



LaLani (l) and her pickleball partner, Dale (r)

## From Chalkboards to Court Lines: LaLani Baker Serves Up Pickleball in Retirement

By Laurie Einstein Koszuta

After dedicating 40 years to teaching high school English, sixty-three-year-old LaLani Baker might have wondered what life after retirement would look like. It didn't take long for her to find out. In September 2023, the Blaine, Washington, resident, returning from a celebratory trip to the Oregon coast, stopped to visit her brother Ty in Woodland, Washington.

"My brother had just installed a new pickleball court in his backyard and was excited to show it to me," LaLani recalled. Ty, a skilled 5.0 player, knew she had played and coached tennis early in her career and wanted to introduce her to the sport. "Sis, come hit a few balls with me," he said, "you're going to love pickleball."

LaLani was eager to try but didn't have the right footwear and ultimately played in a pair of flip-flops. "I figured it would be fine," she laughed, "and it was until I fell." Concerned for her safety, Ty stopped and said, 'No more playing in flip-flops.' Despite the tumble, she was completely hooked on the game.

On her drive home a few hours later, LaLani kept thinking about how much fun she'd had. Before reaching home, she impulsively stopped and bought a paddle and proper pickleball shoes. "I couldn't wait," she said. "The next day, I called the Birch Bay Activity Center to ask about beginner lessons. They were happy to have me as they are often short of players."

### Picking Up The Fundamentals

LaLani immediately signed up for the Center's beginner clinics and quickly mastered the basics. One day, however, she accidentally arrived during an

advanced clinic. “My eyes were like dinner plates,” she said, “I was mesmerized by the players’ skills. They invited me to play, but I declined. I promised myself I’d build the skills to play with them someday.”

Within two and a half months, LaLani felt ready to take on a bigger challenge. “I started showing up during the last half-hour of the advanced session to ease into it. Those ladies were so welcoming and took me under their wing.”

### **Rediscovering Competition**

While playing at the Activity Center, LaLani met Dale Mason-Newell, another newcomer who had recently been introduced to pickleball by her son. “She had never played racquet sports,” she said, “but we clicked immediately and were committed to improving together.”

During a casual game with others one day, LaLani and Dale discussed the idea of playing in tournaments. “None of the other players were interested,” she said. “They didn’t want the higher intensity or competitiveness. But Dale and I decided to team up to enter tournaments.”

The duo has fully embraced the game, playing six days a week, taking lessons, and leading a local drilling group. “We have tried to branch out and play with different players, including the men’s groups, which include some bangers. We have also integrated a ball machine, a gift from supportive family members, into our training.”

Their hard work has paid off. In just over a year, LaLani and Dale have competed in multiple tournaments, even medaling in their second and fourth competitions. “I’m so glad Dale turned 60,” LaLani joked, “now we don’t have to compete against players in their 50s! We plan to play in four to six tournaments this year and want to keep focusing on improving our game and enjoying the process.”

“One thing I am proud of,” she said, “is my forehand drive. It’s powerful, and my opponents seem to fear it the most. “Still, there’s always room to grow. My goal is to reach a 4.0 skill rating by the end of the year.”

### **Building Community**

Beyond tournaments, LaLani and Dale have made it their mission to engage with the local pickleball community. “It’s more than just a sport,” LaLani said, “It has brought a sense of belonging. I’ve met amazing people and found

opportunities to help others, whether getting groceries, celebrating milestones or just being there for each other.”

### **Finding ThatPickleballGuy and ThatPickleballSchool**

LaLani’s passion for the sport led her to discover ThatPickleballGuy, Kyle Koszuta. “His YouTube videos just resonated with me. I really like how Kyle delivers the information with such impressive graphics, humor, and positivity, so I signed up for his newsletter,” she shared. “Then later, joining ThatPickleballSchool felt like a natural progression. I like how Kyle, Zach, and Tyler make fun of themselves because they want to be better, too. The instructional videos and tips are excellent, but I’m blown away by the supportive community. Everyone celebrates your progress, no matter your level.”

### **A Christmas Surprise**

Christmas 2024 was a special one for LaLani as she decided to surprise Dale with a four-day trip to Tempe for one-on-one lessons through ThatPickleballSchool. The experience included three 90-minute sessions focusing on refining key shots, improving communication, and strengthening teamwork. “The progress was tangible,” she said, “Doubles in pickleball is about teamwork, backing up your partner and setting them up for success.”

“I love pickleball,” LaLani chuckled, “I’m 100 percent obsessed. This game is not just about winning medals; it’s about the joy of learning, improving, and being part of an amazing community.”