Backyard
Sports & Games

Ed and Sally Ehlinger live in an unassuming house in south Minneapolis. They have been there for thirty years and never really did much with their yard, which sloped from a high alley in the back down to the street in front. A few years ago they decided to transform a big screened porch on the front of the house into a classic open air one, and that got them thinking about the entire yard. They are both active, but like to be at home, so they wanted some kind of sport or game they could play right out their back door.

The answer was horseshoes. "I can do it at home," says Ed, "and I can do it until I am 120 years old." While they were working on the design of the porch, the Ehlingers called in Southview Design's Karen Filloon, who proposed leveling the side yard and installing a few low retaining walls. She also figured out how to fit a regulation-size horseshoe pitch on a Minneapolis city lot.

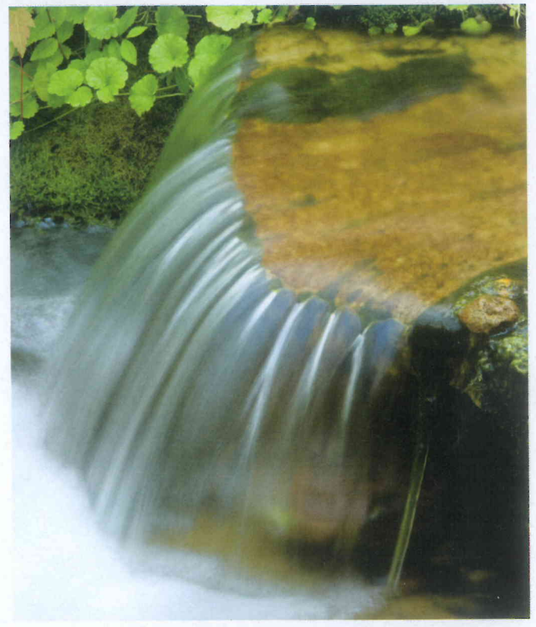
The Ehlingers' pitch is just one of several designs for backyard games that Southview has completed over the last few years. At a lakeshore home in Minnetrista, Southview landscape designer Tim Johnson incorporated a 400 square foot artificial surface putting green into an overall backyard redesign that also includes a pool, fire pit, and stone patio. Because the green is nestled up to these other elements, Johnson says the owners, Becky and Tony Leonard, "can do backyard entertaining and have people putting." The green sports three holes and is contoured like the natural version. It even has two textures of turf, a smooth surface on most of the green and a rougher textured strip around the outside edge – again like a natural course – to help keep balls in play.

Johnson also recently worked with Paula Ehrich and Thor Raarup of Eagan to design a concrete paver basketball court for their four elementary school-age sons. The court doubles as a driveway for a secondary garage and includes two baskets with high school regulation lanes and three-point arcs. The court is mostly made of brown pavers, with lines – also made of pavers – in a dark charcoal grey. Though it's not easy to lay pavers in such precise curves (Southview laid out the entire court, marked the lines, pulled up the brown pavers that needed to be cut, set down the dark gray pavers in curving lines, then filled in with the cut brown pavers), it makes for a much more elegant look than painted concrete or asphalt.

When Nancy and Terry Mueller started working with Southview's Tim Oberg to redesign their wild and wooded backyard in White Bear Lake, they were looking for a different kind of recreation altogether. They wanted to swim – but feared a pool would be too much maintenance. They also wanted a pond – but wanted to be able to go in the water. Oberg's solution was to create a natural swimming pool.

Natural swimming pools use plants, beneficial bacteria, and aeration to treat the water, rather than the chemicals used in conventional swimming pools. The Muellers' pool, which was completed around 2003, consists of a series of small ponds, a waterfall and a stream that cascade down a little hill into a large four-foot-deep pool edged with rocks and

plants. The patio comes right up to the edge of the pool, and a series of underwater stone steps allow access. The pool water recirculates to the uppermost pond, where it is filtered. Its descent back to the main pool aerates it.

Oberg says this type of pool allows the Muellers to "enjoy nature as it is." There are even koi in the pond, which stay there year-round, since it will never freeze completely. There is far less maintenance: no draining, no balancing of chemicals. Getting everything working properly in the spring is the hardest part, then, says Oberg, "you get the ecosystem set and let it go."

Karen Filloon believes that, in addition to being fun additions to a landscape, these backyard sport and game venues can bring people and neighborhoods together. At the Ehlingers' horseshoe pitch, the retaining wall has a little seat (which Filloon calls the "peanut gallery") where people can watch the game in progress. Neighbors have told Ed they enjoy the sound of the clanking horseshoes, and stop by from time to time to strike up a game. He's happy to have them over, and he's happy to teach the game. But Ed is getting pretty good at horseshoes, so don't expect to beat him.