

IN PICKLEBALL

ISSUE THREE



BIG BEN

Breakout star **BEN JOHNS** is pickleball's one to watch

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WHAT'S BETTER THAN PLAYING IN ONE OF THE PICKLEBALL CAPITALS OF THE WORLD?

BY MARGIE ZABLE FISHER

→ Naples, Florida, has it all: beaches, shops, eateries, and now some 90 pickleball courts.

ON A RECENT SATURDAY morning, Lynn Crane and her doubles partner, Johnny Gannatti, played on a 3.5 court at the [Naples Pickleball Center](#), located in [East Naples Community Park](#). The 66 courts were about two-thirds full and were mostly quiet, with the exception of a few shouts from Gannatti. “That’s pickleball, baby,” he called out after a winning point.

After a rousing win of 11 to 8, Crane and Gannatti came off the court. Crane took a few sips from her water bottle and talked about why she regularly drove 25 miles from her home on Marco Island to play here. “Whenever I’ve had friends come to visit from Maryland, Delaware, and California,” Crane says, “they are just amazed by this place.”

Crane plays pickleball for over two hours every morning, seven days a week. “I never have trouble getting a court, except January through March,” she says. “Even then, with so many courts, they turn over really fast.”

With a year-round population of over 22,000, and located on the Gulf of Mexico, Naples, Florida, boasts first-class shopping, pristine and often uncrowded beaches, a lively restaurant scene, and a seeming dedication to pickleball that has led it to proclaim itself the Pickleball Capital of the World™. (Yes, it’s been trademarked!) Overall, the city has roughly 90 pickleball courts open to the public and since 2016 has hosted the [US Open Pickleball Championships](#). (The 2022 tournament will be held April 23–30.)

Naples is indeed an ideal spot for pickleball enthusiasts looking for an immersive vacation. But leave some time to explore the many off-the-court activities this charming Florida destination has to offer.

WHERE TO PLAY

Located on more than six acres, the Naples Pickleball Center courts are laid out in different sections, by skill level. Once you've parked, you'll see the pro shop and 3.0 courts in front of you to the right. On the left side of the pro shop, you'll find a map detailing where each level of courts is located.

"Having different courts for different levels of play is one of the best parts of this facility," says Crane. "People just starting out don't feel intimidated, the more experienced players get good play, and the ones who are trying to make a career out of pickleball can go to the 4.0+ courts."



PADDLES UP! There are 66 pickleball courts at the Naples Pickleball Center.

To help newcomers and visitors feel comfortable, more than 50 volunteer "ambassadors" are available near the pro shop and the 2.5, 3.0, and 3.5 courts every morning and weekday evening to answer questions. They are easy to find with their bright orange shirts that read "NPC Ambassador."

As you plan your schedule, know that organized play takes place from 8 a.m. to noon and from 5 p.m. to 8 p.m., Monday through Friday. (The fee is \$5.) Play pickleball at no charge Monday through Friday from noon to 5 p.m., and on Saturday and Sunday.



At the sign-up board (below) players are matched with opponents of the same skill level

The Naples Pickleball Center Pro Shop sells paddles, balls, clothing, and accessories. You can also try out a new paddle for \$5 per day, or rent a paddle for \$1 per hour through a vending machine when the pro shop is closed.

If you want to beat the heat, sign up for lessons taught by certified pickleball professionals that are conducted on the teaching courts, which are covered by a blue awning. (On that same Saturday morning, pro Holly Bacon led a group of four, providing a mixture of encouraging and bluntly honest individual instruction and drills.)



You can't miss this pickleball "ambassador" in her brightly colored shirt



Players awaiting their turn

The center continues to grow, with a new pickleball welcome center and pro shop under construction and a planned opening just before the 2022 [US Open Pickleball Championships](#). Created by Chris Evon and Terri Graham, two female players and the cofounders of Spirit Promotions LLC, the event is billed as the largest spectator and participation pickleball tournament in the world and attracts more than 25,000 visitors over a seven-day period. (It is also known as “the largest pickleball party in the world,” featuring adult beverages, music, food trucks, and more.)



HONING THEIR GAME Holly Bacon (third from left) leads a teaching session at the **Naples Pickleball Center**.

The Naples Pickleball Center also has a satellite venue in North Naples, located within Veterans Community Park. It has 14 dedicated pickleball courts and the same hours and playing system as the East Naples location, and it also offers lessons and a pro shop.

In addition, Fleischmann Park in downtown Naples has seven pickleball courts open to the public.

WHERE TO STAY



UP A LAZY RIVER Guests float on the winding man-made waterway at the **Naples Bay Resort & Marina.**

Located near downtown Naples and a little over three miles from East Naples Community Park is the 22-acre AAA four-diamond [Naples Bay Resort & Marina](#). The hotel offers access to the resort's private Naples Bay Club, with a free shuttle running between the two locations. While the resort doesn't have any pickleball courts on the premises, it does offer six tennis courts for those who play both sports. A double room starts at \$274 a night May through September and from \$475 October through April. Another option is to rent one of the resort's two- or -three-bedroom cottages, which are available for a minimum six-night stay. Prices start at \$174 per night off-season and \$400 per night in season.



Naples Bay Resort & Marina, where many residents also dock their boats.

If you're looking for a place to stay with pickleball courts, consider [Park Shore Resort](#) in North Naples. Renting one of the 35 updated condos starts at \$109 per night for a one-bedroom and \$159 for a two-bedroom off-season, \$175 and \$299 for the same condos during high season. Six pickleball courts are available to guests from dawn to dusk, and you can also use the pool and hot tub and eat at the on-site restaurant.

WHERE TO EAT

One of the most difficult parts of dining in Naples is choosing where to go. There are just so many terrific options. The [Yabba Island Grill](#) is enormously popular with locals and tourists alike, thanks to dishes like its specialty guacamole (the surprising addition of tangerine gives it a citrusy sweetness) and the crispy crab-stuffed grouper. On a recent evening, as guests waited to be taken to their tables, a woman and a young girl played pop songs on their violins from a nearby courtyard. (Entrees range from \$28 to \$62.) Other indoor and outdoor dining options abound on Fifth Avenue, including the Middle Eastern restaurant [bha! bha! Persian bistro](#) and the buzzy Italian spot [La Trattoria](#).

In North Naples, the [Watermark Grille](#) is a popular spot for large groups, with dishes such as prime rib (the house specialty), chicken Oscar, baked stuffed shrimp (both include blue lump crab meat) as well as Asian orange chicken. (Entrees range from \$19 to \$41.) Save room for dessert, including the tempting peanut butter pie.



A prime rib dinner at **Watermark Grille**



The bar at **Watermark Grille**

If you're looking for a great place for breakfast after a satisfying couple of hours playing pickleball, go where the locals go: [Blueberry's](#). The laid-back restaurant offers indoor and outdoor seating, and the blueberry pancakes are a house specialty. (A stack of four costs \$8.49.)

For a casual night out with drinks, bites, and music, try [Celebration Park](#), near East Naples Community Park. On a recent Saturday night, the food corridor featured four food trucks on each side, with offers ranging from burgers to seafood (including Jamaican jerk snapper) to barbecue to Mexican, as well as ice cream treats for dessert. The Old School Band, which plays classic rock songs, provided the soundtrack, with 60-something couples dancing to tunes like “Stuck in the Middle with You.”



LIFE IS A BANQUET The food trucks at Celebration Park

OFF THE COURTS



The shops of **Fifth Avenue South**

Round out your time in Naples with some interesting and fun excursions. Get your shopping fix on Fifth Avenue South. Most of the businesses are locally owned, and you can find everything from an amazing bathing suit at [Mare Blu](#) to a tropical-inspired blouse or unique gift at [The Wind in the Willows](#).

If you'd rather look at cars than shop, check out the hidden gem known as [Revs Institute](#), considered one of America's best car museums, boasting such rarities as the 1995 McLaren F1 with a center driving position and the 1933 Packard Twelve Dual Cowl Sport Phaeton. Visitors must reserve tickets online, and the museum is open only on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Naples has more than 10 miles of shoreline, providing plenty of options for beachgoers. Shell collectors often flock to [Lowdermilk Park](#), one of Naples's loveliest spots, where visitors can find plenty of sand dollars and starfish.



Relaxing at **Lowdermilk Park**

Finally, no trip to Naples is complete without catching a famous Gulf of Mexico sunset. Watch along with the crowds from the 130-year-old Naples Pier, either from a table on the sand at [The Turtle Club](#) or from a sunset cruise on the [Pure Florida](#) boat *Double Sunshine*. The 90-minute cruise (\$48 for adults) includes an informative narration from the captain, who regales visitors with facts about Naples and some of the sprawling mansions the boat passes by. Drinks are available to sip as you watch the sun set in the distance, the orange glow bouncing off the surrounding water.



ON LAND AND OUT TO SEA A trip to the Naples Pier, especially at sunset, is a must.



A **Pure Florida** boat heading out to the Gulf of Mexico.

But don't stay out too late. You'll want to hit the pickleball courts in the morning.



On the court at **Naples Pickleball Center**