



Discovering the secrets to longevity — on a Mt. Lebanon bocce court



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This is the first in a four-part series looking at the concept of Blue Zones and how they translate in Pittsburgh.

Five members of the Calabrian Bocce Club were several rolls into a brisk Sunday morning game when Carlo Marotta walked toward the court.

He made an entrance.

Greetings in English and Italian bellowed and echoed through the cavernous section of Cedar Boulevard in Mt. Lebanon, then calmed as comments turned to his recent fender bender, an unavoidable smash on a highway ramp.

“I have an extra car for you to use,” offered one player, a friend of nearly 20 years — “Riccardo” Ponzio, who just turned 87. Marotta batted away the seriousness of the issue as he set down the group’s electric espresso kettle

and the day's allotment of Italian cookies, as the conversation turned to nothing but bocce for the next three hours.

The youngster of the group, by far, is 65. The eldest — former Pittsburgh media personality Alan Boal — is 93. All seven bocce players at a mid-September gathering identified their group as a reason why age is truly just a number in their cases.

The men, most of whom immigrated from Italy, had never heard of a Blue Zone until that morning, but that's probably a symptom of not needing to mimic one.

Blue Zones are areas of the world where people live the longest. Coined by National Geographic researcher Dan Buettner in 2004, the concept became a Netflix docuseries, “Live to 100: Secrets of the Blue Zones,” which debuted in August.



Bocce player Carlo Marotta, 71, of Mt. Lebanon played the game as a teenager in Italy and brought his love for the game with him when he moved to the U.S.

(Lucy Schaly/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

The first cinematic stop mirrors the area that inspired Buettner in the first place — Okinawa, Japan — known for one of the largest groups of centenarians anywhere in the world, with 68 per 100,000 people over 100 years old, or a prevalence of 0.068%, compared to [0.027%](#) in the U.S.

While the longevity of Blue Zone populations is multifactorial, each area has a standout attribute, something that those in less-Blue locales might identify as unique and wish to shamelessly steal in pursuit of their own lengthy lives.

Within Okinawan culture — which exists on 150-plus islands in the East China Sea — that means honoring play and the social structure that supports it. But those practices export almost identically on a metaphorical island seated on the edge of Mt. Lebanon Park, in a suburb of Pittsburgh, every Sunday, all year long.

Supportive sports

When the men greeted Marotta, they unintentionally revealed important social dynamics, ones that prove their club to be more than a hobbyist group.

The boisterous welcome — some ribbing, all genuine excitement to see their friend — demonstrates the light-heartedness and vitality of the group, despite an average age in the low 80s.

Addressing Marotta's most pressing life event at the time (a recent car accident) followed by a generous offer to help (a loaned car, free of charge) exemplifies the level of support, emotional and with resources, the members provide to one another.

And the quick, seamless transition to a bocce-only conversation identifies the respite their get-togethers provide, insulating themselves from the trials of everyday life.

“A few people died from our team, lost their wives, but not on the court. On the court, we're fine. We just talk about bocce, that's it,” said Giuseppe Chirumbolo, 88, of McMurray. “We feel relaxed when we play. That's why we play.”



On the court, we're fine. We just talk about bocce, that's it," says 88-year-old Giuseppe Chirumbolo
(Lucy Schaly/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

Okinawans would call this group a *moai*, and Buettner calls it a reason for longevity.

The word doesn't refer to the statues on the edge of Easter Island, in this case, though their function isn't dissimilar. In Japanese, "moai" means "meeting for a common purpose," and these groups — whether statues or groups of older Okinawans (or Italians in a Mt. Lebanon park) — are protectors.

These friend circles have often existed for decades. Their members rely on one other for financial and emotional support in ways no one needs to tiptoe around. And they tend to bond over play.

"The Japanese government promoted those types of activities all over Japan," said Akira Sekikawa, a professor of epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh and native of Tokyo. "Have you ever heard of gateball? This is socialization among the elderly."

Gateball is similar to croquet, and not unlike bocce: skill games with multiple balls rolled on a court. In both cases, they are played by residents of their native countries across their lifespans.

An often referenced 2015 study [showed](#) social isolation increases the likelihood of mortality by an average of 29% (loneliness does the same, by 26%), with prolonged isolation being the equivalent of smoking 15 cigarettes per day.

But for these moai, play isn't just the medium for socialization and its accompanying health helpers. Play might be its own health goal, which leads to another pillar of Japanese wellbeing, *ikigai*.

Meaningful movement

The Japanese have no word for retirement, at least not in the American sense. In ways, neither does Ponzio.

He not only plays bocce on Sundays in Mt. Lebanon, but teaches the sport to any fellow resident of his home, Providence Point retirement community, willing to learn.

“People should understand they have to keep their bodies active and stay socially engaged,” he said. “If they're not engaged, that's when they start losing it, and don't want to get out of bed. When you don't want to get out of bed, you can say bye-bye.”

The sentiment is shared by his fellow Calabrian players, especially those who immigrated from Italy.

“Older people in Italy exercise every day,” said Bob (Roberto) Rubano, 78, of North Strabane, who follows suit. “In Italy, they have piazzas, squares. So they get together and start walking around the squares. They might be walking for hours.”



Bob Rubano, 79, of North Strabane has played bocce every week for at least 20 years with the same group of guys.

(Lucy Schaly/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

It's that cultural pattern, started early in life and represented to younger generations, that catches the attention of University of Pittsburgh Brain, Environment, Aging and Mobility lab leader, Andrea Rosso.

"If we start with older adults, it's already too late," she said. "How many middle-aged people do you see who are playing? In America, we just don't have that as a part of our larger culture, so it doesn't translate into older age either."

But for those who do engage with play as older adults, the benefits do more than pass the time.

"From the brain perspective, it's stimulation. You're interacting with other people. Where if you just got on a treadmill, for example, it wouldn't be the same," she said. "You wouldn't have the rules to follow for bocce. There isn't the interaction or the navigation of social norms that keep your brain active. That's on top of the physical activity."

For Stephen Smagula, an associate professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh, active lifestyles are a theme among Blue Zones, with more far-reaching effects than many would expect.

“You don’t need to break your back doing burpees. That’s unrealistic for a lot of people, and it’s unsustainable,” he said. “I think that’s how it adds up in Blue Zones. They’re doing this every day — or on a schedule — with ease. It’s not walking up and thinking, ‘What the hell am I going to do all day?’

“They don’t think of it as ‘I’m trying to do something good for my health.’ It’s ‘I’m living my life, and my life is an active life.’”

Perhaps more important to Smagula, who studies sleep-wake rhythms and depression, an active lifestyle often means a scheduled one, which has big implications for longevity.



An active lifestyle often means a scheduled one — like the group of Mt. Leabnon bocce players routinely meeting up to play — which has big implications for longevity, says Stephen Smagula, an associate professor of psychiatry and epidemiology at Pitt.

(Lucy Schaly/Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

When people retire in the American sense, they often lose the cues that inform their daily schedules — no specific wake-up times or points when to start or end work. If social patterns or hobbies aren’t maintained, that set of daily directions — “social zeitgebers” — disappears altogether, which can also upend sleep patterns.

“Inadequate sleep, risk factor for dying early. Inactivity, risk factor for dying early. Losing the rhythm and routine of both, well, that’s going to

have even more effects,” Smagula said.

The predictability of activities — gateball or bocce, for example — also has implications for mental health.

“When you’re in that moment playing, you’re enjoying it, and you’re active, but after you’re done playing, you also have something that was fun. If you’re up and active for a long time, and you aren’t worried or stressed, you sleep at night,” he said. “It’s not just amount of activity, but being content with your life. You sleep at night.

”It’s not just that they live longer. They live better.”

And that is the Japanese concept of “ikigai,” or sense of purpose.

Chirumbolo knows it well.

After immigrating to the U.S. at age 21, working as a plumber for most of his life, and still spending his days in his garden and barn at age 88, he has a wide-ranging definition of work, much as the Japanese do.

And like them, he watched generations before him live long, active, bocce-playing lives — his great grandfather lived to be 105 — providing a road map, and expectation, to do the same.

His genetics, the organic foods pulled from his garden over a lifetime and the nearly nonstop movement that accompanied (and accompanies) his professional and personal lifestyle are all in his favor.

But so are his moai and ikigai — echoes of a Blue Zone over 12,000 miles away — which point to a universal source of mental and physical health. Fun.

“I look forward to playing all week. I dream at night about playing bocce,” Chirumbolo said. “It’s going to help me live longer.”

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