A Touch of France in Bryant Park

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By Joshua Robinson

A Handful of Pétanque Clubs Keeps This Relaxing Outdoor Bowling Sport Alive in New York City

Martial Raissiguier, a tourist from Marseille, did not feel like shopping anymore when he wandered into Bryant Park. His friends could keep shopping if they wanted, but he had found a better option. Three thousand miles from home, he had stumbled across the familiar feel of the south of France in the northwest corner of Bryant Park.

And he was going to play pétanque.

“It’s perfectly warm here,” he told his friends in French. “Playing boules in the shade, under the trees.”

Still, the game is a bowling sport, native to the south of France and similar to the Italian game of bocce. Like its cousin from beyond the Alps, the object of pétanque is to land as many of your balls as close as possible to a target. In this case, the balls are made of metal and weigh a little less than two pounds. The target is usually a tiny wooden ball known as the cochonnet, or jack.

On a daily basis from April to November—and sometimes in the dead of winter—the game brings together Bryant Park regulars. Many are retirees from the restaurant business. Others have day jobs that they tailor around pétanque. And all the characters are known exclusively by their first names.

For aspiring regulars, La Boule New Yorkaise offers free lessons and use of their equipment from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. every weekday. (Players have to bring their own boules on weekends.) Through those, the club constantly attracts passers-by to a game they have never heard of.