

With COVID-19 pandemic nearing an end, social sports leagues remind us that we are not alone

By Samuel Lee

On a makeshift field in Southwest D.C., Miguel Moreno barked defensive assignments to his teammates as his coed flag football team, The Replacements, played short-handed. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough to keep their opponents out of the endzone.

Only six of the 12 members on his roster showed up, while his opponents had enough players for frequent substitutions throughout the game. However, Moreno, 25, was still enjoying playing flag football after the COVID-19 pandemic had kept everyone stuck inside their homes.

"I'm very excited to start playing again because I missed the companionship of being around others," Moreno said.

Social isolation during the pandemic [increased](#) loneliness, anxiety and depression as interpersonal relationships became strained, if not completely disappeared. The Surgeon General even went as far to call loneliness and isolation an [epidemic](#) in a recent advisory report.

The [Survey Center on American Life](#) found that Americans have fewer close relationships than ever before, and Forbes found that [59%](#) of adults find it more difficult to form relationships since the pandemic. Young adults were especially hit hard as [61%](#) experienced high levels of loneliness during the pandemic, according to Harvard University.

However, with the pandemic nearing an end, some people are finding a way to reconnect with others through social sports leagues.

"Those leagues, particularly in the D.C. area, trend very young. And it's a demographic that was particularly hard hit by COVID because it's an age where developmentally you are being social, you are building relationships. That's where you're at in life, and that was taken away. But now you've got this opportunity to come back together with people," said Eric Legg, an associate professor at Arizona State University.

Moreno plays as part of DC Fray, the local branch of United Fray. DC Fray, and other organizations like Volo Sports DC and ZogSports DC, host a variety of sports leagues in the district like flag football, basketball and soccer, as well as even cornhole, bocce and axe throwing.

There are also other organizations that are more niche, such as Stonewall Kickball DC, which play a single sport and focus on building relationships within a specific community. Stonewall Kickball DC plays kickball to help build relationships within the LGBTQ+ community.

Skill levels for all these leagues vary; some are more social while others are more competitive. On Moreno's team, nine of the 12 players on the roster are playing in a social sports league for the first time.

And on another flag football team, some players have been playing together for multiple years. Every player even had a wristband with an entire playbook, and some even wore personalized team jerseys instead of the DC Fray team shirts.

Regardless of the level of competitiveness, games provide a chance for players to meet new people.

“It can be very competitive, and I am also competitive. But in the end, it’s a social league and I’m here to have fun,” Moreno said.

Brittany Rheault, chief operating officer at DC Fray, said social sports leagues try to appeal to everyone’s preferences, whether it’s leagues that last six to eight weeks or weekly events like bingo and trivia nights.

“Our mission [at DC Fray] is to make fun possible in any way, shape, or form... Community is really important to us, and so we thought that with social sports, you can tap into that,” Rheault said.

During the pandemic, DC Fray held numerous online events to help people keep engaged with others, with some ballooning to as large as 500 people per activity. However, gathering over a computer screen couldn’t beat the sensation of physically being around other people.

Dr. Richard Cytowic, a neurologist and professor at George Washington University Medical School, said that video communication apps such as Zoom cannot completely replace in-person interactions.

Cytowic said that people are not used to seeing each other at the angles that we see each other on these apps. In addition, artifact can occur with these video communication apps and can make people feel isolated and disconnected.

Video artifact can include the blurring and freezing of video as well as video and audio being out-of-sync, causing subtle facial cues to be lost. These lost facial cues, as well as lost body language as people are also only visible above the chest, are important for conversations.

“When you’re talking, are you really seeing me nod in agreement or say ‘Oh, yes?’ Just the tiny little verbal and physical ticks that say, ‘I am listening. I understand what you’re saying. Tell me more.’ These are really difficult to pick up with Zoom,” Cytowic said.

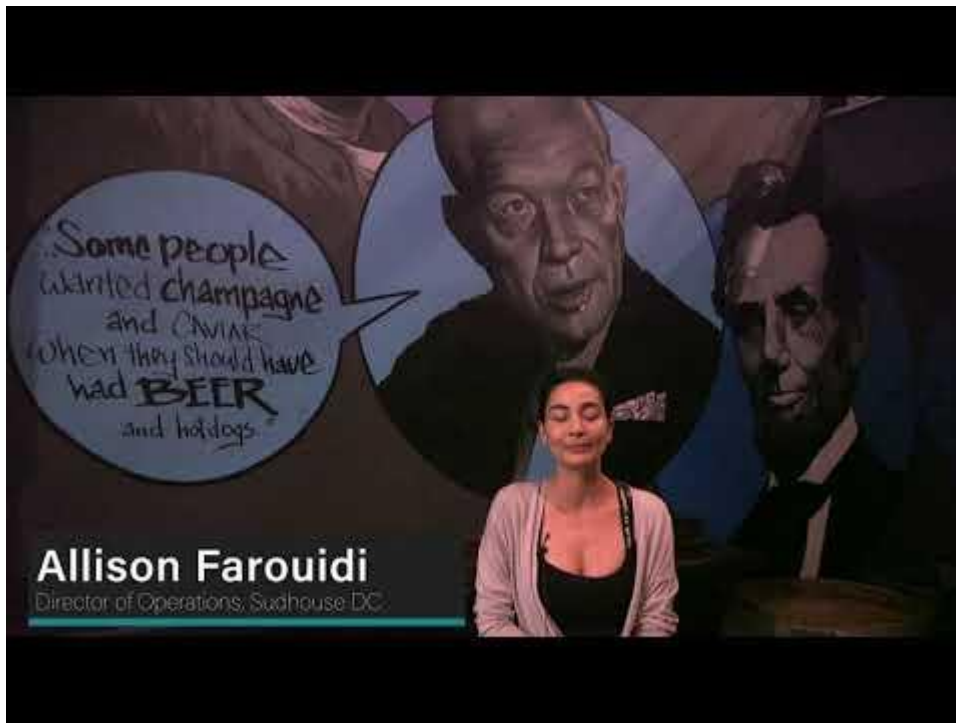
Ultimately, in-person interactions are the most effective way to develop a sense of community. The feeling of belonging and that one matters to others has associations with numerous positive outcomes such as increased feelings of empowerment, self-confidence and life satisfaction.

This is why Legg feels that social sports leagues are uniquely situated to become important places not only for young adults, but everyone who participates.

“Sense of community theory talks a lot about shared emotional connections, shared histories, events that have emotional drama. Sports does all of these things,” Legg said.

Legg said people enter social sports leagues voluntarily and are more likely to also be focused on effort and improving their skills rather than just solely winning and losing. Because of this, they are more likely to be open to building relationships that lead to a sense of community.

Legg also said that many social sports leagues have an added benefit; further camaraderie while visiting local bars. This not only helps prolong the sense of community among players, but it also supports local businesses.



Across the field from where Moreno and his teammates were playing, Jimmy Hiens and his team had just finished their game. Among the laughs about the amazing plays and funny mistakes, were the sounds of them getting ready to leave for their favorite bar.

"We go to the Balguard after every game," said Hiens, who has been with his team for five years and plays in multiple sports leagues.

And at the bar, as you are, in Southeast D.C., over 40 people mingled with drinks in their hands on a Tuesday night. However, they're not just there for the drinks, but also to play cornhole. Up a dark staircase to the second floor, two sets of cornhole boards are arranged for the teams to play.

With very little sense of competition, it looked more like a party or a tailgate than an actual sports league. Even the occasional sarcastic trash talk between players sounded more like playful banter. Everyone there just wanted to spend time with their friends and make new ones.

"I just Googled 'things to do in D.C.' I wanted something low stakes, nothing competitive, where it's all about socializing and making new friends," said Emily Champlin, a first-time participant in one of DC Fray's Cornhole Leagues.

Despite having moved to D.C. six years ago after graduating law school, Champlin wasn't able to make many new friends because of work and then the pandemic. Most adults in the district have a story similar to Champlin's.

According to the US Census Bureau, only [35%](#) of D.C. residents, 234,527 of 670,050, were born in the district in 2021. Therefore, building relationships with others and finding a community can be difficult for the many who move to the city. Cey Cey Green was one of those residents.

Green grew up in Los Angeles and moved to D.C. in the summer of 2014 after earning her master's in education. Feeling increasingly isolated and alone without a solid support system, Green began seriously contemplating moving back to California despite having just left.

"I learned that making friends as an adult is hard. I tried hanging out in LGBTQ+ spaces, like bars, clubs, and even some community spaces not centered around nightlife and drinking. But I was not developing relationships or community from these experiences," Green said.

Ultimately, it was her joining Stonewall Kickball DC that finally made the city feel more like a place she could call home. It gave her a space where she felt important to other people, and those people felt important to her.

Stonewall Kickball DC also supported her and encouraged her, giving her the confidence and strength to embrace herself completely and come out as trans-feminine. Green also plays kickball with DC Fray to continue strengthening old relationships while building new ones.

"Every week I am reminded of why I love this organization and this community," Green said.

Even Moreno, who grew up in the D.C. area his entire life, found it impossible to not make new friends. Having no shortage of hometown friends, Moreno joined DC Fray in the summer of 2022 as a way to get active again and play the sport he had played in high school.

However, since joining, he has made numerous new friends, three of whom he now considers to be his best friends. And despite having lost the game, Moreno and his teammates could still laugh before walking off the field together.

"Looking back on my time at DC Fray, I am most thankful for the friendships that came out of it," Moreno said.