



FRIDAY NIGHT SHUFFLE- A SUCCESS STORY

St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club

In 2005, Mary Eldridge, the President of the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club had a challenge in front of her. The club she loved looked like it might be lost. In the 1960s when she was playing with the likes of Carl Spillman and Mac Hall, the club had over 4,000 members. But as she sat in her office thinking about what could be done, St. Pete had less than 75 members- most of whom were well into their 80s and not able to help with the upkeep and maintenance of the club. She purchased a plaque for the office that said "evolve or dissolve" and decided that she would be open to any opportunities that presented themselves. That Spring, a group of young people interested in saving the club came up with an idea to try a new experiment. They would help Mary open the club up to allow anyone to come and play on Friday nights for free. The first Friday only 28 people came. Instead of being disappointed at the low turnout,

Mary was excited that they had 28 times as many people playing than had been there the previous week. Each month the number of attendees grew. With the help of volunteers and the City of St. Petersburg, Friday Night Shuffle has become a cornerstone of the St. Petersburg Shuffleboard Club. Mary and Christine Page, the Executive Director of the St. Pete Club, offered this advice for any clubs that might be interested in hosting similar events:

- Prior to opening, set up the courts with equipment. It's important that you have equipment for these recreational players that you don't mind being used- discs may get scratched, cues may be mishandled.
- Be very friendly! Someone new off of the street doesn't understand that they shouldn't walk on courts or remove discs from between the lag lines. No one likes to be embarrassed, so you have to be patient with new people as they learn- but they will learn!
- Start with the basics. Remember, if someone hasn't played before, they need to learn the scoring areas, to set up their discs in the kitchen, how to hold a cue and shoot, and how to keep score. Don't overwhelm them with strategy until they've mastered the basics.
- Welcome new members to come play at their convenience. They likely are not going to be available during office hours and if you want them to remain members, they will need time to come and master the game.
- Make it fun! Turn on music, encourage good shots! Not every idea will work (St. Pete had some theme nights that didn't take off), so adapt.
- Use social media (Facebook, Instagram, Reddit) to market to people in your area. Ask your members to spread the word about what you are doing to anyone that will listen. Invite local media to come play and let them know what you are doing at your club.
- Welcome players of all ages, including children. Families make great members and they are always looking for family friendly events they can take the kids.

15 years after the initial experiment, the club is open every Friday (unless it's raining) and gets hundreds of players each week. The membership is now over 1,300 and the club is considered one of the must-visit attractions of St. Petersburg. Mary notes that it takes a real dedication to the sport and your club to open it up this way- you have to want it to survive longer than you will. Looking back on the success of Friday Night Shuffle she said, "When I get to the big tournament in the sky, I might not have 1,000 points, but I will have made 1,000 new shuffleboard players."

