In the past 20 years or so, the game of bocce has all but disappeared from this area. Bill Baiotto, the owner of Baiotto Concrete, has the only authentic set of bocce balls in this area that he knows of. “There is another set in Novinger, but the guys don’t play anymore,” he said. Bocce, pronounced “boat-chee,” is a lawn game of Italian origin. It is played in most European countries and is big in Australia and New Zealand. At one time it was played in the USA on a much larger scale than it is now. Bill says that it is played in rest homes in Arizona and New Mexico and there is one club in St. Louis where all ages play.

Baiotto is of Italian decent. His grandparents moved from Utah to Novinger around the turn of the century. Bill said there were several different nationalities that used to live in what were called the bottoms of Novinger. Most of them worked in the mines and for recreation they played bocce at the “Novinger Bocce Club,” he said they would gather there every Sunday to play and later they put up lights and played into the night. They also played in Northwest Kirksville at the Jaycee Park. Older people who were too old for baseball or other active sports especially enjoyed playing bocce.

Bocce is widespread around the world and the rules, regulations and terms vary in different places. The game is similar to horse shoes. Instead of throwing horse shoes at a pin, balls are rolled at a smaller ball called a jack or palino, or as Bill calls it, “balline.” The playing balls are about the size of a grapefruit and are made out of wood or plastic and vary in weight. The balls are different colors and have different designs for the two different teams. When you roll the ball there is either a line you cannot cross or a pad you must keep your foot on. Some different sets have one side slightly flattened and/or weighted to allow the ball to curve. These are especially common in Australia and New Zealand. Even the official court layout dimensions vary from 13 ft. to 19½ ft. wide, by 78 ft. to 92 ft. long. The surface can be turf or clay or packed sand. Bill said most people wouldn’t want to take that big of a chunk out of their yard for a court. He has a long paved driveway on which he places a long piece of artificial turf to make a long narrow court.

Two people can play on two teams which play each other. The players take turns rolling their balls toward the Jack. The object, of course, is to get closer to the Jack than your opponent. Some variations of the game provide a penalty for...
hitting the Jack. Scoring is accomplished by receiving one point for every ball you have closer to the Jack than your opponent. If two opposing balls are the same distance from the Jack, both score. You can play to 15 or 21 or whatever is agreed on before the game begins.

This frame: white-1 black-3
Total score after frames:
white-3 black-3

A tie scores a point for each color

* Players continue this way for as many frames as necessary to reach the previously agreed on score.

Bocce is an easy going lawn game. Besides his original set of Italian balls, Bill also has a set from Australia that are somewhat smaller and flat on one side. He said that he has seen manufactured plastic bocce sets for sale in sporting goods stores.

Story by Joe Novinger and Adam Still

Bill shows his authentic Italian set of wooden bocce balls and the Jack.

Bill prepares to throw one of the bocce balls.

This is how the Italian balls are thrown.