

‘I’m Doing Something Healthy for My Mind and Body’

A VFW Life member and Army veteran discovered a new game that keeps him active and healthy

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Moving into a retirement community two years ago in Leesburg, Florida, Army veteran Nelson Gonzalez kindled a newfound passion for a game eight years his junior.

A retired Army major, DEA supervisory special agent and investigation specialist with the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in Florida, Gonzalez can now add decorated competitive pickleball player to his long resume.

“I have been playing pickleball for two years now,” said Gonzalez, 65, a Life member of VFW Post 5277 in Clermont, Florida. “When we moved to a 55-and-over community, I made a friend who is an Army Vietnam veteran that introduced me to pickleball.”

Since learning the game in 2020, Gonzalez now spends about two hours every other day playing pickleball, which was created by three fathers near Seattle in the summer of 1965 and combines elements of tennis, badminton and ping-pong.

For Gonzalez, whose deployments include South Korea in 1983-84 and with the Army’s Combined Joint InterAgency Task Force 435 to Bagram Air Base, Afghanistan, in 2013-14, the game provides a gateway to camaraderie and an alternative to PTSD therapy.

“I realized pickleball was free therapy for me, and it led to us opening up about our PTSD,” Gonzalez said. “I feel like I’m doing something healthy for my mind and body.”

At first, Gonzalez focused on the therapeutic effects and exercise of the newfound game. But alongside his Vietnam veteran friend and pickleball mentor, he soon let his competitive nature seep into view.

Gonzalez wanted to test himself, push barriers and see where he stood as a competitive pickleball player. That is when online research introduced him to the National Veterans

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Golden Age Games (NVGAG).

“I learned about the NVGAG through the Facebook page for Adaptive Sports & Arts — U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs,” Gonzalez said. “I then contacted the Orlando VAMC Adaptive Sports Program Coordinator Christina Lafex, wherein I enrolled in the VA Adaptive Sports Program and subsequently registered for the NVGAG.”

Founded in 1985, the NVGAG offers veterans 55 and older an array of avenues for sports competitions and health education sessions. Touted as the premier senior adaptive rehabilitation program in the nation, it also is the only multi-event sports and seniors’ competition program of its kind.

Welcoming hundreds of veterans across the country, Gonzalez understood the NVGAG would provide a platform to test his pickleball skills. He took to tedious research on tricks of the trade, applying them throughout his rigorous training alongside friends.

“I watched a lot of YouTube videos on pickleball tips and strategies,” Gonzalez said. “I also played about 9-10 hours weekly on my community pickleball courts with friends who taught me how to play the right way.”

When the 36th annual National Veterans Golden Age Games rolled around in late July, Gonzalez found himself in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where his hard work and accelerated pickleball skills earned him hardware in two separate events. Over the course of two days, he and his partners won silver and bronze in the 65-69-year-old division’s mixed doubles and men’s doubles, respectively.

“As a first-timer in the NVGAG, I was ecstatic when my playing partner and I got the silver medal and then the bronze,” Gonzalez said. “Definitely, it was one of the best things that has ever happened to me.”

The experience, in addition to solidifying his skills as a pickleball player, provided Gonzalez with much more than he could have expected.

“There was a lot of camaraderie and fraternization going on at the games,” Gonzalez said. “It gave me a chance to build new relationships with folks with whom I shared things in common.”

Despite being more than half a year away, Gonzalez has already commenced training for the 37th annual National Veterans Golden Age Games in July in Des Moines, Iowa.

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