



Pickleball MANIA

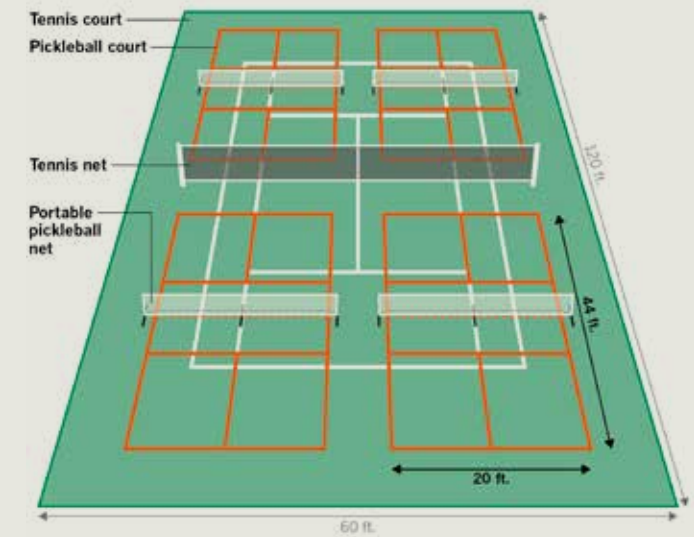
PICKLEBALL IS TAKING BRITISH COLUMBIA BY STORM,
AND OFFERING PLAYERS OF ALL AGES BENEFITS TO HEALTH,
SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AND EVEN TOURISM

STORY & PHOTOS BY
JANE MUNDY



Pickleball Vs Tennis

The Court



It's possible to fit four pickleball courts in one tennis court.

The Ball



If pickleball mania has reached your community it's likely that you already know a picklehead, or pickler, as they fondly call themselves. Possibly it's the kid next door or your grandparents—there's no age barrier. Maybe you play: Pickleball is Canada's fastest growing sport and BC accounts for nearly one-third of all the registered pickleball players in the country.

For many boomers it was a pandemic

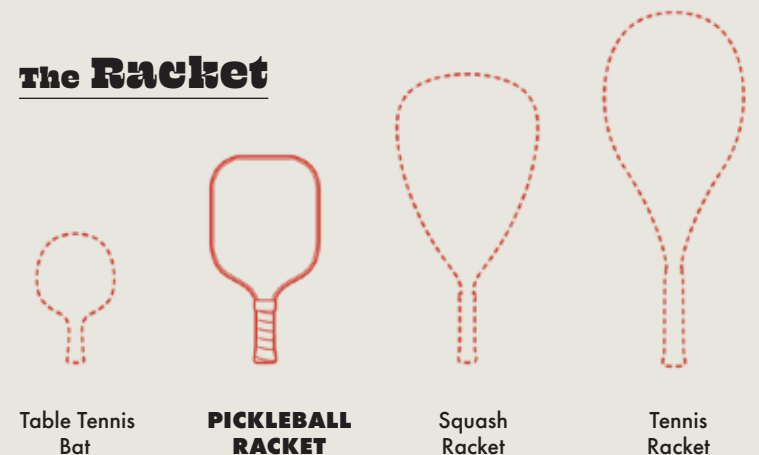
pastime, but it's no longer considered a game for seniors: 18 to 34 years-olds make up the fastest growing population in Canada for pickleball. According to a recent survey by Pickleball Canada, more than 1.37 million of us play the game at least once per month, with more than half playing four or more times per month. And memberships to local pickleball associations all over the province are soaring. So why has it become so popular?

PICKLEBALL APPEALS TO most anyone, regardless of age or athletic ability. With a paddle and a few balls that can cost less than \$50, athletic shoes, an open space and a net, you're good to go. It's a shallower learning curve and a much gentler game than tennis. In pickleball, the plastic wiffle-like ball isn't bouncy and doesn't fly as fast through the air as a tennis ball. The paddle is shorter and lighter than a tennis racket, making it easier to handle. And you

serve underhand in pickleball, which is easier to hit and return. There's less impact—less stopping and starting—the court is smaller and the game is generally quicker. But you can work up a sweat. Considered by health professionals as “fairly strenuous,” it can provide a cardio workout for many people and the lower body especially gets exercise.

Vancouver's Northshore Pickleball Club's oldest active member is Elmer Helm, at 97 years young. “Years ago, a

The Racket





friend made me a paddle from plywood but I only played a few times until I quit tennis in 2018 because it got me out of breath,” says Helm, “but pickleball is great for arrhythmia and eye-ball coordination. Another problem getting older is balance and pickleball really helps. People get hung up on the word “exercise” but it’s important for your mental health to be social and get out of the house. You can have fun and stay active without saying the E word.”

“I know a guy in Mill Bay with Parkinson’s who plays every day; it seems to slow down his symptoms and he’s likely getting more out of pickleball than doing little exercises,” says Lee Schultze, program facilitator at Esquimalt Recreation Centre.

It would make sense that health professionals realize the benefits, and along with the pickleball community, Schultze and many others believe we should pressure the government to provide more courts. “Would you rather have seniors at the bar scarfing down fries?” quips Schultze.

“A few of our members bring their partner with dementia issues. We tell them where to stand and when it’s their turn to serve,” says Walter Knecht, president of Pickleball BC. “One guy didn’t know his name but he recognized his wife, served and played. When he stopped playing, he blanked. A number of people attest that pickleball saves their life or their partners’ lives—but we need government funding to build more courts, for all age groups.” By all accounts it would appear that pickleball could put a dint in healthcare costs...

“PICKLEBALL PROVIDES ALL sorts of unseen benefits that we often aren’t aware of,” says Paul Fitzgerald, age 34, with Canada’s National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) and a de-

gree in human kinetics. He says we tend to turn our backs to aging and a lot of seniors feel powerless against time, but pickleball improves quality of life—physically, mentally and socially, making it a benefit to society. “The more people who play, the better off we will all be.”

I can vouch for Fitzgerald. After six lessons with him earlier this year I became a picklehead. If lessons aren’t within your grasp, Fitzgerald suggests searching the internet to learn the rules and some strategy. He also advises newbies to be discerning because pickleball is a booming industry and with it there are some bad actors and there are conflicting points of view regarding rules.

“There was initially a certain way to play the game but like any sport you have to be malleable, the game is evolving. And most pros—Division 1 college tennis players—are influencing the game so now teens and 20-somethings with phenomenal tennis strokes and less dinking are playing.” (Dinking usually happens when all four players in doubles pickleball are at the Non-Volley Zone line—near the net. It’s been described as an “art of the soft game... an exercise in finesse, control and patience.”

“I try not to steer people into thinking there’s a right and wrong way to play and there’s nothing in the rule book to say what strategy to employ,” adds Fitzgerald. But however way you play, the main ingredient is fun. And maybe add a dash of competitiveness.

Lonely? Grab a paddle. When Jane Addie moved to Victoria from Toronto a few years ago she knew one person. “I phoned the Victoria Pickleball Association and the next morning I was on a court playing with people who fast became friends,” says Addie. “I was soon playing four days a week with the same people and started socializing. I just had the whole gang on my patio for drinks

and sometimes we go to the theatre, have dinner parties. They really saved my psyche.”

“Pickleball allowed me to become friends with a lot of women—not that I’m on the prowl,” laughs Don Cherry, age 73. He is also friends with Addie and about 20 other pickleheads. “I moved here three years ago from Nova Scotia and only knew my sons and one couple. Now I’m part of a big network—about 40 of us rotate at the Esquimalt Rec Centre and I’m widening my circle of friends—widowed, divorced, married—we all have one thing in common.

THE PICKLE

But there’s a pickleball pickle: Supply hasn’t kept up with demand. For instance, demand is so high in Kelowna that the local club had to cap membership before the season even started. Picklers in Victoria are playing on three courts recently created from a small parking lot in Beacon Hill Park (no, pickleball didn’t pave paradise as per Joni Mitchell) but that hasn’t made a dent in demand. There’s also turf wars in Victoria. “Tensions are definitely around some players who would really like to have all of the tennis courts marked for pickleball,” says Connie McCann, president of the Victoria Regional Pickleball Association.

Locals in central Saanich warned council of possible “fisticuffs” if the groups had to share space. Court time disputes on Mayne Island caused a coup at their community centre. (Despite their complaints about pickleball taking over court space, however, many tennis players who retired due to injury are avid picklers.)

And there’s the noise issue. It’s been described as sounding like popcorn warming in a microwave... sporadic bursts that quicken gradually, to an arrhythmic clatter. As a torture technique, it has replaced leaf blowers as the number one noise nuisance for some people. The ▶

Above: Vernon’s Million Dollar Roof. **Below:** Vernon’s Provincial Championship Tournament.



City of Victoria barred pickleball from an outdoor tennis area because of noise complaints, but picklers don't want to play second fiddle to tennis players. "Our association installed sound panels and the neighbours said that worked because it sounds like tennis," explains McCann. "But across Canada pickleballers don't have places to play so they take over tennis courts and parking lots. Loud and proud, they don't obey rules."

No such shenanigans happen in Vernon, where BC's first Provincial Championship Tournament kicked off this past May, with 621 players competing in 47 different age/skill/gender events. The event happened because the Vernon Pickleball Association fundraised \$1 million in 30 days to put a roof on 12 courts. "Four years ago, we got past the idea of the city paying entirely for our pickleball lifestyle so we leased an area

in the sports park and built the outdoor courts," says Vernon Pickleball Association president Walter Knech. "Then Covid hit. Winston Churchill said, 'Never waste a good crisis,' so we decided to cover them." One year later, with the help of 400 members, including electricians and various retired tradespeople volunteering their time, the roof was raised on a building 55 feet high. And they haven't stopped. "We are now building a 2,500 sq-ft reception area with space to take off winter snow boots, an expensive computer system and washrooms—for another \$1 million.

"It's very clear that we have a growing demand for pickleball and there are many opportunities to create more space," says Saanich Mayor Dean Murdock, a pickleball fan. After playing at a tournament on his turf with former Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe,

Murdoch "thoroughly enjoyed the game and a generous five-point lead was most appreciated," he said with a chuckle. Rightly so, as they were playing against coach Paul Fitzgerald. In anticipation of the big event, Murdoch needed a few pointers. "We booked a court last week and got a few tips on rules, and different techniques like how to control the ball," he says. "So I retained about 20 percent of that and it went well—pickleball is a lot of fun." Murdock says the Saanich municipality is looking at existing facilities to create indoor courts and a location is pegged for outdoors, not near a residential area.

Pickleball associations and municipal governments throughout BC are looking at Vernon, where there is proof to the adage, "Build and they will come." Mayor Murdock is looking at partnerships to deliver a service such as Vernon. "It's worth a conversa-

tion to work with partners before fundraising kicks off—partnerships are ways to meet the demand," he says.

In July 2023, the Penticton Pickleball Club's 375 members made an offer to city politicians: a donation of \$100,000 to build four new courts and a commitment to pay more money to rent them. Founded in 2015 with 76 members, the club is capped this season due to a lack of court time. The club previously donated \$50,000 to the city to add four new courts. Twelve courts would put Penticton on par with Vernon, Kelowna and West Kelowna. Interestingly, last year the town of Oliver spent \$153,000 to resurface two tennis courts and convert one other tennis court into four pickleball courts, the same cost the city spent three years ago in building two new pickleball courts, according to the Penticton Herald.

PICKLEBALL TOURISM

In Florida, real estate developers are spending \$180 million on 15 private pickleball clubs, reported the *New York Times*. Courts have been opening at recreation centres, hotels and retirement communities across the US. And they are coming to US malls, replacing shuttered stores like Bed, Bath and Beyond and Old Navy. Which begs the question: What is replacing Nordstrom in Vancouver, or Old Navy in Victoria? Walmart and other huge retailers are also closing stores across Canada, which could translate to pickleball tourism. Lee Schultze says some Pickleballers who want to play every day have joined the snowbirds who regularly go south. For example, Yuma, Arizona is heaven on earth with 25 courts. "Victoria's hotel industry says they are losing business because pickler guests want to play and they don't have the courts, so they go to Vernon or Parksville with purpose-built courts."

Tourism Vernon said that hosting the Provincial Championship Tournament benefited Vernon directly—by about \$600,000. And the indoor courts provide opportunities to host big events in the future. Lee Schultze says that everyone is waiting for municipalities to give them stuff, but as Walter Knech says, we have to pay to play. 🍷



Pickleball History

1965

US congressman Joel Pritchard and two pals on Bainbridge Island are credited with inventing pickleball, possibly named after one of their dogs, Pickle. Or it could be derived from rowing's "pickle boat," which describes a crew of rowers put together at random to compete. Makes sense, since pickleball is a mishmash of badminton, tennis and ping pong. They began with table tennis paddles and a perforated plastic ball and a badminton net (60 inches high).



1967

A permanent pickleball court was constructed in the backyard of Pritchard's pal.

1972

A corporation was formed to protect the sport.

1975

The press took notice. *The National Observer* first wrote an article and *Tennis Magazine* followed.

1976

The first world tournament was held in Washington.



2003

39 places to play in North America, including three Canadian provinces, are listed on the Pickleball Stuff website.

2009

The Pickleball Canada Organization was created.

2023

Bill Gates plays, as do George Clooney and Ellen Degeneres. Pickleball was featured on an episode of *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*.

