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[Nathan Pilling](#), Kitsap Sun Published 8:50 a.m. PT Nov. 23, 2019

In the rapidly expanding pickleball universe, Barney McCallum was a rockstar. McCallum, one of the game's original founders and a familiar face on Bainbridge Island, would show up to tournaments and events where he'd sign paddles, pose for pictures and chat about the game with those who'd picked it up since he helped to launch it half a century ago.

At a tournament on Bainbridge Island in August, he'd coach up players from the sidelines with encouragements like "Take that shot!" and "Get to the kitchen line!"

It was his sport.

McCallum, one of Bainbridge's famed pickleball pioneers and the sport's last living founder, died Monday in Seattle of natural causes, family members said. He was 93.



Barney McCallum, center, poses for a picture at the groundbreaking for new pickleball courts at Battle Point Park on Bainbridge Island, with islander Clay Roberts, left, and Gov. Jay Inslee, right. (Photo: Contributed photo)

A pioneer

The details around the sport's earliest days are a little fuzzy, but generally as the story goes, pickleball was created to cure a bit of youthful boredom in 1965 at the Bainbridge Island cabin of Joel Pritchard, who served as a U.S. representative and as lieutenant governor, by him and friends Bill Bell and McCallum. The men crafted the sport for their families on a badminton court using ping pong paddles and a Wiffle ball.

“It was a series of arguments as to what was right and what was wrong,” [McCallum said in a 2017 oral history of his life on the island](#). “No one said, ‘This is no fun.’ It was all positive.”

After the sport became popular with their families, the three men saw a business opportunity and each put in \$500 to get Pickle-ball Inc. off the ground at Barney's prompting, said Barney's son David. Barney, who had already launched two companies of his own, was the business mind behind the sport's growth. He'd cut out plywood paddles on his bandsaw and establish standards for the equipment and rules.

“He was an entrepreneurial guy,” David said. “Barney never had the intention of, ‘This is the way I'm going to make a lot of money and get rich.’ When he saw something that had to get done, he would do it.”

Customers could buy a boxed set with paddles, balls and a net, and family members got in on a photoshoot to market the game. Pictures show Barney and others in the family grinning and intently smacking around a Wiffle ball.

Barney didn't just have the business sense though. No, back then, “He was a hell of a good pickleball player,” David said.

A phenomenon

Said Joel Pritchard's son Frank, “People called my dad the father of pickleball. Well, Barney was the parent who nurtured it and worked it and put his money where his mouth was. He deserves the lion's share of the credit for making pickleball what it is today, growing it and sticking with it.”

With easy play and simple rules, the sport took off, and today pickleball is said to have more than 3 million players in the United States. It now has a hall of fame – Barney was a member of its inaugural class – recognized tournaments, pro players and associations.

Even with the sport's wild success, Barney found joy in simple stories of how pickleball had helped someone to get healthy or get out of their house and was proud of how inclusive the sport

was, said islander Leigh Tatum, a longtime friend. Anyone could pick up a paddle and learn pickleball.

“He wanted everybody to be included,” she said. “He really thought about what they had to say, he really listened. It was so unusual, especially for someone of that age. He didn’t care if you were rich, poor, purple or polka-dotted, he didn’t care. He always thought you could learn something from everybody.”

Beyond pickleball, Barney served in the Navy aboard a supply ship for two years near the end of World War II and launched two companies in Seattle, printing and envelope businesses, David said. An outdoorsman, he skied and played tennis.

Barney had been living at a retirement community in Seattle in recent years but would make return trips to visit Bainbridge Island.

“It was heaven,” Barney said in 2017, describing his life on the island. “I worshipped everybody here.”

In August, he made an appearance at the first Bainbridge Island Founders Tournament, a celebration of pickleball at the sport’s birthplace. In October, he appeared at Battle Point Park for a groundbreaking event for new pickleball courts that’ll be built there. Kiosks and displays will eventually go up chronicling the sport’s history on Bainbridge Island and honoring its founders.

At the event, Gov. Jay Inslee leaned in for a photo with McCallum, who Inslee said he was naming Washingtonian of the Day.

“Check out the game, everybody can play, score — and win!” Inslee said in a Facebook post alongside the picture of himself with Barney. “There’s a reason it’s one of the fastest-growing sports in the country.”

Said Frank Pritchard: “(Barney) recognized what he had there, that this was a great game and it needed to be supported and nurtured. I have to think particularly at the end it was tremendously satisfying for him to see the fruits of his labor play out here and how this thing has become a bit of phenomenon.”

According to the Wall St. Journal obit, “It was named after Pickles, a dog owned by the Pritchards. But Frank Pritchard, a son of Joel Pritchard, said the dog was named after the game. He said his mother, Joan Pritchard, derived the name from ‘pickle boat,’ a term that can refer to the slowest boat in a race.”