

# Beloit Horseshoe Club pitches in for fun

By Erica Pennington

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BELOIT – There's nothing better than hearing a loud clank followed by the thump of a shoe landing in clay.

Members of the Beloit Horseshoe Club are always hoping to pitch a "ringer," but even those who struggle to get a shoe near the pit are welcome.

The club, located at 640 Ravine Drive, is known just as much for its friendly faces as it is for wonderful facilities and champions who call it "home."

"Horseshoes is a very challenging sport and it's 90 percent mental," said Earl Paulson, a longtime member of the club.

The Beloit Horseshoe Club draws in players from all over the Stataline Area and beyond. It hosts practice nights, organized leagues and the prestigious Team World Tournament. The club averages one "open" tournament a month. This year the club also hosted the Wisconsin State Horseshoe Tournament over Labor Day Weekend.

The Beloit facility features 13 outdoor courts. Indoor courts are used when the weather is not favorable for play.

Kevin Brekke, of Edgerton, started pitching horseshoes about 44 years ago after running into a state champion. He's been involved with the Beloit Club's functions since 2005 and currently serves as second vice president of the Wisconsin Horseshoe Pitchers Association (WHPA).

"I would walk to school and I would see the courts at the bars around town...I met Harold Bestul," Brekke said. "He won a state title when he was 66."

A mentorship and friendship grew over time. Bestul (1916-2004) won the men's championship class at the Wisconsin State Tournament in 1983 and was inducted into the Wisconsin State Horseshoe Hall of Fame in 1984. Bestul taught Brekke all he knew.

"He taught me how to watch the really good players and had a lot of wisdom to share," Brekke said.

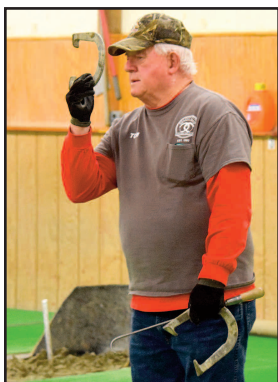
The willingness to teach others is something special among horseshoe players, said Fred Lane, WHPA publicity director.

"Everyone (in the horseshoes community) is so friendly and wants to show you how to play," Lane said.

For those who don't know much about the game, horseshoes might seem a little confusing. But it's really not too hard.

The goal of recreational horseshoes is to score a set amount of points before the opponent (or other team) does. Each pitcher throws two horseshoes per "inning." One point is awarded if the horseshoe comes within a short distance (usually six inches) of the stake without hitting the backboard of the pit. A "ringer," meaning the horseshoe encircles the metal stake, is worth three points.

"The other way (to play) is a shoe limit game, where there is a set number of shoes that each player pitches



**Beloit Horseshoe Club member Tom Bird lines up his pitch during practice at the Beloit Horseshoe Club in December of 2017. (Photo by Erica Pennington/Beloit Daily News)**

and whatever the score is at the end is the final score," Lane said. "This is the most common way games are played at the Beloit Horseshoe Club and in the WHPA in general."

Horseshoes weigh in between 2 pounds 6 ounces and 2 pounds 10 ounces. There are different strategies that pitchers use to try and get a ringer.

Some throw a "flip" style, while others rely on various grips for a "turn" style. Flip pitchers throw the horseshoe so that it moves end-over-end. Turn pitchers toss the horseshoe almost like a frisbee.

"You just have to toss it the way that works for you," Paulson said of the way he learned to pitch years ago. "The horseshoe has to be open or it won't go on the stake."

Each of the game stakes are located 40 feet from each other. Men from ages 18-70 toss an actual distance of 37 feet. Children, youth under 17, the disabled, women and men over 70 have the option to pitch from 27 feet instead.

"Anybody can pick up a horseshoe and play," Lane said, noting that he's seen players of all ages and physical abilities compete.

It was about four years ago that Lane fell in love with horseshoes. He travels all the way from Stevens Point to pitch at the Beloit Horseshoe Club.

"Beloit has such a nice facility that if it was in my backyard I'd probably live there," he said.

Although Lane's passion for the sport has grown over the past few years, his initial interest came from watching his father play.

Family camping trips never could be 100 percent peaceful thanks to a friendly rivalry between good ol' dad and the camp's director.

"They'd always duke it out," Lane said with a laugh. "Once I ended up in Stevens Point I found a horseshoe set on Craigslist and bought it."



**Beloit Horseshoe Club member Tammy Newkirk practices pitching before a tournament at the club in early December of 2017. (Photo by Erica Pennington/Beloit Daily News)**

The whopping \$15 Lane spent for a few horseshoes and a couple stakes proved to be money well spent. He really hasn't stopped pitching since.

Helping others to discover (or rediscover) a love for the game is really what the Beloit Horseshoe Club is all about.

"We have time on Thursday nights where people can come watch or participate," Brekke said. "It's good to just come out."

In addition to building a wide network of friends, another benefit to horseshoes is that it's inexpensive, he said. Pitchers just need to buy their horseshoes and dedicate some (or a lot) of time to practice, depending on their desired skill level.

And while the Beloit Horseshoe Club is home to the Wisconsin Hall of Fame, there's no pressure to end up there. Most just want to have fun.

"It doesn't take long for people to realize that this (sport) isn't just about pitching a horseshoe," Brekke said. "It's about being one big family."

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## History of horseshoes in Beloit

Horseshoes has a long history in Beloit. It really kicked off in 1955 when Beloit resident Earl Ramquist won the Wisconsin State Championship in West Allis.

Ramquist, Al Walmsley, Ben Brostuen and others built eight courts at the Vernon Avenue playgrounds in the late 1950s. In 1967 Don Goldsmith and his father built four regulation courts off Shirland Avenue and Fisher Road in South Beloit, and that became the hang-out spot every Tuesday and Saturday afternoon until the 1980s. There were no organized leagues at the time.

With a growing number of players came the need for the horseshoe "club" to become more organized. The league was sanctioned by the National Horseshoe Pitcher's Association (NHPA) in 1985. Then came the need for a permanent home on the Wisconsin side of the state line. The area near what was then Ken Nelson's "Hitchin' Post" tavern on Newark Road began to be eyed as a good location.

Beloit Horseshoe Club President Bud Renley began to clear the land and nine regulation-sized courts were created in the spring of 1987. The 1989 Wisconsin State Tournament, originally scheduled to be held in Sturtevant, came to Beloit. The number of courts grew to 13. International Team World play came to Beloit's Telfer Park in 1990 and continues to visit annually.

The present team's Telfer Park schedule includes the Wisconsin State Club Team Tournament (last Saturday in April); Wisconsin State Walking Doubles Tournament (last Sunday in April); Beloit Encore Tournament (first weekend in May); Team World (third weekend in May). Club tournaments include the Beloit Spring Singles, Southern Wisconsin Open, Annual Doubles Tournament, among others.

For more information on the Beloit club, see www.beloithorseshoeclub.com or call 608-365-9901. More on the Wisconsin Horseshoe Pitchers Association is available at www.whpahorseshoes.com or by 'Liking' WHPAhorseshoes on Facebook.

Annual membership in the WHPA is \$35 for men and women and \$5 for kids.

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