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The quintessential French game of petanque is finding fans in Australia

Petanque might have only a niche following in Australia but its popularity is growing, writes Jonathan Barrett.



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Twenty-six teams, with players from around the world, compete in the Whicher Ridge vineyard, in WA, petanque competition. **Martine Perret**

by **Jonathan Barrett**

Back in 1910, Provence cafe owner Ernest Pitiot looked at his chair-bound friend, Jules Lenoir, cheerlessly watch a game of boules. Lenoir's rheumatism was playing up, and the days of him taking an energetic trot before throwing the ball, as was customary in the popular game of the day, *jeu provençal*, had passed. Pitiot puffed out his rounded cheeks, exhaled, and came up with a new boules game

wanted to. Petanque would go on to become the dominant boules game in France.

Fast forward a little over a century, and 26 teams are competing in a local petanque tournament near a famous wine-growing region. But it is not the rosé-producing Provence, in the south-east of France. This is the south-west of Western Australia, near Margaret River. A team from Mauritius are doing well, as are several teams consisting of a mix of Australians, European expats and French travellers.

A team of young French men, all of whom are in Australia on working holiday visas, tell me that playing petanque has been their weekend activity for as long as they can remember. "You start when you are young and you play until you are dead," says the dreadlocked Thomas Henry. The prize-money tournament is hosted by Whicher Ridge vineyard owners Neil and Cathy Howard in an unashamed bid to mix business and pleasure. Given it's one of the few sports where you can hold a glass of wine while you play, the vineyard setting is entirely appropriate, and more than a few competitors buy a few bottles of the vineyard's finest.

SOCIAL APPEAL



As the pressure mounts, players shuffle the metals balls between their hands faster and faster, presumably to alleviate tension.

Martine Perret

Petanque might have only a niche following in Australia, and is clearly overshadowed by lawn bowls, but its popularity is growing. Part of its appeal is clearly linked to the social element. "I come from

a family of lawn bowlers but it was never something that I really wanted to get into," says one of the country's top over-60s players, Helen Bayet "[Petanque] was a lot more fun. If you can hold a boule in one hand and a glass of wine in the other, well it's great."

Like lawn bowls, the aim of petanque is to get your boules as close to the jack as possible. Players stand in a small circle; this used to be drawn on the gravel-playing "piste" but is now more often marked by a plastic circle. At the end of each round, the team scores as many points as it has boules which are closer to the jack than the closest shot of their opponents.

The winning player or team – you can play singles, doubles or triples – is the first to reach 13 points. But games are also often timed, which means that if you are ahead when the time runs out, you win. This can lead to allegations of time wasting, especially if people are betting on the result, as is the case in parts of France. "When there's a lot of betting going on it gets competitive," says Petanque Federation Australia president Joe Corcoran. "There is time wasting, but there are other things you need to keep an eye on. People do things like step outside the edge of the circle to create a different angle. People do all sorts of things to help them score a point."

If this all sounds rather competitive for a social sport, that's because for many players it isn't strictly social. It could soon be an Olympic event.



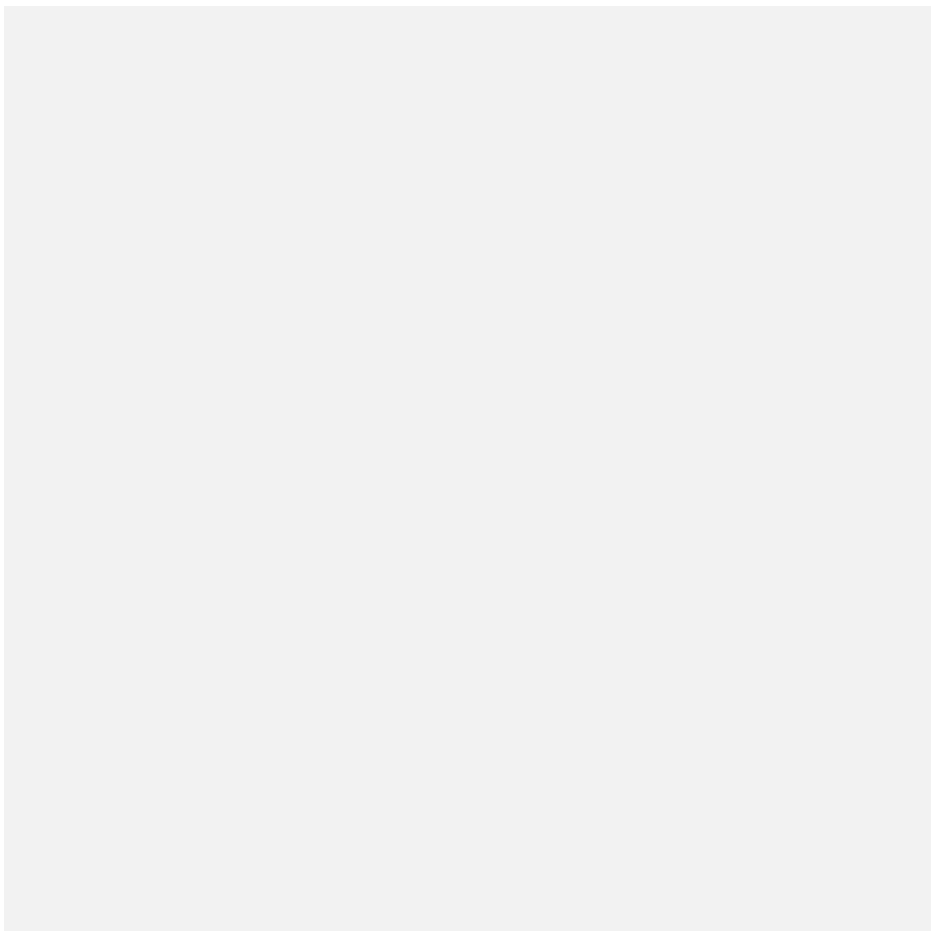
Bernard Nada wears a whimsical beret in a nod to the game's French origins. **Martine Perret**

The sport's international federation is pushing for petanque to be included in the 2024 Olympics; an event France wants to host. Part of any bid to have a new sport included in the world's premier sporting event relies on proving it has widespread appeal outside its country of origin. It's unclear whether petanque will be included, but gaining supporters in Australia won't hurt its chances. And while France's colonial past has ensured petanque is played in several places around the globe – former French colonies and protectorates like Tunisia and Algeria traditionally field strong teams at tournaments – the sport has taken off in the most unlikely of places.

NERVES OF STEEL

The late Princess Srinagarindra of Thailand fell in love with petanque after living for a time in Switzerland. She encouraged the sport be played in her homeland, and Thailand now boasts several world champions. The success of the Thais seems to be rubbing off on its neighbours, with most of south-east Asia now being competitive in petanque tournaments around the world. In Thailand, the armed forces have their own teams. The sport is said to improve co-ordination and aid strategic thinking. It can also help develop nerves of steel – or destroy you.

On the advice of a petanque player, I recently watched a video of the 2006 World Championships, played in Grenoble, France, between a French and Tunisian team. It's a bit like watching a sudden death golf play-off; the tension never ceases. As the pressure mounts, players shuffle the metal balls between their hands faster and faster, presumably to alleviate tension. When the crowd falls silent, the click, click, click of the metal balls becomes the predominant sound. It would not be out of place on an Alfred Hitchcock film soundtrack.



Usually, petanque has that certain French chic that the all-white-wearing lawn bowling organisations don't quite portray. Casual competitions, the obvious exceptions. **Martine Perret**

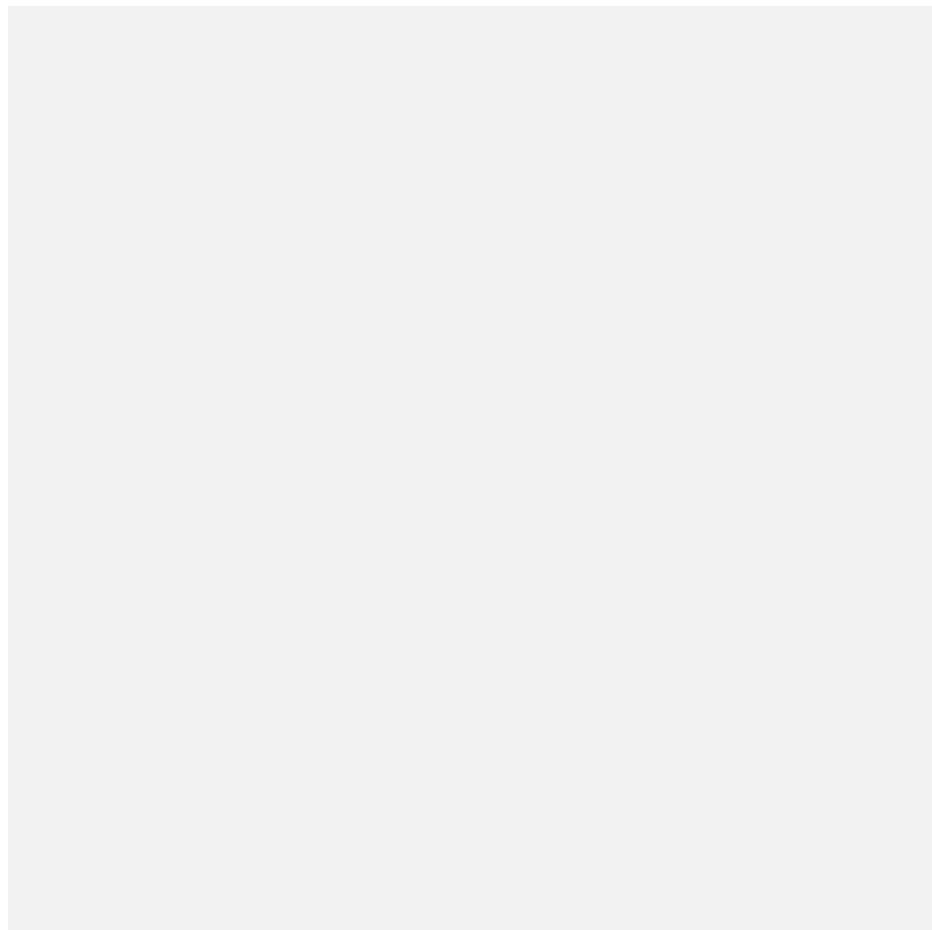
There are many reasons petanque might thrive in Australia and abroad and a few why it may not, according to Murdoch University professor and social scientist Toby Miller. He says that some sports have natural barriers to expansion, like AFL's requirement for a vast field. Ice hockey and golf are naturally inhibited, although given the latter is a sport that comes with a certain element of wealth and prestige, countries with a growing middle class tend to build golf courses. NFL is, of course, just strange to anyone not born in North America.

While petanque obviously lacks certain athletic attributes, it does have a "low barrier to entry" as the equipment is cheap and the skill level required to play in a social game is low.

"But the difficult thing for petanque in Australia is to show it is a different form of game to one that is extremely familiar to us, lawn bowls," says Miller, who co-authored the book *Globalisation and Sport*.

There is a school of thought that says two similar sports will struggle

to thrive in one jurisdiction as they tend to cannibalise one another. For example, cricket will dominate baseball or vice versa in any one country, given their similarities. When two similar sports do co-exist successfully, like Rugby Union and Rugby League, there is often a historical cultural or socioeconomic element, such as the two codes' "gentleman" and "working class" roots, respectively.



Denise and Anton Wieland at the more relaxed end of the dress code. **Martine Perret**

FASTER-PACED THAN BOWLS

At risk of upsetting lawn bowlers, my view is that petanque could be more successful than bowls in attracting more diverse – and younger – players in Australia. The game is faster-paced than bowls, does not require a long bowling green to play on, and, includes the strangely satisfying "shooting" element, where you aggressively knock a rival's ball out of the way. When petanque enthusiasts run programs at schools, teenage boys, in particular, love this element. While lawn bowlers "drive" with similar aggression, it is a less frequently used shot.

And then petanque has that certain French chic that the all-white-wearing lawn bowling organisations don't quite portray. In 2010,

fashion labels Chanel and Louis Vuitton even released petanque sets in soft leather cases to celebrate the sport's centenary. I don't see any such sets at the laid-back Whicher Ridge event, where some players are wearing whimsical berets in a nod to the game's French origins. A team from the Perth Petanque Club: John Rowe, Walter Lubtschenko and Mattias Laukart, won the tournament.

It seems petanque's best chance of enticing more than a few lawn bowls turncoats and attracting a new generation of Australian players lies with its Olympics bid. The increased exposure and funding that comes with being an Olympic sport could catapult the sport on to the world stage in a way Ernest Pitiot, the Provençal cafe owner, could never have imagined when he came up with a form of boules his chair-bound friend could play.

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