. National Shuffleboard Association. "A lot of today's retirees have more money for things like golf." He added that the number of players nationwide has dropped to about a million from more than 4 million in the early 1980's.

Now, however, possible salvation has arrived in the unexpected form of three activists and artists in their 30's. Mr. Kelly, the head of marketing for a publisher, and two friends, Phillip Clark, 30, a multimedia artist and the director of an artist's organization, and Chad Mize, 30, also a multimedia artist, discovered the spot late last spring and decided it would be a great gathering place for artists and musicians.

As a trial they invited several friends to a game in late March. Since then, through word of mouth, a Web site and some local press, the once-dying institution has become a thriving and increasingly important part of the city's downtown scene, attracting up to 100 young players every Friday night.

"I was surprised to see a lot of young people," said Jonathan Cohen, 32, who moved to St. Petersburg from Chicago three years ago to complete his law degree and made his first visit to the club in mid-August. "It was like some secret society that only a few people seemed to know about."

The nature of shuffleboard, the modern rules of which were invented in St. Petersburg in 1924, is such that once a player is past the first frustrating hour of learning not to plow the 15-ounce discs from one end of the court to the other, the sport becomes straightforward to anyone who has handled a pool cue. Beginners can become fairly competent fairly quickly, but players say the game is harder than it looks. Push the "hammer" cue too hard and your disc will end up in the negative scoring realm of "the kitchen" or off the court altogether. Don't push it enough, and you're not even in the scoring zone.

Not everyone returns after an introductory game; maybe it's the civic regulation that prevents the consumption of alcohol on the premises. Nevertheless more than three dozen young people have put down the \$20 annual fee and joined the club since April.

"I mean, after a while, you get tired of the same old dinner, bar, movie, club event on Friday nights," said Sara Hoeber, 29, a landscape designer who was born and raised in Florida, who joined over the summer. "It's a fun social thing to do with friends," she continued. "The music is good and typically fun, the atmosphere is comfortable and the nostalgia is a bit of a draw as well."

At first the arrival of the new players did not amuse some of the older members. "They were worried they were going to be pushed out," said Mary Eldridge, a sixtysomething shuffleboard hall of fame and president of the St. Petersburg club. "They thought they wouldn't be able to play in the afternoons."

That concern was soon dispelled when it became clear that the new crowd, with jobs, school, young children and other responsibilities, preferred to play at night, long after the older players had gone home. The two constituencies rarely cross paths, let alone compete for time on the 62 functional courts.

This year's Fourth of July weekend presented the older and the younger members of the club with an opportunity to play with, and against, each other. About 30 members, evenly split between old and young, came together on a Saturday morning for a couple of hours of play.

"The fact we could get people to show up on Saturday morning was pretty amazing to me," said Mr. Kelly, who is almost as good a shuffleboard player as he is an organizer of shuffleboard events. On that day, however, he met defeat from the cue sticks of men almost double his age. "We played three games of doubles, for a nickel each," he said. "I ended up playing two games and handing over two nickels." His wife played the third game for him.

For Mrs. Eldridge, who had been fretting for years about the club's demise, the new players are "a dream come true." Before this summer she spent most Friday nights at home. Now she spends them coaching new players, organizing competitions, and once, in late July, handing out free ice cream to those who reached 75 points in a tournament. She is also the proud owner of an iPod, a gift from Mr. Kelly and other new members.

"I like this," she said as she sat in the sweltering clubhouse while a track from the White Stripes played over the courts. "It was busy for 60 years, and then we hit a lull for the last 20 years. So I like this a lot!"

The younger members are also working to raise money to renovate the club, lobbying St. Petersburg's director of urban planning and historic preservation as well as getting the mayor, Rick Baker, 49, to make the five-acre club an element in the revitalization of the city's downtown. On Thursday, Mr. Kelly and other members presented Mr. Baker, who played the odd game with his family at the club this summer, with a trophy for his victory in a mini-tournament.

Mr. Clark said he hopes interest in shuffleboard will lead to other things in St. Petersburg. "Shuffleboard is actually a side note to what's really happening here," he said. "The reality is we've created a social outlet for all age groups and demographics."

Plans are afoot for card games, film screenings, lecture series, perhaps even art shows and live music, to take place in the clubhouse when the weather gets cooler. And like a Friendster link come to life, some unexpected reunions have occurred at the Friday shuffleboard games. Mr. Cohen bumped into an old friend from Indiana University, and at least one romance has bloomed. Tami Shadduck, 26, a health care coordinator, met Josh Wallace, 28, a contractor who returned a few months ago from a job in Iraq, while playing him in a doubles match. "It all started at the St. Pete Shuffleboard Club," she wrote in an e-mail message. "Many a flirting Friday later."

With Friday night turnout growing every week, Mr. Kelly has started printing and selling "St. Pete Shuffle" T-shirts to patrons and players for \$15 each. While merchandising is a part of any modern success story, Mr. Clark is thinking big league. "My dream," he said, "is to see ESPN cover the national championships from the St. Pete Shuffle Courts."