

A Heart for the Game: Celebrating Don Wheeler at 94

Happy 94th Birthday to the Heart of Bellingham Pickleball

If you stroll by the pickleball courts at Cornwall Park on a sunny morning, you're likely to see him — paddle in hand, grin on his face, still playing the game he helped bring to Bellingham nearly twenty years ago. At 94, Don Wheeler isn't just a regular on the courts; he's one of the founding members of our local pickleball community, and the heart of what makes it so special.

Don's pickleball journey began in 2005, when he was a young 74 and spending the winter at Happy Trails Resort in Surprise, Arizona. A friend from Bellingham named Ralph wouldn't stop talking about this new sport called pickleball. Don finally gave in and tried it — with little toy paddles, no less — and from the first rally, he was hooked.

Ralph was making his own paddles out of wood, and Don bought one for \$15 — the same paddle he still uses today. "I see all these folks out there spending \$200 on fancy paddles," he laughs. "In my opinion, a better paddle won't make you a better player. You can't buy a game."

When Don came home, he was eager to share the fun. He gathered a few friends at the Bellingham YMCA, where they played for nearly a decade before moving outdoors to the tennis courts at Cornwall Park. Those early days took dedication — players had to sweep the courts, chalk their own lines, and lower the nets before a single serve could be made. But soon, word got out, and dozens of new players began showing up each morning.

That's when Don called the Parks Department and invited the director — who had never heard of pickleball — to come watch. The sight of 60+ players waiting their turn made an impression, and eventually, thanks to Don's persistence, the city budgeted \$73,000 to expand the courts. And that was only the beginning.

Every morning, Don and a small crew would arrive early to set up the nets and mark the lines — waiting for the day when tennis players might show up to reclaim their courts. That day never came. Instead, many of those tennis players joined them.

Over the years, Don has seen pickleball transform not just into a sport, but into a true community. “I’ve got more friends through pickleball than I can count,” he says. “People who’d do anything for me.”

He means that quite literally. Seven years ago, Don collapsed while waiting to play, and it was his fellow pickleballers — a nurse, two doctors, a dentist, and a pharmacist — who immediately jumped into action and saved his life. “If that had happened anywhere else, I might not be here today,” he says, touching his chest where his pacemaker now rests. “Every time I feel it, I’m reminded that I have great friends who care about me. And I wouldn’t have that without pickleball.”

Don calls pickleball “the great equalizer.” When you retire, he says, “everyone’s just a person. There are no social classes. But when someone stops showing up, everyone notices. People rally around them.”

After outliving three wives and nearly a century of adventures, Don Wheeler remains full of life, laughter, and gratitude. He’s proof that friendship and movement keep us young — and that community can grow from something as simple as a game and a paddle. Don will play the game with anyone, and he won’t hesitate to stop a game and offer a new player a few helpful pointers. Don is a man of class and a friend to many..

On his 94th birthday, we celebrate Don Wheeler — a friend, a founder, and the living heartbeat of Bellingham’s pickleball family.

Here’s to many more mornings at Cornwall Park, Don — and many more games still to play.

Written by Krista Golden