



Words Sarah Hender

Bowled over

Who wouldn't want to play a sport where the rules are simple, your fellow players are convivial and there's no need to move from your spot to play it?

Like so many others, Allan Johnston's working life was all-consuming and stressful. The former defence industry business manager was regularly travelling for work and as he drove down Greenhill Road on his way to Adelaide Airport he would often notice groups of people in the parklands, standing around in circles, throwing a metal ball onto a dusty patch of gravel. What were they doing? And why did they all look so happy? Allan was intrigued. So, six years ago, he walked into the Greenhill Road-based clubhouse of the Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide and promptly signed up.

"Petanque saved me," says the 61-year old, who is now retired. "While playing petanque, the game became my focus and work for me didn't exist."

Allan has spent 25 years living and working in France where he immersed himself in French culture and learnt the language. Being a member at Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide means he gets to enjoy both.

Petanque, also known as boules, is lawn bowls with a difference: two opposing teams (comprising singles, pairs or trios) take turns throwing a boule (or metal ball) as close as possible to a small



Above Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide playing members Renee Burton (left) and Sandy Shaw (middle) with Lord Mayor Dr Jane Lomax-Smith in Rundle Park last year. *Photograph Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide*

Right Alain Rousse, a playing member of Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide. *Photograph Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide*

Opposite page Members of the Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide are all smiles every Sunday when they play. *Photograph supplied*



wooden ball (the “cochonnet”, or “little pig” in French) while standing stationary in a circle. A point is scored each time a team achieves this, the winning team being the one to reach 13 points.

The game is most often played in parks and its usual playing field not a manicured lawn, but hard dirt or gravel.

Sandy Shaw, 76, has been playing petanque for two years after retiring from her high-powered advertising sales and marketing business. She needed to get regular exercise in a social environment and fell in love with it because of its French-ness and the fact that it is not as structured as other games.

“I always leave there on a Sunday really happy,” she says. “I think it’s because I’ve spent the day outside in the fresh air and although I might not have won, I’ve given it a really good go.”

Petanque came to Adelaide in March 1977, when a group of five French expatriate gentlemen began to meet regularly in the city parklands to play the game they had enjoyed playing as children in France.

It was the beginning of the Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide, which also now happens to be the oldest petanque club in Australia.

One of those five founding men was Vincent Michielin, and his legacy continues today through his daughter, Marcia McLachlan, who also serves as South Australia’s current Honorary French Consul.

Vincent was Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide’s first president and Marcia recalls how important the club was to her sociable father, who arrived in Australia from France aged in his 30s and knowing no one.

“When Mum was alive and my father was president, the club was a huge part of their lives,” Marcia says. “But when Mum died,

it became even more important to him because he would get a fantastic meal, which the ladies made, and the social connections he forged there really buoyed him.”

Forty-six years since it began, the club is still going strong today with around 70 members and many other social players during corporate days or other events.

The club hosts numerous French-inspired events throughout the year, often in conjunction with its French partners including Alliance Francaise and the French-Australian Chamber of Commerce.

Of course, it wouldn’t be a French game, if food didn’t play a major role. Current club president, Rada Pierre, is also the resident chef responsible for the three-course lunch that precedes play every Sunday. So famed are these lunches that some older members who no longer play, come just for the meal and a chat.

French club member, Alain Rousse, a former chef with the Queen Adelaide Club for 17 years, helps out with the cooking when needed. On those days, you might savour a French onion soup, coq au vin or a beef bourgignon; a drawcard in anyone’s book.

Stan Wilson is president of the South Australian Petanque League, which oversees the state’s eight petanque clubs that extend from Gawler and Novar Gardens to the Coonawarra and Adelaide Hills.

He says what attracts people to the game is that it is quick and easy to learn.

“This is an enjoyable, social and competitive team game, that can be played by all ages, genders and at different levels of ability,” Stan says.



Above Arnaud Benassy (left) with Morgane Montpeurt from Alliance Francaise helping out at Club De Pétanque's Raclette night August 2022.
Photograph Club De Pétanque D'Adelaide

Truly a game for everyone. Phil Pollard, 69, from Port Noarlunga South can attest to that. When he was 25, he played a football final on a Saturday and by the Sunday morning he could hardly put his feet on the ground. Diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, Phil's active life was over, until he was aged in his 50s and discovered petanque; finally, a sport he could play. He now calls himself a petanque tragic.

In recent years, Phil developed Stage 4 lung cancer, but despite this, the motivation to play is still there.

"Since I got really crook, I have wanted to try and get better so that I can still have a throw because I enjoy it that much."

As Phil himself puts it, his doctors have given him an "expiry date" of mid-2023, but he is determined to stay well so he can play in the Coonawarra Classic Clash, a national petanque competition held in the Coonawarra on February 11 and 12 at the Piste on Memorial Drive. His excitement is palpable.

Petanque's origins are founded in accessibility, having been adapted from an earlier version of the game called "Jeu Provençale", which required participants to take three steps before throwing the boule. But in 1910, in south Provence, a champion player could no longer move and so would throw the boule from a stationary position. This new game was called "pieds tanques" meaning "feet planted", evolving into petanque.

Although the game seems simple, there's more to it than first appears.

For Adelaide-raised Tory McBride, 68, who spent 18 years living

in France until returning to SA in 2010 with her partner, Frenchman Lionel Pujol, 69, it's the simplicity of petanque that encourages a beginner to want to stick at it.

"Petanque looks really easy, which means it sucks you in," Tory says. "But then you discover it is hard to be consistently good." What makes it hard? "If only we knew," she says, laughing.

Lionel elaborates: "The game takes a lot of skills; concentration, studying the ground to know where to drop the ball, how hard you need to throw the ball and how to throw, do you shoot or spin?"

Although Lionel and Tory aim to win, it doesn't mean they're not having fun. Petanque is a game where you can chat, laugh, drink, eat and poke fun at each other all at the same time as determinedly shooting a boule to score a perfect hit.

Sandy's philosophy is that she likes to win, but it's not going to ruin her day if she doesn't.

"I might ruin someone else's though," she says with a laugh.

Sandy has some advice if you give this game a go: try not to win on your first day like she did. She recalls her opponent's response: "There's only one thing worse than a winner and that's a beginner winner". You've been warned.