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Contact: Jim Muench
Far West Enterprises
(573) 499-4897

FOR SERIOUS FUN, GO TO THE BACKYARD

COLUMBIA, Mo. – A famous sports columnist once said of his least favorite sport, “If they held it in my front yard, I’d move to my backyard.” Well, don’t dismiss the backyard; there’s great fun to be had there.

Disc golf appears to be one of the fastest growing backyard games recently, according to one Columbia sporting goods store, and even the old schoolyard games of Tetherball, Kickball and Dodgeball have gained popularity recently, with leagues for the two latter sports even forming around town. It even turns out there is an international association for kickballers. Who knew?

The best disc golf is often played at a park with a permanent course, and many parks in the Columbia area have them, suggests Margaret Terry, associate manager of MCSports at the Columbia Mall. But there are backyard, portable disc golf targets available at a cost of about \$100 each, and Spalding makes a version of the game, Flying Ring Golf, especially for the backyard for about \$15.

A backyard staple with serious adherents around the world is badminton. In case you hadn’t noticed, it’s an Olympic sport. Named after the home of the Duke of Beaufort’s home, Badminton House, where the game gained a following in Britain in the 19th century, the sport’s origins go back to at least ancient Greece, India and China. It has been played in the United States since at least the 1870s.

Badminton racquets can range from \$5 up to \$99 for the serious badmintoner. If you want something that flies better than a plastic shuttlecock, buy some made with real feathers for about \$30. The real feathers create better loft.

Badminton has grown big in Columbia, especially among people from other countries. “We’re actually re-stringing badminton racquets more so than we ever have before,” Terry said.

Another classic, croquet, is not as popular right now, Terry said, but tends to sell better during the hot summer months. French shepherds were hitting balls through hoops with crooked sticks in the 14th Century, but modern croquet was born in the British isles in the middle of the 19th century and quickly migrated to the United States, which developed the lightweight,

inexpensive nine-wicket backyard game.

Croquet was an Olympic sport at the St. Louis Olympics of 1904, and the American team won gold because the other teams did not know how to play our version. Most of the world plays the more serious six-wicket "Association" rules game, which uses heavy, skinnier wickets and requires an immaculate lawn. The term "sticky wicket" is reputed to have come from the tight clearance of the ball through an Association hoop, only 1/16 of an inch.

Ministers in the 1890s complained that croquet caused immoral behavior such as drinking contests and fraternization between the sexes. Rather than engaging in "drink a hoop" behavior this summer, consider spicing up your party by playing "Gloquet" at night with a set of Wonder Wicket Lights, available from a Web site, www.wonderwicketlight.com. Invented by a retired rocket scientist in Seattle, the special lights clip to each wicket, shining a bright spotlight bulb underneath the wicket and a second bulb that provides broader illumination for the surrounding area. Priced at \$60 for nine wickets, they might add some fun for those wanting to extend their game after daylight. Make sure to buy a slew of AA batteries too.

Who knows, it may not be long before somebody invents glow volleyball as well. Although a tradition, Volleyball appears to be on the wane as a backyard sport, Terry said, but it still has some diehard fans. If you are going to use a volleyball net often, she suggests getting a net with a chain cable inside instead of rope for durability. And avoid sets that call themselves volleyball and badminton combinations. Invariably, the badminton net won't hold up to a hard spike.

Perhaps the most interesting latecomer to American backyard sports is bocce. Brought here by Italian immigrants, the game's origins lie in ancient Greece or Egypt. Roman soldiers played it, using stones, during the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage. The English Admiral Sir Francis Drake, playing bocce as the Spanish Armada approached, said, "First, we finish the game; then we have time for the Invincible Armada."

Bocce can be played by two to eight players, split into two teams. Playing balls are 4.5 inches in diameter and weigh about three pounds. A set costs anywhere from \$20 to \$100. The purpose of the game is to roll your team's balls closest to the pallino, a 1.75-inch ball that is rolled down the alley first. The bocce balls that land closest to the pallino, and closer than the opponent's balls, score points. The first team to 12 points wins, and the game switches directions after every set of balls is thrown.

The playing space needs to be free of trees. A regulation bocce alley is 10 to 12 feet wide and 76 feet long, with a half-court line 38 feet from each end and a shooter's box at each end of 10 feet. If your yard space is not big enough, scale down or adapt the dimensions as needed. If small children want to play, let them throw from a shorter distance, or shorten the alley's dimensions.

On grass, the lines can be marked with sticks or rocks. Another good method is string or twine held taught with tent stakes. At the beach, the lines of the Bocce alley can be marked out quickly in the sand, a surface that can make the balls bounce in interesting ways.

With so many possibilities, you are sure to find a backyard game you enjoy. Who knows, with enough practice, you might get taken in next year's World Bocce League draft.

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