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PEPPER PONG — PICKLEBALL AND PINGPONG’S BABY — IS A NEW GAME HELPING PEOPLE GET SOBER

by Tracy Ross

Tom Filippini founded three Colorado companies before accepting that his out-of-control drinking was killing him. When he finally got sober, he created Pepper Pong.



Ed McCaffrey and his mother-in-law, Betty Conroy, 85, play a game of Pepper Pong on a coffee table Aug. 31, 2023, in Castle Pines. (Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)

Ed McCaffrey has never been much of a drinker, but on a steamy recent summer evening at his home, the legendary Denver Broncos receiver was playing a drinking game with his 85-year-old mother-in-law, Betty Conroy.

Actually, it was a game for not drinking. Or, as Pepper Pong creator Tom Filippini said: “It’s a game that can maybe help someone who’s trying not to drink stop drinking” by focusing on something frivolous created by someone like them.

McCaffrey and Filippini are friends, and like McCaffrey, Filippini has been very successful. In 2016, the Denver-based entrepreneur founded StraightLine Private Air, which flies uber-wealthy families and business folk anywhere they want to go.

That business is still going strong along with another private aviation enterprise he built, FlightLink, for “post-COVID air travel.” And before those, in 2002, he founded Exclusive Resorts, LLC, which, you guessed it, offered luxury resort experiences to, you guessed it again, the uber-wealthy until 2015.

His history of business successes is even more remarkable considering Filippini’s dark history with alcohol. Some years he was drinking so hard, he said he’s surprised he didn’t give himself liver failure. Back then, he said, his mind was never clear because he’d spent so much getting incapacitated.

“When you’re that sick, it truly isn’t the individual in charge anymore,” he said. “Alcohol is a chemical that’s extremely addictive and very challenging to overcome.”



Tom Filippini and Ed McCaffrey play a game of Pepper Pong, created by Tom Filippini, Aug. 30, 2023, in Denver. Pepper Pong is a game resembling pickleball and pingpong that features a portable “fence” and was unveiled in June. (Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)

Filippini stopped drinking for good in 2016. With sobriety came mental clarity and the ability to “execute on ideas I’d had in the back of my mind for a long time,” he said.

One of them is his newest business experiment, which is a far cry from elite adventure travel or private jets for the wealthy. It’s Pepper Pong, a pickleball-pingpong mashup game he dreamed up after he stopped drinking. He built it with everyone in mind but it has morphed into a game he thinks can help people trying give up booze. And that might be a good thing, because according to statistics, in Colorado, there are a lot of drinkers.

Colorado may do well to drink less

All it takes is a quick glance at some recent statistics to see how much Coloradans love their alcohol.

According to the Commonwealth Fund, which creates scorecards ranking every state on a number of things related to healthcare, Colorado in 2020 ranked 45th in the United States for alcohol-related deaths, with 24 per 100,000. The U.S. average was 13 per 100,000, and Colorado's previous average, in 2016, was 15 per 100,000.

In 2022, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released data from its Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System that also showed Colorado ranked high for alcohol consumption. It showed 61% of adults who responded to a 2021 survey had downed booze in the previous month, with only Vermont, Wisconsin and the District of Columbia ranking higher.

According to the National Center for Drug Abuse Statistics, an estimated 19.8% of Colorado adults over 18 binge drank at least once per month, compared to 18.5% in Wyoming, 16.6% in California, 10.5% in Utah and 15.5% in Washington.

And in 2019, Colorado had more alcohol-related driving fatalities than any state except Texas by hundreds.

But there's also evidence that Colorado is at least trying to become drier, with groups dedicated to sobriety, bars selling alcohol-free cocktails, and as part of a growing contingent of Gen Z'ers across the U.S. who are skipping ethanol-laced drinks.

Filippini overcame what many haven't been able to in Colorado. Yet even after he quit, he was reluctant to tell people how much he'd once drank.

"I wasn't always forthcoming about my drinking," he said. "I was embarrassed and ashamed of what it said about me as a person — that I hadn't been able to overcome."



Early versions of balls used in Pepper Pong have different weights and densities, affecting the speed and bounce during plays. (Olivia Sun, The Colorado Sun via Report for America)

Even a few years into his sobriety, he wasn't telling people outside of his friends and family. But with the creation of Pepper Pong he realized, "this whole thing exists because I'm sober. So then when I was about to, like, just send an email out to friends – this is available, here's a discount code, get a free set – I thought why wouldn't I just tell everybody? Why would I hide this part of the story?"

He wondered what benefit hiding his sobriety story held "when someone struggling could look at Pepper Pong and know a guy as sick as him created it," he added. Had he not stopped drinking, "I probably wouldn't be here. So those were the drivers of my decision to just say screw it and (send the truth) to the biggest possible email list I could muster."

Filippini let loose "because when people are trying to get sober, in the heat of the battle of trying to get through this, you need something to occupy your time, to take your mind off of whatever substance you're trying to get rid of," he said. "You can play for hours with your mind on the game as opposed to using substances. And to get through the deep, dark tunnel, which is what I was living in for years if not decades, you need some light. You need someone you can point to. Someone to look at and say. 'If I can get through this, maybe I can be like that person.'"



Ed McCaffrey and Tom Filippini Aug. 31, 2023, in Castle Pines.

A pepper, a pong and a paddle

Filippini calls Pepper Pong “a very simple product.” Each set comes with four paddles — dubbed “mullets,” because they’re a blended shape of pickleball and pingpong and “because playing doubles is a total blast,” he said. “We invented our own rules” — some pickle, some pong, he added. The paddles have a 30% larger “sweet spot” than standard pingpong paddles, to make hitting the ball easier and keep everyone engaged. A “sucker serve rule” keeps every match close. “If you lose a game, you start with a 3-shot lead in the next game. Everything about the rules and the equipment is designed to level the playing field so there are no blowouts,” he added.

Pickle or pong require a ball to play, of course; so does Pepper Pong. But the latter comes with three balls, pepper named to “indicate their spiciness,” Filippini said. The Ghost Pepper is the firmest of the bunch, with the most kick, so it plays the fastest and bounces the highest for larger tables and better players. Habanero is a little softer and a bit less bouncy, and is the most versatile ball, designed for any table and all levels. Jalapeño is the mildest, lowest-bounce ball, making it ideal for the small surfaces (think large cooler lid or car hood) and new players.

Other than that, all you need is the small, foldable proprietary “net,” which can be expanded to match the size of various play surfaces. “So you can play on any flat-ish surface and match it with the right pepper,” Filippini said. It all fits into a bag that could hold a men’s size 8.5 shoe.

Pepper Pong is available exclusively from the [company’s website](#), and Filippini said he intends to keep it that way for now, “to build a community of players that have direct input on the game’s development.” That means no Amazon or big box retailers for the foreseeable future. He also hopes to get them in alcohol recovery centers, where people going through the challenges he once did can forget about them for a while, have fun and maybe envision a brighter future.

In an email, McCaffrey said a Pepper Pong game Filippini gave him had been sitting in his living room for a few days when his mother-in-law came to visit. Intrigued, the two opened it up and started putting the parts together. He thought they’d hit the ball around “and giggle for 2-3 minutes” before calling it quits.

“Instead, we spent over an hour engaged in all-out sweaty, smack-talking fun and competition,” he said. “This is off the record ... but Betty beat me in a few games!”



Tracy Ross

Tracy Ross writes about the intersection of people and the natural world, industry, social justice and rural life from the perspective of someone who grew up in rural Idaho, lived in the Alaskan bush, reported in regions from Iran to Ecuador and as a parent of kids growing up during the age of accelerated climate change.

Before coming to The Colorado Sun, she was a correspondent for Outside Magazine, an editor at both Backpacker and Skiing magazines, and the author of the critically lauded memoir *The Source of All Things*, about overcoming child abuse through connection with and adventure in the outdoor world. She is the co-producer of a movie — *Hard Miles* — based on her *Bicycling Magazine* story *Street Kids*, about boys from a school for adjudicated youth in Colorado who she rode to the Grand Canyon with in 2014. She lives in Nederland with her husband, 12-year-old daughter, Hollis, and, occasionally, her two grown sons, Scout and Hatcher.

Job title: Rural reporter

Topic expertise: I specialize in stories affecting rural communities, from energy development to recreation to affordable housing and hunting. I also write about the outdoor economy, sports and culture. And whenever possible I dip my toe in arts that intersect with rural communities and the outdoors. I have a strong interest in social justice.

Location: Nederland, former land of Frozen Dead Guy Days current Carousel of Happiness

Newsletter: [What's Working](#), news about unemployment, jobs, job training, hiring, labor issues and more

Education: It took me 12 years and four colleges to graduate because I kept getting distracted by real world adventures. But schools: Cornish College of the Arts, St. John's College (Santa Fe), University of Alaska Fairbanks, CU Denver (graduated at 30 while pregnant with my first kid). Also: I attended Interlochen Arts Academy (boarding school) for part of my high school, which had perhaps more impact on my life and education than any higher education.

Honors & Awards: National Magazine Award in essay category 2009 (beating Harpers, *The New Yorker*, and *Antioch Review*). Lowell Thomas award for investigative journalism 2015, I consider getting a book deal an award — 2009, multiple inclusions or notable mentions in Best American Sports Writing, Best American Travel Writing and Best American Magazine Writing

Contact:

Email: tracy@coloradosun.com

X (Formerly Twitter): [@writertracyross](#)

Instagram: [@heli_girl_1970](#)

Facebook: [Tracy Ross](#)