

HOLYOKE

Play (*pickle*) ball!

Holyoke Community College joins pickleball craze, opens 7 indoor courts

By CHRIS YURKO

Special to The Republican

The Bartley Center for Athletics & Recreation at Holyoke Community College is open five days a week for pickleball after the college installed seven indoor courts.

Now, for a \$5 per visit fee, any member of the general public can stop by to play what has been touted as “the fastest growing sport in America.”

“We’re offering the courts and all the equipment — nets, balls, and paddles,” said college president and avid pickleball player Christina Royal. “We have everything here you need to play, and it’s all new.”

The pickleball courts at the Bartley Center are available Monday through Friday from 7 a.m. to 1 p.m. Courts cannot be reserved in advance but instead are assigned on a first-come, first-served basis.

There is no pickleball fee for HCC students and other Bartley Center members.

“It’s exciting to create more access to the Bartley Center,” said Royal. “We already have a lot of people that utilize the facilities for basketball or for working out in our fitness room. Here’s another way we can open up our campus to the community.”

Pickleball, which is like a hybrid of tennis, table tennis and badminton, became possible at HCC after the floor in the Bartley Center gym was redone over the summer. Inserts for existing indoor tennis nets were removed, and inserts for pickleball nets were installed along with permanent pickleball court lines.

“Tennis is a dying sport at the junior college level,” said Bartley Center director Tom Stewart, who serves on the Board of Regents for



Pickleball players try out the indoor courts at Holyoke Community College’s Bartley Center for Athletics & Recreation. (PHOTO COURTESY HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE)

the National Junior College Athletic Association. “There are no junior colleges in New England that have tennis anymore. Tennis used to be so popular you couldn’t get on a court. Now people are having a harder time getting courts for pickleball, particularly indoors.”

Royal, once a competitive amateur tennis player, started playing pickleball a few years ago at the suggestion of former HCC trustee Julie Pokela. At the time, Royal was looking for a way to get some exercise and relieve some stress from her busy new job at HCC. She found pickleball to be the perfect outlet and a lot easier on her knees than tennis.

“I love competitive sports, and I’ve played them all my life, so to be able to get back into that was really thrill-

ing,” she said. “When I’m interested in something I go full immersion, so I got my own equipment and started playing regularly.”

Three years ago, Royal was playing in a pickleball league in Easthampton and invited Stewart to watch.

“She said, I’d love to get pickleball courts at HCC,” Stewart said. “The floor was scheduled to be redone anyway. I said, when we redo the floor, we’ll put them in.”

Stewart and Royal both envision the college hosting pickleball leagues and tournaments.

“In addition to my own passion for the sport, there’s a real opportunity here from an economic development perspective for our region to draw more visitors to the area for pickleball,” Royal said. “That

creates all sorts of business opportunities.”

“Five dollars is a very low barrier for entry compared to other sports,” Royal said. “I think that is a really important part from a community engagement point of view. I want us to be as consistent with our athletics as we are with other services at the college. We’re always thinking about access and affordability. To me, this is another expression of that.”

The new pickleball courts have been drawing small crowds since they opened.

One player, Barbara Decker of Sunderland, said she usually plays in Amherst.

“We’ve been buying chalk and drawing our own courts,” she said. “This is way better.”



“We already have a lot of people that utilize the facilities for basketball or for working out in our fitness room. Here’s another way we can open up our campus to the community.”

Christina Royal, president of Holyoke Community College