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Four-Square champs put fun in fundraiser

By **Terry Karkos** , Staff Writer
Sunday, February 4, 2007

BRIDGTON - Combine an obscure playground sport with tape, winter doldrums, a bouncy orange ball, and a funky old town hall, and the one-of-a-kind Bridgton Four-Square World Championships emerge.

The 2005 brainchild of Lakes Environmental Association Executive Director Peter Lowell, this wacky, intense fundraiser is a big hit with grown-up kids in their 20s and older. On Saturday night , more than 60 men and women from all over New England competed in the third annual championship to determine bragging rights, and just who would walk away with what Lowell calls the world's gaudiest trophies.

"It's a bizarre form of ecotourism," Lowell said Friday by phone in Bridgton. "This is a pretty dull time of the year, so, we're trying to get a lot of people together and boost the economy."

Players only needed sneakers and \$10 for the entry fee, money that supports the organization's environmental work.

Five 16-foot squares were taped off on a basketball court in the town hall. Each square was then divided into four squares. The object of the game is to knock people out of the squares by hitting a standard playground ball into someone else's square and making them miss it to score points.

"Basically, it's like squash. It's one of those things that's good exercise and requires some real skill," Lowell said.

It also requires good hand-eye coordination, body control, agility, and confidence, but not necessarily athleticism or strength, so, couch potatoes could play the game just as well as athletes, said Sean Effel, who co-founded Boston four-square league Squarefour in fall 2003 with two-time Bridgton world champion Dana Ostberg, 29, of Jamaica Plain, Mass. Lowell's group then adopted their rules last year.

"Some people play because they were very good at it as kids, and some people who were not so good as kids, play it better as adults," Effel said.

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With a revival of playground games going on across the country, Effel said he believes four square is one of the most popular games because it doesn't require special gear, special training or diets.

Three factors evident in Saturday's play were confidence, fun and a fearless attitude about hitting the floor while diving for the ball.

"People get sucked into it and they learn pretty quickly, but it's tough to play and win," Effel said.

Israeli Ayala Livny, 30, of Somerville, Mass., said she really enjoys it.

"I'm playing because it's good old-fashioned fun, and I think it's an opportunity to access stuff you used to do as a kid," she said in between games.

"This is a really fun thing," said Ann Brahms, whose 69-year-old husband, Paul, of South Portland was the oldest player there. The Brahms family, minus Ann, a spectator, were all competing Saturday.

While Ann Brahms fed an infant in the spectator alcove, court action in front of her grew fast and progressively more furious the longer the volley. Then, suddenly, a player missed the ball, and left the square to get in line to play again.

"Player!" yelled the server, raising her arm, indicating where the next body in line should go.

Ostberg said her goal Saturday was to win a third-straight world title. Her strategy, she said, was "fair play, good spirits, and having more fun than anyone else." She was one of the more colorfully dressed characters.

Joe Johnson, 38, of Williamstown, Mass., drove up with 10 other players. Despite never having played the game, he figured he'd do well with his extremely small hands. He also offered some advice for would-be four square players.

"Don't ever play four square, just play it the day of the world championships and make sure you have \$10," he quipped.

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