

Sports coming out of the shadows: Pickleball is stealing a march on rivals

SPORT

Fr Vlad Felzmann

“One is never too old to learn” came to my mind when, for the first time – and aged 84 – I came across three hither-to-me unknown sports: pickleball, padel and racketball.

I will share with you my discovery over three pieces, hoping you might be encouraged to try at least one of them out. We will start with pickleball.

Pickleball is a racket or paddle sport in which two (singles) or four (doubles) players hit a perforated, hollow plastic ball with paddles over a 34-inch-high (0.86 m) net until one side is unable to return the ball or commits an infraction. Pickleball is played indoors and outdoors. It was invented in 1965 as a children’s backyard game in the United States, on Bainbridge Island in Washington state. In 2022, pickleball was named the official state sport of Washington.

While it resembles tennis and table tennis, pickleball has specific rules, paddles and court dimensions. The court is 44 feet long and 20 feet wide, and the paddle is larger than the one used in table tennis. The hard plastic ball used in pickleball produces less bounce than tennis balls. On each side of the net is a 7-foot area (2.1 m) known as the non-volley zone (or the kitchen), where the ball must bounce before it is hit. The rules specify side-out scoring, where only the server can score a point. The minimal amount of bounce, the non-volley zones, and the underhanded stroke with which all serves are made, gives the game a dynamic pace.

Growing in popularity

Between 1965 and 2020, pickleball became a popular sport in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States, and began to grow in popularity elsewhere. In 2021, 2022 and 2023, the sport was named the fastest-growing sport in the United States by the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, and by 2023 it was estimated to have over 4.8 million players. The growing popularity of the sport has been attributed to its short learning curve, its appeal to a wide range of ages and fitness levels, and its low start-up costs. There are now thousands of pickleball tournaments throughout the United States, including the US National Championships and the US Open Tournament, along with two professional tours and one professional league. Pickleball is



also growing in popularity outside the United States: there are several other national and international competitions.

The game was created in 1965 on Bainbridge Island, Washington, at the summer home of Joel Pritchard, who later served in the United States Congress and as Washington’s lieutenant governor. Pritchard and two of his friends, Barney McCallum and Bill Bell, are credited with devising the game and establishing the rules.

According to Joan Pritchard, Joel Pritchard’s wife: “The name of the game became Pickle Ball after I said it reminded me of the pickle boat in crew where oarsmen were chosen from the leftovers of other boats.”

Other sources state that the name ‘pickleball’ was derived from the name of the Pritchards’ family dog, Pickles, but the Pritchards said the dog came along after the game had already been named, and in fact the dog was named after the game, not the other way round.

The confusion arose when a reporter interviewing the Pritchards in the early 1970s decided it would be easier for readers to relate to the dog rather than a pickle boat.

Putting your opponent in a pickle

Jennifer Lucore and Beverly Youngren, authors of the book *History of Pickleball: More than 50 Years of Fun!*, say that they could not conclusively determine whether the game was named after the dog or the dog was named after the game. They did, however, discover a third possibility: Bill Bell claimed that he had named the game because he enjoyed hitting

the ball in a way that would put his opponent in a pickle.

Shortly after the game was invented, some of its inventors and their friends brought pickleball to Hawaii, where the game became known as pukaball. Puka, meaning ‘hole’ in Hawaiian, was at first used to refer to the ball, since pickleballs have numerous holes, and later used to refer to the game itself.

When Pritchard and Bell returned from golf one Saturday afternoon in 1965, they found their families bored. They had attempted to set up badminton, but no one could find the shuttlecock. Pritchard and Bell challenged their kids to devise their own game. The adults and kids ended up at the badminton court and began experimenting with different balls and rackets, including table tennis paddles. The 5 foot (1.5-metre) badminton net was eventually lowered to hip level to accommodate driving the ball.

Initially, a Wiffle ball was thought to be the ideal ball, but later the Cosom Fun Ball was found to be more durable and provided a better playing experience.

The table tennis paddles were quickly replaced with larger, more durable plywood paddles fabricated in a nearby shed.

McCallum continued to experiment with various paddle designs in his father’s Seattle basement workshop. He called one paddle the “M2”, or McCallum 2, which became the paddle of choice for most early players of the game.

Tournaments and recognition

Soon after its creation, pickleball became popular with local neighbours and relatives of the

inventors. In 1968 Pritchard, along with McCallum’s son David and two other friends, formed Pickle Ball, Inc. The company filed its first annual report in 1972, around the same time they trademarked the name Pickle-ball. The company manufactured wooden paddles and pickleball kits to satisfy the demand for the sport.

Interest in pickleball continued to grow, and spread from the Pacific Northwest into warmer areas as ‘snowbirds’ brought the sport south to Arizona, California, Hawaii and Florida. In 2016, Pickle Ball, Inc. was purchased by PickleballCentral.com, which operates under the corporate name Olla, LLC.

A 1976 tournament held at the Southcenter Athletic Club in Tukwila, Washington, is credited with being the first formal pickleball tournament. It was billed as ‘The World’s First Pickleball Championship’ by Joel Pritchard and received a mention in the July 1976 edition of *Tennis* magazine.

The United States Amateur Pickleball Association (USAPA) was formed in 1984, which is when the first official rulebook for the sport was published, and the first National Doubles Championships held in Tacoma, Washington.

By 1990 the sport was being played in all 50 states.

In 2001 pickleball was included as a demonstration sport in the Arizona Senior Olympics (ASO) with 100 participants.

The pickleball tournament was held at the Happy Trails RV Resort in Surprise, Arizona, and within five years included 275 participants. The inclusion of pickleball in the ASO was seen as a significant

contributor to the growth of tournaments in the United States.

The US Pickleball National Championships are held near Palm Springs, California, and co-hosted by Larry Ellison, co-founder and CEO of Oracle and owner of the Indian Wells Tennis Garden, where they have been played since 2018. They had been previously played in Arizona, from 2009 to 2017. The tournament has the oversight of the USA Pickleball Association; itself reincorporated with an updated rule book in 2005 after its foundation in 1984.

The US Open Pickleball Championships are played in another hub of pickleball, Naples, Florida, and started in 2016.

Estimates for active players grew to 3.3 million in 2019 – up 10 per cent from 2016. As of 2021, there were 58 member countries overseen by the International Federation of Pickleball. As of 2022, there were over 8,000 pickleball locations in the United States.

State Senator John Lovick proposed a bill making pickleball the official sport of Washington state in 2021. Pickleball was then named the official state sport of Washington in 2022 by the state legislature.

On 28th March 2022, the legislation was signed by Governor Jay Inslee on the original Pritchard family court where the sport was invented.

Why not see if you can – in your street or parish – organise a pickleball competition and bring the various age groups together to play?

Next week: The history of padel