

Tossing & turning

Members of an East Vancouver bocce club try to preserve an Old World pastime in a New World setting

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Tracey Lebedovich first witnessed men playing bocce in Victoria Park while on maternity leave with her daughter Stella.



This “mysterious group of guys” was at the park whenever the Vancouver filmmaker visited. They were playing the game they brought with them from Italy.

Lebedovich began filming Victoria Park – A Generation of Bocce in 2007 to document the game and its players in East Vancouver. The 42-minute film is slated to premier at the Okanagan International Film Festival in Kelowna, B.C., next week.

When Lebedovich began the project, there were about 30 regular players using the park. The number of active players has since dwindled to about 10.

“It’s about this little piece of the city’s culture and history that is slowly disappearing,” Lebedovich says.

The documentary follows players in the park and at the Italian Cultural Centre, as they play and struggle to impart their love of the game to a new generation.

Italian immigration to Vancouver slowed dramatically in the 1970s. The children of immigrants who landed before the decline in new arrivals did not embrace the sport. “They’re all off playing hockey,” Lebedovich says.

Shortly after she started filming, construction began at Victoria Park, and Lebedovich followed the players as they struggled to find a new place to play. “The whole herd of them moved to Garden Park,” a few blocks away, she says. Some of the men who frequent Victoria Park have refused to let advancing age take them away from the game they love.

Lebedovich says some play cards and watch the games, others “walk the lines” and one die-hard player fashioned a device from wire hangers to pick up bocce balls from the ground, because he can’t bend over to pick them up any longer.

The players in Victoria Park are all men, although the courts at the Italian Cultural Centre are open to any member of the centre. “The guys in the park are very old school,” she says, “but the real reason they go day after day is because they love bocce and enjoy each other’s company. It’s been a great support system for them for a long time.”