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Come out and play

Adults can be kids again with help of Web site, setting up pickup games in their neighborhoods

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Bill Lubinger
Plain Dealer Reporter

As a boy, Andrew Holland kept the names and numbers of neighborhood kids on a legal pad in the pantry.

All it took to rustle up a pickup game was a few phone calls with the essentials: "4 o'clock. Dawson's back yard. Capture the flag."

In college, a pickup game can kick up any time. Plenty of players live just down the hall.

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But for adults, neither the cul-de-sac nor dorm method are options. For them, there's a playmate shortage.

So Holland and two colleagues from his Akron software company devised an alternative. It's GameSnake.com, an Internet site (www.gamesnake.com) that connects players with local pickup games with the tag line, "Can you come out and play?"

Burnin' for a round of bocce? Got a taste for tennis? A hankerin' for handball? But no one to play with?

The site matches recreational athletes in more than 90 sports, from basketball and flag football to disc golf and Wallyball.

Players -- including athletes with disabilities -- post their profiles, listing sports of interest and their athletic skill. Game-starters post times, locations, number of players needed and other details to organize an outing.

The Web site also lets players and organizers print fliers and cards to publicize their games.

Best of all, it's free.

The potential for making money, Holland said, is from sports-equipment companies and other advertisers hoping to reach people such as Mike O'Connell.

The 45-year-old tire-company inspector from Tallmadge used to love playing Ultimate Frisbee, an outdoor game that kind of blends football, lacrosse and Frisbee. But O'Connell hadn't played the sport in 10 to 15 years because he couldn't find enough players to field a game.

He heard about Game-Snake.com, signed up and meets other Frisbee fanatics for regular games. He's also organized a Wallyball (wall volleyball on a racquetball court) outing, teamed up with compatible tennis competition and played in a recent 20-on-20 dodgeball game in Brunswick.

"For active people, it's a really good vehicle to find pickup sports you didn't even know were being played in this area," he said.

GameSnake.com resulted from a brainstorming session seven years ago.

It was the thick of the dot-com craze. Holland, Andy Hopkins and Glenn Somodi were building Web-based software as the Interactive Media Group, a firm Holland founded 12 years ago.

The challenge: how to leverage their day jobs to create something fresh and cool by night.

All three were just out of college (now in their mid-30s, married with kids), rec-sports enthusiasts and frustrated that they either had to join leagues or clubs to stay active in team sports.

"I'm a bad teammate," said Holland, in his brick-and-glass loft office up a flight of spiral stairs. "I don't know if I'm gonna travel. I don't know if I'm gonna be there."

But organizing pickup games is a pain.

GameSnake.com was the solution. They made a business plan and tried to sell it to venture capitalists. Potential investors weren't as thrilled.

So the idea sat on a shelf - until last summer.

With the trio covering costs for now, GameSnake.com's launch was announced with 3.5 million e-mails to college students nationwide. The system now has 15,000 players nationally, and it's growing by word-of-mouth.

The Web site is especially popular in such active sports areas as Colorado and Utah, the upper Northwest, along the upper East Coast and Chicago.

GameSnake.com initiated croquet outings in Hawaii, a running club in Chicago, a rock-climbing group in Boulder, Colo., and paintball battles in Rochester, N.Y.

Its creators expected GameSnake.com players to be mainly men, but almost half of the participants are women.

Among them is 24-year-old Jessica Bader, who returned to Akron from Washington, D.C., in November.

Ultimate Frisbee is her game. The grassy malls of D.C. are jammed with pickup games. Akron wasn't.

"When I heard about GameSnake, it was like, 'Wow, this is exactly what I'm looking for,'" said Bader, who's organized three games and plays almost weekly.

At play, strangers become friends. But it's impossible to do background checks, so participants are reminded to meet in public places, arrive with pals and take other precautions when showing up for a game.

The site is self-policing. Players and game starters can rate each other online. If you're a poor sport, unreliable or not as skilled as you think you are, others will hear about it - just as buyers and sellers are rated on eBay.

Holland smiled. "If we become the eBay of games . . ."

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