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The LGBT Bar Scene's Only Organized Sport

Tony Jasinski, December 2014

Only one organized sport takes place in our bar scene. That sport is pool table play, and there is a strong organization in San Francisco that sponsors tournaments and related events. It's the San Francisco Pool Association (SFPA at www.sfpapool.org). Play is on Tuesday nights with 2 seasons a year. The association's theme is "unity in sportsmanship," and it is a nonprofit entity.

The organization has been around since 1978. It currently houses pool play at about 20 different venues. There are around 215 players in the association, and it only costs \$60 for one season. With that cost, all games are free, and you also get a membership in the West Coast Challenge (WCC) and Billiard Congress of America (BCA). WCC consists of gay pool associations from San Diego, San Francisco, Long Beach, and Los Angeles. Collectively, they host 2 tournaments a year. Expansion to include Sacramento and Portland is being considered. In January, there will be the 70th anniversary event in San Francisco at the Hyatt Embarcadero. San Diego will be hosting the one after that next July.

In the current season, there are 6 divisions of 6 teams each. The divisions are mixed in skill and are not ranked. There are 4 to 7 players on any given team. Games start at 7:30pm on Tuesdays, with an hour of practice beforehand. They end at around 10:30pm with 16 games a night. The schedule is posted online. The playoffs are underway now, as they run from late November through December. A new season begins Tuesday, February 3rd.

Because the games take place in local bars, spectators are encouraged to cheer on the players. Certainly there are strong social aspects to the sport, and people can enjoy alcoholic beverages during the play. Not all events are held in bars, as the Hyatt and the Billiard Palacade in the Mission are also used for competitions.

It is easy and cheap to go onto the website and enroll in the association. Women are encouraged to participate as much as men. One team is exclusively women, and there is a local tournament just for women. In fact, one local player won the women's national championship in the BCA in Las Vegas last year. (Note that the BCA is not a gay players association.) Several association members participate in the Las Vegas event annually.

There are a variety of types of games sponsored by the SFPA. One type is called a Hi-Lo tournament, where the higher-ranked players get paired with lower-ranked players for a competition involving 2-person teams with alternating shots called "Scotch Doubles." One fun game is called a Turkey Shoot, where all signed-up people get to take one shot on a rotating basis. If you miss 3 consecutive shots, the player is eliminated, and this continues until there is a champion. The Turkey Shoot is part of the end of season party. There are also individual tournaments, a nine-ball tournament, and other types of competitions.

I recently spoke with current SFPA president Ray Smith. He said that he participates because he loves going to the different venues and meeting and spending time with the players. I could tell he takes great pride in the quality and breadth of this long-running organization.

There is probably not a more easygoing and pleasant group of players in any sport compared to pool play. If you are looking for something that often fits into the bar scene and is not too strenuous, but requires skills and a competitive nature, then consider trying out the SFPA to see if it fits your interests.

Tony Jasinski is the former president of the San Francisco Gay Basketball League.

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