

America's Pastimes

Sports and Recreation in Litchfield

Swing



The “swing” sports have a long history in Litchfield. As early as the mid-1800s, the game of wicket was a popular pastime with residents of the town, including such former students of the Litchfield Law School as Asa Bacon. Baseball’s rise in popularity following the Civil War produced numerous club teams and “base ball nines” in town, with each borough fielding a squad of players in the early decades of the twentieth century. Tennis at the Litchfield Lawn Club began in 1878, with two separate (and often competing) golf courses to follow in 1896 and 1898. Tennis, platform tennis, and golf continue today at the Litchfield Country Club. Litchfield is also now home to a nine-hole public golf course, two championship-winning Tri-State League baseball teams, the Tri-Town Youth Baseball and Softball leagues, high school teams, and many recreational players.

Race

Nothing captures the racing spirit of Litchfield better than the Litchfield Hills Road Race, an internationally known, 7.1-mile race through the streets of Litchfield. Founded by Joe Concannon and Bill Neller as a means of bringing the American running scene to the community they loved, the LHRR will celebrate its 40th anniversary in 2016. Since 1977, the race has brought together Litchfield residents and amateur and professional runners from all over the world, attracting names like Bill Rodgers and Olympic gold medalist Joan Benoit. When the race is not in town, Litchfield’s running culture is maintained by high school teams and organizations like the Litchfield Track Club, organized as an offshoot of the road race for youth and adult runners, many of whom participate in running competitions across the country. Litchfield’s running calendar also includes a Cross Country Challenge at White Memorial, a Jingle Bell Run, and a Sweetheart Run and Walk, among others.





Splash

With the largest natural lake in Connecticut located on its southern border, Litchfield has always enjoyed a strong connection to the water. Whether it was learning to swim at Sandy Beach or venturing out with one of the local sailing clubs, most Litchfield residents have fond memories of Bantam Lake. Lined by campgrounds, boat launches, and beaches, much of the lake's shoreline is owned by the White Memorial Foundation, preserving the wildlife and natural beauty enjoyed by boaters and birdwatchers alike. In the winter, the frozen lake is used for ice skating, ice fishing, and ice boating. Numerous organizations call Bantam Lake and

the Bantam River home: the Canoe Club, with roots dating back to 1897; the Bantam Lake Yacht Club, which celebrated its 80th anniversary in 2013; the Litchfield Hills Rowing Club, which promotes recreational and competitive crew for local residents and students; the Bantam Lake Ski Club, the oldest continuously operating water ski club in the country; and the Litchfield Area High School Sailing Team, a fairly young organization founded to introduce local teens to the sport of sailing.

Ride

Horseback riding in Litchfield is as old as Litchfield itself. The early histories of the town mention events like Mr. Pool's "Equestrian Feats of Horsemanship" and horseback paper chases, in which trails of paper scraps are laid out as a "scent" for others riders to follow. Beginning in 1839, the country fairs of the Litchfield County Agricultural Society frequently featured a horse show, becoming an annual event between 1928 and 1975 under the sponsorship of the Litchfield Horse Show Association. Younger riders learned dressage, cross-country riding, stadium jumping, vaulting, and the care of horses and ponies as members of the Litchfield Pony Club. Until 2002, many Litchfield riders participated in the hunts of the Litchfield County Hounds on Saturdays and Thursdays, as well as trail rides, pace events, and the annual Hunt Ball. In addition to horseback riding, Litchfield has a long history of cycling and winter recreation. Velocipedes appeared in Litchfield in the late 1860s, with "bicycle fever" reaching its peak in



the 1890s with more than two hundred bicycles in town. Litchfield residents seemed especially fond of tobogganing, with a Toboggan Club and slide established on Prospect Hill in 1886 and at least one other slide in use behind St. Michael's Church. Litchfield skiers frequented the slopes at Mohawk Mountain, and the Connecticut Junior Republic operated a ski tow on their Litchfield campus.

Score



From high school basketball dynasties to backyard games of touch football, Litchfield residents of all ages and skill levels continue the tradition of "score" sports. In the 1920s, the Litchfield High School basketball teams won numerous state and league championships under captains like Vera Register and George "Lasso" Crutch, with later teams securing championships in 1959 and 1965. Soccer was on the rise by 1963, when the boys from LHS clinched their championship, and is extremely popular today with hundreds of local youths playing on travel and recreational teams organized by the Litchfield Soccer Club. Between the 1960s and 1980s, a group of local field hockey

players competed on a Washington-based team known as the Marvelous Mothers, playing games against local schools and colleges.

Play

Whether at the kitchen table, in the backyard, or on the Green, play is perhaps the most universal recreation. In the late nineteenth century, members of the Litchfield Village Improvement Society frequently held garden parties featuring croquet, lawn games, and even archery. The Litchfield firehouse ran a bowling alley in the basement, and outdoor bowling was a popular amusement on the grounds of White Memorial. Before radios and televisions entered the household, Litchfield families entertained themselves with games of dominoes, chess, or croquet. Alain C. White, a founder of the White Memorial Foundation, was a true student of chess and published numerous chess problems and strategies. Even as lawn darts and NERF footballs replaced archery and croquet, play continued in Litchfield to the present.

