

# no pickles, but plenty puka

Getting in on the Hawai'i pickleball craze.

By **Nicole Duarte**

Rule #5 of Da Pukaball Way to Play says, “If yo patna stay playing junk, no say mean stuff or give um stink eye.”

I’ll rely on this rule to stay in the good graces of my partner as I try my hand at “pukaball,” or pickleball as it’s known across the country.

A cross between tennis, badminton, and table tennis (ping pong), pickleball uses just a quarter of a tennis court, a lower net than badminton, and what looks like oversized ping pong paddles. And then there’s the ball: plastic and full of holes—much like a whiffle ball. One of the fastest-growing sports in the U.S., pickleball has an estimated 2.5 million players, a number that’s expected to grow.

Within minutes of arriving at the O’ahu Pickleball Association’s meet-up in Kaimukī, I had a paddle, a partner, and a match. Association volunteers set up the nets, tape lines, and post a sign-up board and the game rules and court etiquette in pidgin. They even have demo paddles on hand so that newbies can just show up to play.

Founded in April 2017, the nonprofit Association has over 400 members. Its meet-ups, which take place several times a week, average 30 to 35 players of all ages.

“People try pickleball and they just love it,” says Donna Ching, Association president. “It’s good cardio and easier on the body than tennis because it’s not as jarring.”

As a casual tennis player, I thought I’d have an advantage. However, I found myself whiffing horribly on the ball. Luckily for me, my partner and opponents were supportive and gave me helpful tips. Soon, I was producing an erratic mix of hits and misses.

But the good nature of my fellow players helped me relax and have fun. And there’s



PHOTO COURTESY OF RUDY LOPEZ, O’AHU PICKLEBALL ASSOCIATION

something about that plastic ball and the sound it makes that had me giggling. It’s hard to take yourself too seriously when you’re hitting (or whiffing on) a toy-like ball full of puka.

“The game is so lighthearted and people are so encouraging” Ching says. “Games are only to 11 points, so there’s constant turnover and you’re always meeting new people.”

And don’t underestimate the social aspects of the game. The intimate size of the court and the upbeat nature of pickleball make for a friendly sport, even among advanced players who engage in a fast-paced game. Members will often potluck and bring their families and pets to the park.

The Association ([oahupickleballassociation.org](http://oahupickleballassociation.org)) offers classes, clinics, and open-play sessions on O’ahu. To find a meet-up near you, go to [usapa.org](http://usapa.org) and join the fun. **15**

## Pickleball Beginnings

Pickleball started on Bainbridge Island, Wash., in summer 1965 by Congressman Joel Pritchard and his friends. Its name may be related to the pickle boat in crew (rowing). Or maybe it’s related to the Pritchard family’s dog, Pickles. Or maybe Pickles was named after the sport. It’s all part of the sport’s light-hearted mystery.