

Pickleball Makes A Dink Shot Among Sports Lovers Of All Ages!

Marilyn Shapiro

*Pickleball, Pickleball, how I love the game,/Pickleball, Pickleball, what a silly name/ When I play, every day,
my body is in pain/ But you know, I can't stop, unless it starts to rain! (Parody sung to tune of **O Chanukah!**)*

What? You haven't heard of pickleball! Have you been living under a marinated mushroom?

Pickleball is the fastest growing sport in America. According to the USA Pickleball Association, there are over 3.2 million pickleball players in the United States alone, 5,000 indoor and outdoor courts in the United States; and at least one location in all 50 states. The game is being introduced to kids and teenagers in physical education classes in middle and high schools.

A Game Is Born

Pickleball was the brainchild of former Washington State representative Joel Pritchard. Summer, 1965, he and two friends came home from golf to three bored families. Their attempt to play badminton was thwarted by the fact that a shuttlecock was no where to be found. Undaunted, they retrieved a Whiffle ball, improvised some paddles with some plywood, and lowered the badminton net to compensate. His wife Joan dubbed the game "pickleball" after the "Pickle Boat" in crew where oarsmen were chosen from the leftovers of other boats.

Although pickleball languished in obscurity for almost fifty years, that all changed when Baby Boomers began to retire. Many "seniors" still wanted to compete and win at a sport but lacked their youthful running abilities. According to an article on the AARP website, pickleball, which combined elements of badminton, tennis, and table tennis, filled that need. Games usually last 10 to 15 minutes, so players can take frequent breathers. Since the court is small and most people play doubles, there's no serious running — making it easier on the knees. The lightweight paddle and plastic ball reduces the chances of tennis elbow; having two people on the team reduces the area of play.

Larry Loves Pickleball

My husband Larry picked up the game when he turned 65 and joined Southern Saratoga YMCA in Clifton Park [New York]. Larry had been involved in sports his entire life—basketball, baseball, and track in his youth and running and cycling as an adult. In pickleball, he has found camaraderie as well as the ability—to quote Jimmy

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Buffet—“to grow older but not up.” He has participated in several tournaments but prefers to play for the exercise, the fun, and the socialization. During the summer, Larry plays with the Summit County pickleball league in Colorado. As the group plays at over 9100 feet, their tee shirts proudly proclaim, “We Play With An ALTITUDE!”

When we moved to Florida, one of Larry’s requirements was that the community had an active pickleball presence. Solivita, which is listed by www.55.com as one of the top five 55+ communities for pickleball, has seventeen outdoor courts. The Smashers, the largest sports club in Solivita, has over 1000 members and growing. Along with hosting the Polk Senior Games, the club also holds Sadie Hawkins, Halloween, and Yearling (new players) games.

Each Player Has A Story

Tom Leva, the Smasher’s president, first played the game in pickleball in 2007. After moving to Solivita in 2008, Tom, who had a history of heart problems, lost 40 pounds and was soon playing the game competitively and teaching new players. Although reoccurring cardiac issues has curtailed his game, he has remained on the board and has been behind the expansion and improvements of the pickleball courts.

Linda Kuhn, the Smasher’s treasurer, hadn’t played a sport since high school but now she is addicted, sometimes playing 2 to 4 hours in the Florida heat. “Pickleball gives me such a sense of contentment,” Linda said. The game has reaffirmed my decision that as I age, I am going out with a roar!”

When they moved to Solivita in 2015, Dave and Patti “Smith” were tennis players who were not going to ever play that silly game called pickleball. After their neighbors gave them paddles and took them out to play, they soon became self-professed pickleball addicts. They enjoy sharing their love of the game with others and meeting so many interesting people. Patti is looking forward to playing in the Florida Senior Games in December.

Sandie and Howie Vipler, former Upstate New York pickleballers, recognized soon after picking up the game in 2012 that Clifton Park lacked outdoor courts. Howie reached out to Phil Barrett, the town supervisor, who agreed to fund painting pickleball lines on some of the town tennis courts. They have moved themselves and their equipment to Virginia, where they continue to play almost every day.

Meanwhile, Sandie, who has a sports resume that includes downhill skiing, kayaking, cycling, and golfing, regards pickleball as her favorite. She plays pickleball 5 to 6 days a week for 2 to 3 hours a day. She revels in the compliments she gets from new competitors, including "You play tall for a short person" and "Wow, look at the wheels on her!" At 68 years old, Sandie vows that she will be playing until she can no longer walk.

That hasn't stopped Brenda Taylor. Brenda had to have a leg amputated after a 1998 motorcycle accident and desperately wanted to find a way to get exercise while in her wheelchair. Except for an extra bounce before returning the serve, the rules are basically the same. Her proudest moment playing the game is when people compliment on her backhand shot.

Mel Toub had played tennis and racquetball in his youth. Now in his late sixties and facing health challenges, he has mixed those two sports with pickleball. "Pickleball has wide appeal to both folks who used to play racket sports in their youth and to seniors who wish to remain active but no longer have the stamina or physical ability to play more demanding sports like basketball, soccer, and tennis," said Mel. "The learning curve to play pickleball at a socially acceptable level is fairly quick, so pickleball becomes a route to a new activity and new sets of friends."

Growing Popularity

The game is growing internationally, with many European and Asian countries adding courts. Personal friends from England, Wales, and Canada have gotten hooked on the game after playing in Florida. Rob Harvey located an indoor pickleball facility near his home in Barhead, Alberta. "The game is great for eye-hand coordination. It keeps me limber and helps the joints." Pickleball also helps him keep in shape for his summer baseball league. Lynda and Steve Gorwill from Wales fell in love with the game after playing the game while on vacation in Florida. Last year, Lynda applied for and received a grant from Wales' sports council to establish a pickleball league in her town. Although she has had roles in an English soap opera, Lynda still considers one of her proudest moments was winning a silver medal in her first pickleball tournament in Abingdon Oxfordshire, England.

Margaret and Peter Hunter were "kitted" with paddles and balls while visiting Larry and me in Solivita last November. "Within two minutes we were captivated, line, hook and sinker." They are looking to returning to our area for another American Thanksgiving and another month of pickleball.

Some Like It Not!

Not that pickleball doesn't come with its hazards. Sharon and Rick McKelvey both ended up having torn meniscus surgery after a year of playing at Solivita. "That wasn't fun," said Sharon, another admitted addict, "but it didn't stop us from returning to the game." Debbie Pratt broke a vertebra in her back after she took a bad fall moving backwards to return one of Larry's volleys. She no longer plays pickleball, but her injury certainly didn't scare off other women in her RV resort on the West Coast of Florida, who are appropriately called "The Sweet Pickles."

Between my own fear of injury and my total lack of hand-eye coordination, I, like Debbie Pratt, am sitting this game out. During my one and only lesson, I enjoyed volleying the ball that Larry gently lobbed across the net. That enjoyment ended ten minutes into my first game. Larry and I competed against other "newbies," but they had a strong background in tennis. I couldn't serve the ball and missed every volley coming my way. I felt as if I were back in junior high gym class, the last one picked for the team. I have decided to stick to my 'safe' sports: Zumba, cycling, and swimming laps.

Marta Groess, a lifelong athlete and a member of Smashers, says that the most important feature of the game is that it is FUN! "I tell new players that if they aren't laughing, they aren't playing the game right."

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*Marilyn Shapiro, a resident of Kissimmee, Florida, is a regular contributor to (Capital Region, New York) **The Jewish World** and (Orlando, Florida) **Heritage Florida Jewish News**. She has published two compilations of her stories, **There Goes My Heart (2016)** and **Tikkun Olam: Stories of Repairing an Unkind World**. Her blog is theregoemyheart.me.*