As pickleball grows, Keowee to hold tourney

BY ROBBIE TINSLEY
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SALEM — If you're looking for a new sport to try that's easy to pick up, isn't cost-prohibitive and has a marginally funny name, then pickleball might be the game for you.

The game's popularity is on the rise, evidenced by the Pickleball Club at Keowee Key holding its inaugural invitational tournament today. It will feature 48 teams from around the Upstate and North Carolina competing in men's, women's and mixed doubles categories.

Pickleball is a mix between badminton, ping-pong and tennis. It's played on a court that's about a third of the size of a tennis court. The players — two per side — use paddles to hit a softball-sized wiffle ball back and forth over a 36-inch-high net.

Pickleball Club committee member Doug Crawford is hoping today's tournament is the first of many annual events, and he's also hopeful the club can eventually add to its four existing pickleball courts and host bigger tournaments.

"If we had more courts, we'd have a larger tournament," said Webster, who is also on the tournament committee. "Ultimately, what I see at Keowee Key once we add the next four courts, the plan will be to have a multi-day tournament, which will feature three levels of competition."

The club, which was founded in 2010, started playing on a concrete patio before it was eventually allowed to put pickleball lines on a couple of Keowee Key's tennis courts.

Keowee Key residents then started flocking to the club, and in May 2012, four pickleball courts with lights were built for the members to play on.

Webster estimates the club now has around 150 members.

While Keowee Key is a private community, Webster hopes to see the sport soon become a staple of the local schools in Anderson, Oconee and Pickens counties.

"Around the country, a lot of middle and high schools are incorporating pickleball into their athletic programs," Webster said. "The skills translate very well into tennis, so it's kind of a feeder sport. It also makes a lot of sense because it's an inexpensive sport."

Part of the appeal of the sport is its ease to play and difficulty to dominate. Rules like no-volley zones at the net make it harder for bigger or more experienced players to take advantage of small or less experienced members. The size of the court also means players don't have to cover large distances.

"(The game's creators) wanted a very fair, fun competition," Webster said. "Many of the rules in pickleball are designed to create this atmosphere of fun and good exercise.

"Don't get me wrong, there's a lot of competition, but it's very difficult for a team to overwhelm another team."

Weather permitting, the tournament will be held at the Keowee Club Tennis and Fitness Center beginning at 9 a.m. and lasting until 5 p.m.

For more information about pickleball, visit the sport's official website at www.usapa.org.

rtinsley@upstatetoday.com | (864) 882-2385
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