



THAT

PICKLEBALL MEMBER PROFILE

Number 10

By Laurie Einstein Koszuta

After Trauma, Carla Stelmach's Second Act is Pickleball

When Carla Stelmach was growing up, she lived on a 100-acre dairy farm in Carthage, New York. The farm was a bustling place that Carla shared with her parents, three older siblings, 35 Guernsey/Holstein cows, goats, chickens, pigs, sheep, ducks, turkeys, horses—and also her unmarried uncle and grandfather.



Carla (on left) and partner Jerry took 2nd place in the King and Queens Court contest!!

According to Carla, life on the bustling farm was hard work, as there were animals to care for and chores to be done. As a dairy farm, the family milked cows and goats by hand and machine. Every other day, a tanker truck would arrive to empty the milk tank and take the fresh product to market.

Still, Carla has fond memories of those early years. “We always had a lot of fun,” Carla remembered. “We motorbiked all over the neighborhood in the summer

and snowmobiled in the winter. In high school, I also played varsity soccer, field hockey, volleyball, basketball, and softball, so sports were important.”

When Everything Changed In An Instant

That passion for sports stayed with Carla into adulthood. But a freak accident a decade ago nearly derailed her ability to play again. She and her husband were cutting down a tree—something they had done many times before. “We were being cautious and trying to guide the fall away from our house,” she said. “As my husband began cutting, I was pulling from the other side with the help of a rope attached to our four-wheeler.”

Then something went terribly wrong. Carla glanced over and saw the top of the tree falling straight toward her and realized there was nothing she could do to prevent it. The impact was devastating as she fractured both sides of her ankle her left scapula, four vertebrae, several ribs, and punctured both lungs. “The injuries were extensive,” Carla said, “and the recovery was overwhelming. I ended up spending 51 weeks in physical therapy.

Walking again seemed like a distant hope, but by the grace of God and with unwavering support from my husband—I did it. He took three months off to care for me. It was grueling, but he never left my side.”



Let them eat cake! Years after the trauma, celebrating a birthday is sweet!

A Spark in the Park

In those early days of recovery, returning to any sport seemed impossible. Carla focused on daily walking, staying positive, and slowly rebuilding her strength. A decade passed, and while she was mobile again, the notion of competitive play still felt out of reach.

Then, in the spring of 2023, a neighbor mentioned that people were playing pickleball at a local park in Oswego, New York, where she lives.

“Something about that invitation sparked a light in me,” Carla said.



Carla and pals with trophies they stole! They didn't win a thing but why not get a photo anyway?

Curious, she went to the park and asked the players if she could watch. “I even offered to chase balls for them,” she laughed. The players welcomed her and introduced her to TeamReach, an app used to coordinate games, and helped her download it to her phone.

Since she was a beginner, they recommended she play at noon with other newcomers. But Carla was eager to jump in. “I didn't want to play during the hottest part of the day. So I got brave and posted a message: ‘I'm a newbie. Would

anyone be willing to play in the afternoon?’ To my surprise, four people showed up. That was May 21, 2023.”

Today, at 62, Carla is hooked. “There are several outdoor and indoor courts in my area,” she said. “And you need indoor options—this is upstate New York and we get a lot of snow.”

Support on and off the Court

What Carla loves most about this game are the people. “Where else can you find three generations on the court simultaneously?” she said. “I play with an 88-year-old guy named Bob, who loves to lob. There's a 76-year-old woman who won't quit playing unless she's won her last game or there's no one left to play with, and a man with Parkinson's disease.”

Her husband plays occasionally, but he’s more of a behind-the-scenes guy. “Sports were never his thing,” she said, “but he’s so sweet—he built two PVC paddle holders for the park and was even going to build a court on our property.”

Carla is also close to her 33-year-old son, Shane. “He doesn’t play much, but he gave me the best gift for Christmas. He said, ‘Mom, since time with me is your favorite gift, here are four days I can play pickleball with you. It was awesome.’”

Rallying to Gold

Carla has even ventured into tournament play. Her first event was a mixed doubles match in August of 2023, where partners were drawn from a hat. “I was paired with a guy named Greg. In our last game, I ran into the fence and fell hard on my arm. I was so embarrassed I popped right up. And guess what? We took first place!”

In 2024, Carla entered a 3.5-level tournament with her friend Leah, who was four months pregnant. “It was our first DUPR tournament, and we won gold.”

A School That Feels Like Home

Early on, Carla found inspiration and instruction online from “That Pickleball Guy,” Kyle Koszuta. When *That Pickleball School* launched, she joined right away. “I love Kyle, Tyler, and Zach’s sense of humor and how down-to-earth they are. I might never do anything amazing in pickleball, but they make me feel like I can. They’re not just building a school—they’re building a community. It’s not just *That Pickleball School* anymore—it’s *our Pickleball School*.”