



Photos by Anne Freeman

Mike Flanagan prepares to hit a pickleball launched from Simon, a new ball machine for the Pickleball Association of Sun City. Below left, Pickleball Association of Sun City members gather around in for a demonstration of the machine on May 21. As shown below, Don Hayes swats a pickleball across the net while he and Julie Sowell wait for Simon to swivel his head to them to hit.

Simon helps ball players in a pickle



By MICHAEL FREEMAN

Simon can fire a pickleball up to 30 mph. Simon can accurately place the ball from anywhere on the court. Simon can launch balls for more than four hours without getting tired.

Simon is a pickleball machine.

No, seriously Simon usually is a machine — and he belongs to the Pickleball Association of Sun City.

The club of nearly 400 members purchased the machine to help with practice drills.

"We feel Simon will help our members get better," said Nancy Grafton, president of the Pickleball Association of Sun City.

The portable, battery-powered machine, nicknamed "Simon," can hold up to 300 pickleballs, which resemble Wiffle balls. It's the only pickleball-specific ball machine on the market, costing more than \$1,000. But club members feel it's worth the investment.

Fourteen Sun City pickleball players will be playing in the National Senior Games in Minneapolis, Minn., on this July. The ball machine can repeatedly feed players balls so they can hone their groundstrokes, volleys and dink shot skills.

"You get to work on a particular shot you're had trouble with," said Chuck Flanagan, North Austin pick-

leball ambassador. "I think it's going to be good."

Members can use the ball machine during weekday afternoons with the help of an equipment manager at no cost.

Pickleball was invented in the 1960s in Washington, and is a combination of tennis, badminton and ping-pong. Players use paddles to swing a ball back and forth across a net.

Stories conflict on how the sport got its name, some saying it was named after the sport's founding family's dog, others saying it refers to a boating term. Either way, it's becoming one of the more popular recreational sports in the nation.

"We're a hot spot in Texas with good pickleball players," Mr. Flanagan said.

In 2010, Sun City club members won 31 medals in a rare pickleball tournament. Sun City has six pickleball courts. The club was founded in 2009 with the courts being built that year. Members range in skill level from novice to advanced.

Residents can join the club through the Sun City Community Association for \$15 a year.

Ms. Grafton expects more pickleball courts will be needed in the future, taking into account the influx and the anticipated number of new homes in Sun City.

"We're a hotbed in Texas with good pickleball players."

Chuck Flanagan
Pickleball ambassador

During the summer, the Sun City Community Association offers a two-week camp for the grandchildren of Sun City residents.

Residents can also learn how to play as the club puts on introductory clinics. It's an addictive game as about half of those who try it out end up joining.

The club also hosts tournaments and socials throughout the year. The next big event will be Halloween, when members will wear costumes as they hit the court.

For people not living in Sun City, pickleball is offered at the Georgetown Recreation Center, 1008 North Austin Avenue, on three indoor courts on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Four outdoor pickleball courts are also at the McMaster Athletic Complex, 40 W. Wilcox Drive in Georgetown.

Pickleball groups also meet in Cedar Park, Austin, Pflugerville, Round Rock and Hunt.

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