

COMBAT BOCCE CLUB HABBANIYAH, IRAQ

By Tom McNutt

Many things have happened in the world of bocce over the past 12 months. While lots were related to National and International tournaments one involved almost as many people and yet is little known about. This story is about the Combat Bocce Club of Habbaniyah, Iraq, proud members of the US Bocce Federation.

On Monday September 26th, 2005 I received an email from a Captain Steve Jaksec of the 1-110th Infantry Battalion, a reservist task force stationed at a remote base in Habbaniyah, Iraq. Seems he and comrade SFC Foster were looking for some distraction from the psychological realities associated with their duty in Iraq.

Jaksec writes "Today I called a combat engineer team to scrape me out a bocce court in the living area of my commo section here in a pretty gnarly part of Iraq. My section sergeant and I are both big fans of bocce, and we both decided that putting a court in here would do wonders for morale., ...I guess my big question is, how feasible is it to get oyster shell shipped to a combat zone...Thanks for any help and support. I look forward to hearing back from you. PS - Any idea where I can get an Italian flag or a Bocce-type flag that we can post at the court? Thanks and take care."

After writing the Captain back with advice on court prep we then assured him we were onboard and set out in search of the bocce flag he referred to. Contact was made with USBF President John Ross who we knew to be the source of the USBF bocce flag we proudly fly at our courts. The next day John sent a USBF flag to Captain Jaksec and also sent a USBF membership certificate to Camp Habbaniyah and the first branch of the USBF in Iraq was created. The Combat Bocce Club was formed and in short order the flag was flying proudly over the "court in progress". Next we contacted Bede Kortegast of Playaboule (www.playaboule.com) and he provided some awesome Perfetta balls and another bocce banner. Boccemon offered to donate the oyster shell blend if there was a way we might ship through a military channel.

Jaksec returns mail with, *"Thanks for getting back and making the offer. I put it out at a staff meeting this morning, and after the commander and the rest of the staff stopped laughing and realized I was serious, they thought it was pretty intriguing. I'm going to get with our supply officer and see what we can do and who we can engage to make this happen."*



Soon after while standing in the Post Office shipping the balls, banners, and some hats, I learned about the Flat Rate program offered by the US Postal Service which would allow access to inexpensive freight. A corporate sponsor offered to underwrite the cost of shipping the boxes, but we wanted to extend the opportunity for others to say, "thank you" by offering folks the chance to pay the \$7.70 postage for one box and send a note with it. The knowledge that this effort was really making a difference to some of our Reservists motivated what turned out to be one of the best-spent months of my life.



The initial plan was to generate the postage and names from my local community in Bellingham, Washington. After the Bellingham Bay Bocce Club had packed up 506 boxes of product (12,000 pounds) I started door to door with merchants I do regular business with collecting postage and a message from 25 people each day. Our goal was to ship 25 boxes daily during November to be done before the Christmas postal rush. One night things were slow and I didn't have 25 boxes pledged for the next day so I called

John Ross and asked if he might have a few bocce fans willing to help get a bocce court to Iraq. Still wanting this to be a local effort I suggested to John that he should keep the box sales down to 50. The following morning he emailed back saying he had plenty of interested donors in his immediate bocce circle to fund the whole program and that he had already received pledges for most of the 50 boxes from the Los Gatos Bocce Club and was wondering if I was sure there wasn't more the USBF and other local players could do. He moved the remainder of the boxes by contacting friends, neighbors, relatives and the Tuesday morning bocce league at Campo di Bocce. The response was overwhelming. As we put this plan into action the Captain started to receive some of the boxes.

"The mission to form the "Al-Anbar Province Combat Bocce League" will succeed. Thanks again, let everyone know who has an interest in this that we greatly appreciate everything they're doing and thinking. The guys even get a big boost when I tell them I got another email regarding the court! Good job. You've done great things for us already."

A short time later the Captain wrote this...

I grabbed SFC Foster when I opened the first box.. He took green, I took red.. Bottom line,

Green - 2

Red - 0

The second game was played by one of our E-5's who's never seen bocce.. Got his (butt) kicked, but he's hooked!



Keep in mind at this point that the rails weren't completed and the "clay" they were able to round up in multiple Humvee loads was just being worked for the base. The joy of bocce was contagious. A few days later I received this...

"...I'll leave you with this fantastic bocce-moment... during a game today, a pickup truck FULL of either Philippino contractors, or actual Iraqi workers drove past the court. They

have these little pickups called Jundi vehicles that they stuff 10 or 15 people in.. Anyway, they go driving by during the game and we hear someone screaming "I have a pallina!!" .. So there it is, we're well on our way to making this an international venue. Hang in there Tom, tell all the guys and gals thanks a ton for the effort. The pictures are great. It's hard to believe the effort you folks are putting forward for us. Looking forward to hearing and seeing more from your side.

*Take care, stay low.
Bocce-6 OUT"*

I also sent Steve a box of bocce paraphernalia like the 2005 Bocce Nationals program from the Palazzo di Bocce, some USBF pins, other Bocce related pins, the Scorekeeper t-shirts, and some Boccemon hats.

Steve comments -

"I struck a deal with the 'mayor' of our FOB (Forward Operating Base), ...I can see the 2 am tournaments taking shape right now! Also, not only do we love everything that's being sent but I got a special kick out of the program that was sent from the 2005 Championship at Palazzo di Bocce.



A few days later he wrote...

"SPLASH 4 BOXES OF PREMIUM CRUSHED OYSTER ... Right in the middle of the most dangerous square mile in the world!!!

... The first 4 boxes arrived today... (Pictures) to come. The boxes held up pretty well."

This fueled us. Tom Albanese of Campo di Bocce ordered a 7' drag broom for the court. As a distributor for Lee Tennis I was able to get them to cut the broom in half in order for it fit a box size Fedex

would handle. Their engineers did a great job sending extra parts so the troops could reassemble the broom to full size (7 feet) in Iraq. This broom was instrumental to the success of the court. Meanwhile, I had a scoreboard made and a plaque dedicating the court to the fallen from their task force, as the Captain had deemed this the appropriate commemoration.

1 to 2 hours were spent daily in the Post Office deeply involved in the production created by 6 pages of Customs forms per box. By Thanksgiving we had shipped them all. Each box was numbered with a name and a message of gratitude from 506 different Americans back home. This was truly the great effort of my life and the most fulfilling thing I have ever done. It became clear, possibly for the first time, that the relationships I have fostered through bocce are with people who I hold in the highest regard. Strangely, I would walk that extra mile for these people, and I now know they would walk it for me too. Please look at the Bocce.com website under "Bocce Tours" "Iraq Tour" to see other photos and view the list of folks who paid postage for a box.

December was back to normal business for us. The Captain and I continued to email. By Christmas the lights were all up, the court was mostly complete and folks gathered to play bocce and watch the live cable fed Steelers game. Think of the irony of an original Seahawk fan shipping bocce to a bunch of Steelers fans during the year they are competing in the Super Bowl. This may have been the greatest testament ever to the community that can be created through the joy of bocce. Speaking of the joys of bocce, I sent Captain Jaksec several copies of Mario Pagnoni's newly revised Joy of Bocce, which he claims he kept on top of his Reservist Handbook by his bedside. We got Veneto Sports involved helping prepare some medals for the New Years 2006 bocce tournament put on by the Combat Bocce Club. The engraving was perfect and our friend April even silk-screened some shirts especially for the original club members. She then individually wrapped them so each soldier would have something addressed personally to open on Christmas Day. This email I received from Captain Jaksec on Christmas Eve brought tears of great joy and pride to my world.



"OK, my boyz found a light set.. Hot-wired it in, the generator went down,. Fix applied.. Electric back up.... Sit-rep:

Xmas Eve, court is lit, fire is stoked, Burl Ives is on the sound system, and there's folks out there rolling the pallino that don't have a care in the world. A big turnout, gets bigger every day. I took a minute to come in here and share with you a quick thought on this night. Thanks to you and all the wonderful souls that made this possible, the folks that I promise I will get around to thanking as soon as we

cut the ribbon, thanks to all of you that you were able to give an unbelievable gift to America's finest young people.. The gift that for the 20 minutes or so that they are standing on those oysters, laughing and enjoying each other, they have no idea that they are in the middle of the Sunni Triangle, at war, on Christmas Eve. You're a good man Tom. You and your patriot friends have gone above and beyond the call. We have succeeded in this mission. All you have to do is walk 20 feet and lookdown the court. The fun is just about to start. Needless to say, there are not

enough adjectives and syllables to truly express my thanks. This is a heartwarming story of epic proportions, and you made it happen. Sleep good tonight buddy.. I hope Santa brings you everything you ever wanted. Take care, I'm gonna go look at my kid's pictures, open a few things that were sent by Santa, then go be one with the oysters and my troops and try to spread some cheer. I'll try to get you more pics tonight if I can. Thanks again, God bless you and yours. Steve”



They all made it through the next week to New Years when they had what was the first and possibly the last USBF Tournament to be held in Iraq.

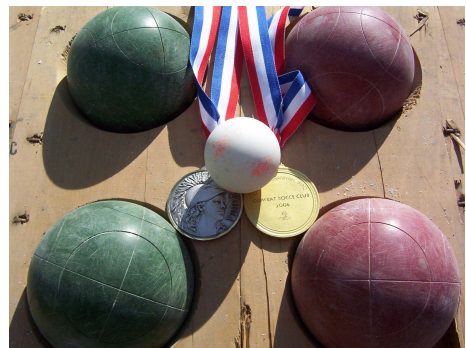
“OK Bud..

0140 here in Habbaniyah... I feel sorta guilty for saying it, but this may have been one of my best New Years ever. I'll make this quick, and fill you in later.. First round of tourney started, almost 20 teams, will probably have more show up tomorrow. Court finished.. looks un-friggin believable. Chaplain came by at 2300 to bless the court.. Marine Explosive Ordnance Team showed up to dedicate the court to their fallen team chief... "Skip" rolled in to exhibit his one-armed bocce expertise. That's all I'm gonna say. You'll figure it out from the pics. These are just some teasers. More and better ones to come tomorrow. What a (hoot).. I just sat out there after everyone called it a night, and revealed at what we've made here. Like the brigade commander said, 'this is incredible'. So... tell everyone thanks and that we haven't forgotten about them. ... Enjoy your New Year's in about 10 hours!”



So to summarize..

again... (way) too much high intensity emotion during the tournament. Medals on display on the scoreboard, troopers actually competing at an intense level.. the best thing that's happened to a lot of these folks in 12 months.. etc. etc. I'll rewrite it all again.. in the meantime, take a look at a couple pics of the awards ceremony... these are Happy and Proud troopers right here. Damn.... we (did) a great thing. I keep getting emails from back in Tampa and Pa. from workmates, etc. ...every single person says that this is one of the greatest stories they have ever heard... “



Apparently he wasn't kidding. Fast forward to late April when the great Charlie Daniels tossed a few balls while visiting the troops. Semper Comm, a not for profit foundation out of D.C., sponsors an award given each year to 4 service members, worldwide, who have gone above and

beyond to improve the morale of US troops stationed in remote operating bases. This year in late May they gave out 5 awards as both Captain Jaksec and SFC Robert Foster were honored based on the scale and impact of this project but they were unable to attend as they were still on mission in Iraq. My wife Erin and I were able to accept the award on behalf of Captain Jaksec, so we were able to rub elbows with some great philanthropists, Generals and Admirals, as well as some of Washington D.C.'s most powerful lawmakers. It was a great evening and from the chuckles I heard, it seemed that most people in attendance at the gala event were familiar with bocce.

As a bocce community we all pulled together and should be proud of this great accomplishment. All of the troops from Task Force Panther who survived have returned stateside and are now attempting to pick up where they left off. Many learned to play bocce in Iraq and will likely play for the rest of their lives. If you didn't get to send a box, be aware that you likely know somebody who did. This is something for all the bocce community to take pride in. We as competitors, corporations, and friends put aside all else to contribute the best materials and equipment available. Why? Perhaps it can best be summed up in the dedication plaque the Captain placed at the entrance to the court which reads, "To all the troops of Task Force Panther who paid the ultimate price so that the rest of us can continue to enjoy the simple pleasures that freedom provides"

Thanks to all of you who knew we were crazy but sent us postage anyway.

Tom McNutt - Boccemon

