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COMMENT

Some see pickleball as a threat to tennis, but it is also an opportunity

Pickleball fits into the way that the world has become in terms of shorter, sharper activity to capture people's attention



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Pickleball is growing in popularity in the United States | CREDIT: Getty Images/Bruce Yeung

Pickleball may not be massively popular in the UK yet but, if it's embraced in the right way, it could be really good for tennis.

In the United States where it is the fastest growing sport with around five million players, some are viewing pickleball as a threat to tennis courts and to tennis. I, on the other hand, see it as a fun, accessible activity for all generations and a great way into or out of tennis.

The best way to describe it is a mash-up of tennis, badminton and ping pong but even a newbie to racquet sports can get to grips with pickleball easily and quickly. It's played over a net on a badminton size court with giant table tennis type bats and a hard, perforated plastic ball - so it feels like a game, rather than a sport, when you first start and has an immediate fun feel to it. The smaller court and the fact that it's mainly doubles means that the ball is almost always within touching distance. Compare that to starting out in tennis, where it can take ages to get into a game because you have to acquire so many coordination and control skills first.

The first time I played was four years ago. I was at a coaching conference in South Carolina, and was taken to a pickleball club. I had no idea what pickleball was but

here was this facility with 16 courts and a clubhouse – no tennis, just pickleball – and at two o’clock in the afternoon every court was full.

Seeing Kim Clijsters and Tom Brady investing in teams now, and millions playing it, you know it’s captured the imagination in America. I’m not surprised by how popular it is. It can be a sport that appeals to young and old.

For older tennis players, it can also be a really beneficial sport. If you’ve played tennis all your life and get to the stage where the court is just too big for you, you will be able to manage pickleball physically because of the court being much smaller. It’s so great to be able to transfer your skills into something like pickleball.



Pickleball is played on a smaller court than tennis CREDIT: Andrew Crowley for The Telegraph

I don’t play a lot of tennis anymore, but I would play pickleball or padel tennis before I play tennis now. The court is smaller, and therefore it’s more doable, and it’s almost more sociable, because it’s predominantly doubles and you’re very close to your partner all the time, so you’re talking to each other.

If I’m looking at Scotland, which has terrible weather and hardly any indoor tennis facilities, I can see pickleball as something that could really take off. It can be taught in schools and sports centres, which all have badminton courts of a very similar size, and keep up those tennis skills during the harsh winter months. That could arguably apply to much of the UK.

During a clinic I ran recently, we introduced some very good junior tennis players to pickleball. They had so much fun with it. What I noticed was how good pickleball was in terms of bringing a friendship element, playing in such close proximity to your partner and your opponents, where tennis is usually so individual. It helped their communication skills massively.

It also forced them to be clever about their tactics, by dinking to opponents' feet, lobbing and volleying a lot. In grass-court tennis, we used to say when you return the serve, you had to chip and charge the net and that's exactly what you get in pickleball. If you're teaching people how to play tennis, putting in an abbreviated version of that net-play in a fun format actually encourages them to be brave and come to the net. The space is so much smaller that you're not going to win with power, you've got to be smart.

And yet, in the US, there's legal wrangling and major objections from some who fear their clubs are evolving to pickleball and limiting space for tennis. One of the things that creates the biggest objection from tennis players to pickleball courts is the noise. If you play tennis beside pickleball courts, the 'pa-pa-pa' of the hard ball on the hard court apparently annoys some players.

But, from a business perspective, having more pickleball facilities within clubs makes sense. The space of one tennis court can fit four pickleball courts so will drive more income. If there's a demand for it among your membership, you would adapt courts to facilitate that.

Tennis is a complex sport, on a big size of court and therefore from a business and social perspective I can see the advantage of investing in having pickleball as an additional activity at your club. I think the days of the single sport club are really coming to an end.

There probably is a danger that pickleball will start to encroach on a lot of tennis court spaces, but they can also work in harmony. At Andy's hotel we tried to introduce pickleball by measuring and putting frog tape down on the tennis courts. The uptake was great, from people from all ages, shapes, sizes and stages: everybody could join in. That's the beauty of it. The other thing about pickleball is that I think it fits into the way that the world has become in terms of shorter, sharper activity to capture people's attention.

It sounds to me like tennis is going to have to work harder than it's ever worked before, to retain and continue to grow its numbers. Pickleball is great fun and a good run around, so I can see the dangers it poses for tennis. But my belief is that this is something that could really bring people into or keep people in a tennis environment.