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An old game's retro revival

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Lars Lucas is not the kind of guy who likes to be seen gabbing on a cell phone in public. So when a business partner called en route to Paris on Friday night, Lucas had to cut him off.

"Hey, can I call you back?" he said. "I'm in the middle of a shuffleboard tournament."

There was a pause. With the phone pressed to his ear, the 38-year-old jewelry artist turned to friends and grinned. "He's laughing," Lucas said with a giggle.

It is kind of funny, the notion that a group of hip 20- and 30- somethings might give up their Friday nights to play a sport more popular among septuagenarians and cruise ship passengers.

But over the past month, a swelling crowd has turned out at the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club for weekly matches organized by a group of preservationists and young artists. They view art, listen to music and mingle with friends, just as they would in a loft or bar. Only they're doing it on the city's historic shuffleboard courts.

"It's, like, kitschy beyond kitschy. It's uber-kitsch," said Phillip Clark, director of the Artillery, the St. Petersburg artists' collective behind the tournaments. "It's this weird, seemingly old person's sport. But it's just dying to have someone come in and freshen it up."

The first Friday, fewer than 10 players showed up. The next week, it was 20. Then 30. Last Friday's matches drew a crowd of about 40, including several families and downtown residents.

"'Friday Night Shuffleboard' is maybe not the first thing you'd think about," said 29-year-old Neal Wolfrath, who lives nearby, during a break in last Friday's action. "But the vibe is just real cool, and the atmosphere is real relaxed. Right now, it's kind of underground, which is cool."

The goal, organizers say, is to reinvigorate one of downtown St. Petersburg's most historic locales. Artillery members and preservationists plan to work throughout the summer to spruce up the 81-year-old club, scraping paint from the windows and rust from antique light masts.

The club's annual budget is only about \$5,000, funded partly through dues and fees, which range from \$1 for a daily pass to \$40 for a yearly family membership. At its peak, the club boasted more than 5,000 members; now that number is down to 110, many of whom are in their 60s and 70s.

"What the club really needs is an injection of life, youth, vigor, enthusiasm - people who want to play and have fun, but also have enough energy so that once in a while we can all undertake some kind of a project," said club president Mary Eldridge.

About five weeks ago, Chris Kelly, a local historical activist instrumental in restoring Greenwood Cemetery, bumped into Clark and partner Chad Mize over lunch at Evos. Clark and Mize, who moved to St. Petersburg from Boston two years ago, had passed by the shuffleboard courts countless times, but not until Kelly invited them for a tour did they ever step foot inside.

Kelly pointed out the cracking terrazzo courts, rusting fixtures and peeling paint. "The facility can be made to look charmingly neglected," he said. "Now it's just full-on neglected."

Said Clark: "The more we started talking about it, the more we were like, this place is so amazing, so historic. It just needs a little bit of work done to it.

"And then once we began playing the actual game of shuffleboard, we became addicted," he added. "We laugh about it now, but we are so into it."

Lucas, too, laughed off the concept at first. But then he remembered how much fun he had playing shuffleboard during family vacations as a child, and he decided to give it a go.

"I really hope it goes to a younger crowd," he said. "You can see the camaraderie."

Pushing a shuffleboard cue feels a little like gently closing a heavy drawer. The game requires fluid motion and a delicate touch, like pool and even bowling - two sports that have also experienced a resurgence in the past decade.

"We have your hipsters with their tattoos," said Mize, who wore a homemade "SHUFFLE OR DIE" T-shirt Friday night. "There's families, gays, straights - it's just a big mix of different types of people."

Some passers-by are drawn in by the trippy jazz and world music booming from a courtside sound system. Each week, organizers plug an iPod loaded with their favorite tracks into the speakers, lending the event a true party vibe. Last week it was Mize's mix, everything from Aimee Mann and Bran Van 3000 to Lou Reed and Gladys Knight.

Eldridge usually plays the role of den mother to the shuffleboard newbies, doling out praise for solid shots, giving tips when needed and explaining the game's lexicon to a younger generation.

She hasn't heard of anything like this anywhere else in the state, she said. But if the Friday night crowds continue to grow, the game could find a younger audience across Florida.

"St. Pete has always been the first place to do anything in shuffleboard," Eldridge said. "Whatever happens in St. Pete will eventually happen everywhere else."

Locally, Kelly doesn't see why this summerlong experiment can't catch on. Many of the players live and work in downtown St. Petersburg, he said, so it feels like they have a stake in preserving the the community's landmarks.

"There's so many people in these neighborhoods downtown who are younger and who appreciate historic preservation in their homes," he said. "If you can fill a space with people who are creative, it's a magnet in and of itself."

But the biggest draw, players say, is the game itself.

"It's very nostalgic," said Clark, 30. "There's something so St. Pete about it, and I think that's what makes it so great."

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SHUFFLE ON OVER

The St. Pete Shuffle, a weekly series of shuffleboard matches organized by Pinellas Heritage and the Artillery, takes place from 6 to 10 p.m. Fridays at the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club, 559 Mirror Lake Drive N. For more information, call (727) 822-2083 or visit www.theartillery.com or www.pinellasheritage.com.

[Illustration]

Caption: Jazz and world music and the voices of young people float across the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club, where a growing crowd is turning out for weekly matches.; Heidi Lovett, with her 8-month-old Isaac Luttenberg, competes in a game at the club; on Friday. ; (1964) Competitors face off at a tournament at the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club in 1964. Artists and preservationists plan to spruce up the 81-year-old club.; Photo: PHOTO, MICHAEL RONDOU, (2); PHOTO, Times files

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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