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Women are the sharks at Wilmette retirement community's pool night



Trudy Armstrong, 94, founder of the pool-shooting club, lines up her shot in the game room at Mather Place senior living center in Wilmette. NANCY STONE/TRIBUNE PHOTO

It's a Thursday night and Trudy Armstrong has blue chalk on her fingers and a pool cue in her hand. She watches intently as Midge Babcock hunches over the table and takes aim at a purple-striped ball waiting helplessly by a corner pocket.

"You're solids, Midge," Trudy reminds her.

"Well," says Midge, disappointed. "I guess that makes a difference, doesn't it?"

Pool night at Mather Place in Wilmette has a decidedly different feel than you'd find in most billiard parlors. The youngest player is 75, and Trudy, the founder of this all-female pool-shooting club, is a spry 94.

Missed shots lead to exclamations of "gee willickers" or "darn that ball," though an occasional "damnation" slips out, and players spend a good part of the evening lamenting their lack of skills on the felt-topped table.

Since 2006, the group has been gathering twice weekly in the ground-floor game room of their senior living center learning a hobby few ever imagined they would play. Trudy grew up in a tiny Iowa town where the pool hall was a forbidden destination.

"You just never went there," she says.

Now she's the ringleader of an aging collection of would-be pool sharks old enough to be great-grandmothers but young enough to savor the thrill of competition.

"It reminds me a little of golf," says June Lynch, in her 80s and recovering from a hip replacement. "Of course, I can't play golf anymore, so I just love this."

Before moving to Mather Place in 2004, Trudy lived at a senior housing complex in far north suburban Fox Lake, where she first started shooting pool. She's always been a sports fan -- playing tennis, golf, badminton and Ping-Pong -- and the challenges of pool got her hooked.

A little self-conscious, she set the avocation aside when she moved to Wilmette. But after a few months of walking past the center's lone pool table, her itch to play needed scratching.

Trudy recruited two friends -- Babette Goldhammer, 87, and June -- and started teaching them the basics. Word spread, others joined and soon Trudy was copying pages from her well-worn copy of "The Everything Pool & Billiards Book" and

handing them out to the team.

They learned how to properly hold the pool cue, how to break, how to bank shots. They began watching pool on television and became fans of pro player Allison Fisher -- "She never misses a shot," Trudy notes. The group grew as large as 16, though it now hovers around a more manageable 10.

"When you consider what ages we are, it's sort of fun," says Midge, 88, whose two sons bought her a pool cue for Christmas. "I like the camaraderie, and I like the game.

"Plus," she says, tapping her temple, "they say the more you do things, the better your brain gets."

The group's games can best be described as leisurely paced. With canes stacked on a nearby table and a walker parked by the door, the women take turns in teams of three, rising slowly from their chairs and occasionally squinting to find the cue ball.

The bursts of conversation go like this:

"Who's up after Shirley?"

"Midge."

"Where is she?"

(Midge shuffles toward the table)

"She's on her way."

The first game of the night lasts 53 minutes, punctuated by hoots when a ball is sunk and encouraging words when a shot is missed.

All but one of the pool ladies of Mather Place are widows. Neatly dressed and proper, they seem to revel in their mildly bohemian hobby, proud to be doing something most women their age don't do. Mention playing a card game like bridge and Babette rolls her eyes -- too mundane. Ask if they'd take their game to a pub or pool hall and Van Bobrow, 87, raises an eyebrow with intrigue.

"I think some of our families have been a little surprised to hear about all this," Babette says. "But they're happy we're happy."

She looks around at her friends, pool sticks resting like rifles on their shoulders.

"Maybe we can incorporate this on our tombstones somehow."