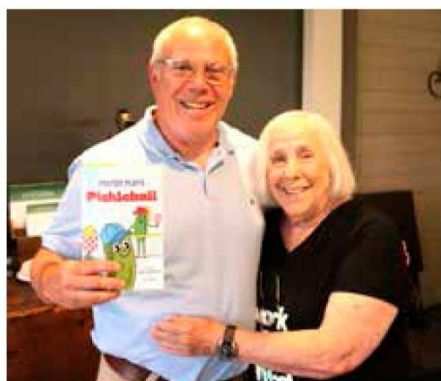




Pam Lippy with Bea Gardner

STILL IN THE GAME: BEA GARDNER'S PICKLEBALL LEGACY AT 86

BY DAVID W. LIPPY



Bea Gardner with her son, Glen



Play for Pink Fundraiser at Match Point





Linda Kass, owner of Gramercy Books in Bexley with Bea.

At 86 years young, Bea Gardner may have stepped off the pickleball court, but her impact on the game, especially here in Central Ohio, remains very much in play.

A New Albany-area resident, Gardner spent nearly a decade playing the fastest-growing sport in the country, before most people could pronounce “pickleball,” let alone understand it.

“When I first started, nobody knew about pickleball,” Gardner recalled with a laugh. She officially retired at age 84, but her connection to pickleball hasn’t faded, if anything, it has evolved.

“I miss the game, especially the exercise,” she said. “Every time I visited my cardiologist, he would ask, ‘Bea, are you still playing pickleball?’ And when I said yes, he’d smile and say, ‘Good for you. Keep it up.’”

For Gardner, the physical benefits were only part of the story. What kept her returning week after week was something more meaningful.

“The best part was the friendships,” she said. “There’s something special about the camaraderie you build with a group of like-minded people.”

It was through pickleball that Gardner met Dave, a fellow player who would become important in her life.

“We were both widowed for about three years,” she explained. “It didn’t take long for us to connect.”

Dave, a former tennis player at Marietta College, brought both skill and insight to her game.

“He taught me my backhand,” Gardner said. “That alone elevated my game. It gave me a competitive advantage.”

Those early days of pickleball look very different today. There were no courts or polished facilities, just creativity and commitment. “We used to tape the court lines onto the basketball floor at the Gahanna YMCA,” Gardner said. “We had two hours, three days a week. We’d set up portable nets, play, and then peel the tape off when we finished.”

She smiled at the memory. “It took time to do the lines ourselves, but we loved it.”

Fast forward a few years, and the sport has exploded. New Albany now boasts 16 dedicated outdoor pickleball courts at

Bevelhimer Park, widely considered among the best in the Columbus area. Indoor facilities have also expanded throughout Central Ohio, including complexes in Hilliard, and the Polaris area. The most notable, Match Point in Reynoldsburg, has become a major hub for year-round play just minutes from New Albany.

“The growth has been incredible,” Gardner said. “It’s almost hard to believe how far it’s come.”

After stepping away from competitive play due to age and health considerations, Gardner began thinking about how she could continue contributing to the sport she loves. That reflection led her back to a familiar passion: writing.

“I thought, what could I give back?” she said. “And it hit me, so many beginners step onto the court without knowing the rules.”

Her answer was *Paxton Plays Pickleball*, a children’s book designed to introduce the fundamentals of the game in a simple, engaging way. While written for younger readers, Gardner emphasizes its value for a much broader audience.

“Honestly, it’s for all beginners from ages 8 to 80,” she said. “If you learn the rules first, you’re not slowing down the game for others or feeling lost out there.” Having played with people of all ages, from grandparents to grandchildren, Gardner saw firsthand how often newcomers struggled.

“I remember watching people pick up a paddle and just start hitting the ball back and forth,” she said. “They didn’t know how to keep score or even how to serve properly.”

That experience reinforced her belief that early education is essential, not just for enjoyment, but for long-term development.

“The future of the sport is with our youth,” Gardner said.

“Good habits start early. That’s how you build confidence and, eventually, great players.”

Today, while she may no longer be competing on the court, Gardner remains deeply connected to the pickleball community, especially as she watches the sport thrive in places like New Albany.

“I think about my pickleball years often,” she said. “It was such a joyful time in my life.”

Through her story, and her book, Bea Gardner is helping ensure that the next generation of players begins their journey with knowledge, confidence, and a lasting love for the game.



Bea Gardner at the Play for Pink Fundraiser at Match Point