



## Once Upon a Time at Fairyland

By C.J. Hirschfield



Members of the Oakland Lawn Bowling Club have been participating in the sport at Lakeside Park since 1903.

## Barefoot on the Greens

When Ratka Mira Popovic was a toddler, in the 1970s, her Yugoslavian immigrant parents made a point to explore Oakland's delights with her and with her older sister. Lakeside Park by Lake Merritt was a popular destination: It boasted not only Children's Fairyland but also gardens, a nature center and a manicured area that Ratka found particularly fascinating. Behind a short fence she observed people playing a game on pristine grass, rolling what looked like a funny ball, and generally having a great time. Her curiosity was piqued.

Now, many decades later, Ratka is determined to introduce the historic Lakeside Park's Oakland Lawn Bowling Club to more young people, building community along the way.

Lawn bowling – not to be confused with its cousin, bocce ball – involves rolling oddly shaped (“biased”) balls so that they come to a stop close to a smaller ball called a “jack” or “kitty.” The sport was introduced to Oakland by a group of Scottish bowlers who organized the Scottish Lawn Bowling Club on April 15, 1903.

The original membership totaled 93. The Oakland Lawn Bowling Club is now part of the Pacific Intermountain Division and is the second-oldest civic bowls club in the United States.

San Francisco is the oldest.

In the beginning, the Oakland club's matches were held on private estates. The current clubhouse and its three bowling greens, located right across from Fairyland on Bellevue Avenue, were recommended in 1993 by the Oakland Landmarks Advisory Board as protected features of Lakeside Park.

But let's skip ahead to the present day, and back to Ratka.

She and her sister Zarka joined the Oakland Lawn Bowling Club in 2013, and immediately took action. Since then, a lot of positive change has taken place. “Everything needed love and energy,” she says. She and a small team cleaned up the club house's interior, better organized the space, created a reasonably priced family membership, launched outreach efforts to attract a younger crowd, and raised money to create a banner to help draw in the curious.

It's not the first time Ratka has helped create a cool space that brings Oaklanders together. She was a member of a core group that started the Crucible, the extraordinary fire arts collective.

But why lawn bowling?

“The community is just so nice,” is one reason she gives. She also believes that the historic property is a special gem in the middle of her town.

Keeping the club's greens playable is not without its challenges. The City of Oakland helps, but the club has a committee that uses special little rakes and dustpans to dispose of Canada geese droppings and to relocate squirrels' nuts. Lakeside Park is the country's first designated wildlife refuge, after all, so no pesticides are used either. Not too long ago, a frog had to be removed from the green before play could resume.

Lest you think you need to dress up in white clothing and be all fancy to play with the club, Ratka wants to set you straight. Unless you're playing in a tournament, you can come as you like – even barefoot (a practice that apparently first caught on in Australia).

Her dream is to “reignite” the game in Northern California, which lags behind the state's southern regions. The Oakland club's oldest member is 91, and the median age is 35; the membership includes about 30 children, the youngest of whom is 5 months old.

When she's not at the club, Ratka works as a holistic health practitioner in the Rockridge neighborhood. Her work integrates traditional Chinese medicine technique, massage therapy, bodywork, botanical medicine and women's health.

But on Wednesdays at 6 p.m. and Sundays at 2 p.m. you can find her attempting to improve the holistic health of her city by offering free lessons on the sport she's come to love. To join her, visit [oaklandlawnbowlingclub.com](http://oaklandlawnbowlingclub.com).

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