Kickball no longer just for kids as leagues catch on in South Florida

By Justine Griffin, Sun Sentinel

10:45 PM EDT, October 14, 2011

Thousands of adults in South Florida are flocking to county parks to relive their childhood P.E. days and play a surprising amateur sport: kickball.

Organized leagues like the World Adult Kickball Association, Ultra Kickball and Joimo, which are run by young professionals in South Florida, offer casual, recreational sport leagues that encourage competition and social events between games.

After the games, players celebrate — win or lose — at a local bar.

"People remember playing these types of recreational sports," said Jim Riordan, Director of the Master's of Business Sport Management program at Florida Atlantic University, who said they work because they mix both competitive and social activities.

Fort Lauderdale native, Lenny Tomson, started Joimo with partner Jesse Forrest, a recreational sports league in Broward County in the summer of 2009 when he was 26. He brought the concept to his hometown after having some success with a league in San Diego.

"I wanted to do something fun that could give back to people," Tomson said.

Joimo offers bowling, kickball, indoor soccer, dodgeball and flag football leagues. They last for eight weeks, with two weeks for playoffs, and usually have a two week to a month break before the start of the next season. Member ship fees range from $50-$70 per person for each league.

Sponsorships by local bars, which offer drink specials for team members after the games, play much the same role as they do for softball.

About 100 people play on Joimo's dodgeball leagues whereas an average of 80 people play on the kickball leagues.

Stephanie Arbucci started playing on the Joimo league when she first moved to Fort Lauderdale in 2009. "It's how I met all of my best friends here and my boyfriend of a year and a half," said Arbucci, 24. She still plays in the Joimo bowling and dodgeball leagues.

The league offers activities in Pompano Beach, Plantation and Deerfield Beach, among other locations in South Florida. "We've noticed that location is key," Thompson said. "People want to
play near home."

Jon Simon, a managing partner of Ultra Kickball has grown his Fort Lauderdale-based league to 150 participants in less than a year's time.

The league now hosts nationwide tournaments in Fort Lauderdale that attract nearly 600 players.

Simon, 38, started his own league with some friends after seeing the need for a more competitive outlet for kickball. "The others are more of party leagues, whereas Ultra is more for the competitive players," Simon said.

Although the games may be more intense, Ultra Kickball still relies on bar sponsorships and hosts after parties as well. Lucky's Tavern in Fort Lauderdale is the league's local watering hole. Players can join by paying a $60 membership fee and logging onto the website. Simon started in Fort Lauderdale but has expanded leagues to reach Delray Beach and Jensen Beach.

WAKA the league with the longest standing in South Florida, was started by four friends in the Washington D.C. area in 1998, now has 400 leagues across 45 states. WAKA hosts leagues in West Palm Beach, Boynton Beach, Coral Springs, Fort Lauderdale and North Miami.

WAKA has "thousands" of young professionals who play on week nights after work in Fort Lauderdale, said Priscilla Doyle, the WAKA representative for the South Florida market. "I think Broward County is one of the most popular for WAKA kickball," she said.

Doyle dedicates about 20 hours a week as a paid representative for the leagues in the area. It's a part-time position when she's not working in sales for a telemarketing company.

She joined WAKA when she moved to Fort Lauderdale three years ago and "was hooked."

"You don't have to be an athlete and you can be here just to socialize or you can be an athlete and revel on that competitive side," Doyle said. "The one thing that I think ties everyone together is that we're all adults playing a kid's game, which may bring back a sense of nostalgia and carefree nights to our lives."

WAKA charges players fees of around $75 per season. Corona Light is the largest sponsor of the South Florida leagues.

"Nowadays where sports and entertainment coming together, there isn't such a gap in between traditional participatory and recreation sports anymore," Riordan said. "They're going after the right demographics here to be successful."