

Close Counts for This Villager, A Champion In Horseshoe Pitching

Bob Gray prevails over 223 other competitors to win Elder Division at World Horseshoe Championships

By JEAN RACINE
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For the past several years, Bob Gray's friends had unsuccessfully tried to talk him into testing his luck at the World Horseshoe Pitching Championships.

This summer, the Village of Springdale resident finally gave in — and he proved them right.

Gray won the Elder Division at last month's championships, prevailing over 223 other entrants after six days of competition in Monroe, Louisiana.

"It was great. I never thought I had a chance to do that," said Gray, 78. "People have been trying to talk me into doing this for a few years and I finally decided to go before I got any older."

Gray tallied 76 percent ringers in the 16-man final round, going 14-1 in round-robin competition and defeating West Virginia's David Holmes in the final with 55 ringers in 68 shots. Over six days, Gray pitched 1,414 total horseshoes — 600 in the preliminaries and 814 in the championship rounds.

"It's like winning the World Series or the Super Bowl to us," said Dave Wietrzak, president of The Villages Horseshoe Club.

Gray said the win did come as a shock to him because he entered the event ranked just 10th nationally in Elder Division with 75 percent ringers.

"The top guy in it was 80 percent, so I wasn't sure," said Gray. "It's very tough competition — everybody's

got pretty close averages."

Gray, who moved to The Villages in 2003 from Cambridge, Ohio, started pitching horseshoes seriously in 2004, saying a lot of practice has helped him reach an elite level.

"I just think it's accuracy, practice and concentration," he said. "Any sport you're in, you have to practice quite a bit if you want to be fairly decent at it."

Gray also has won the Florida State Horseshoe Pitchers Association Championships five times, the last two in the Elder Division. Including local and state tournaments, he participates in about 16 tournaments a year and is also a highly active member of The Villages Horseshoe Club.

"Everybody looks at him like their mentor — everybody looks up to him," said Wietrzak, of the Village of Hacienda. "He's a highly personable guy, good sportsman, very easy to like."

Gray credits some of his success to the level of competition he faces here in The Villages.

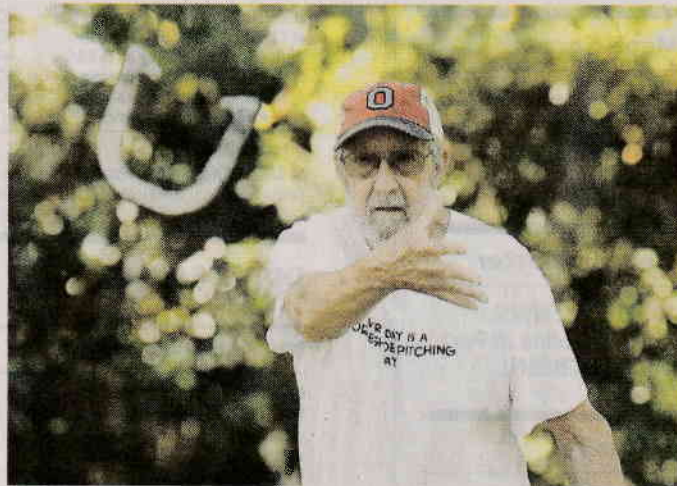
"There's a good group of guys down there at Paradise (Recreation Center) that's in the horseshoe club," he said. "They're all very competitive, and it makes anybody else a better player to play against good competition."

Looking to grow the game, Gray also is an advocate for horseshoe pitching and encourages Villagers to pick up the sport.

"Come down to Paradise," he said. "We've got leagues on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. There's always somebody down around there pitching."

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Bob Gray, of the Village of Springdale, won first place in the World Elder Championship of the National Horseshoe Pitching Association. Above, he practices at the Paradise Regional Recreation Complex horseshoe pits.