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## Inside pickleball: The sports craze backed by Tom Brady and LeBron James

Story by Molly McElwee • Yesterday 6:00 AM



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What do Tom Brady, Kim Clijsters, Nick Kyrgios, Naomi Osaka and LeBron James all have in common? They are all putting their weight and money behind a strange-sounding sport that [few this side of the Atlantic have even heard of.](#)



Pickleball, described by some as a hybrid version of tennis, table tennis and badminton, was created in 1965 but has taken America by storm in recent years to the tune of five million active players. Utter the word in a British sports newsroom, though, and most editors will reply with: "You want to write about what?"

But if it is good enough for that esteemed group of athletes to invest in then surely there must be something to this bizarre racquet sport?

It is how I find myself at a leisure centre in Battersea, setting up a small-sized tennis net across an indoor badminton court and holding an over-sized table tennis paddle in my hand. That initial confusing combination was only further compounded by a whole lexicon of new jargon thrown my way by my patient Pickleball London teachers.

Dinking, I learn, refers to short drop shots. Stacking is a tactical doubles play to help maximise left-handed players' advantage. The 'kitchen' is the front section of the court. So far, so bemused. Yet as unfamiliar as the plastic, perforated, hollow ball feels and how odd the small, solid paddle seems, the game is as accessible as any I have ever played. Within 10

minutes, I can hold a rally and within half an hour hitting winners is not too ambitious (especially if your hitting partners are as generous as mine).



The speed of the game is slower than tennis, which helps a novice like me, but in theory, pickleball should appeal to tennis purists too. It is mainly played in the serve and volley style, with rallies mostly contested at the net (or in the kitchen). For those open to it, it might feel like a welcome nostalgic revisiting of the tennis of yesteryear, which was wiped out by the power baseline game favoured by players of the last two decades. But to other tennis stalwarts, the sport is simply a threat.

Google searches for 'pickleball' have risen 219 per cent in the United States over the past five years, according to analysis by pickleball paddle providers Selkirk. The estimated five million active players across America is also only expected to rise with the likes of Brady increasing the sport's platform. One Telegraph Sport colleague was recently in Nashville and found a local paper's sports section had dedicated a full spread to pickleball coverage.

This rise has sparked a war with tennis in some corners of the US, from fighting over public courts to feuds within private tennis clubs, whose members oppose their tennis courts being converted into pickleball courts.

One of the benefits of pickleball is that four courts can fit within the size of one tennis court, so the same real estate can have so many more people playing on it. It is a factor that savvy club owners are clocking on to – but the purists are less impressed.

"I say if pickleball is that popular let them build their own courts," 59-times major champion Martina Navratilova tweeted recently. Former Australian doubles player Rennae Stubbs concurred, saying she would "rather watch paint dry" than watch pickleball, which sparked a terse spat with Kyrgios online. He, like Clijsters, Osaka and former American tennis player James Blake, are all owners of Major League Pickleball teams.



The 2022 Margaritaville USA Pickleball Nationals Championships, held at Indian Wells Tennis Garden - GETTY IMAGES/BRUCE YEUNG© Provided by The Telegraph

The sport only arrived in the UK in the last 15 years or so, and is not even close to the levels seen in the US, with only 7,000 active players. PickleballEngland – established in 2019 – has reported a 60 per cent year-to-date increase in membership for 2022, has 270 registered playing venues and the ambition is to reach 25,000 members by 2025.

PickleballEngland CEO Karen Mitchell only discovered the sport herself once she was retired. The fact it rewards precision as much as power, and is mostly played on a much smaller court, means it appeals to young and old. "I was at a session on Saturday, and the youngest player was 18, the oldest 78. They all play together, so as long as you balance up teams, it's great."



Molly McElwee tries out pickleball - Geoff Pugh/Telegraph© Provided by The Telegraph

Top British player Thaddea Lock is a tennis convert. She hit a career-high 947 in the ITF rankings and was wheelchair tennis world No 1 Alfie Hewett's hitting partner, but she discovered pickleball while visiting friends in Wichita, Kansas four years ago. After spending five months bed-bound by glandular fever soon after, it was pickleball – which requires far less running than tennis – that helped her energy-sapped body back onto a court, and she has never looked back. Her full-time job remains in tennis, as an operations coordinator at Wimbledon, and she thinks the two can live in harmony.

"People are so quick to pit tennis, padel and pickleball against each other; I think there's space for all," Lock, 35, says. "With pickleball though you can draw the court on any concrete surface. Tennis is a much more cliquey, individual sport. Pickleball's selling point is the social side and inclusiveness. You automatically get a much different environment to a tennis one as there are no barriers to friendships across all ages."

This year Lock won national titles in singles, doubles and mixed doubles, and (though a ranking system is not yet universally established across the sport) is considered a top-five competitor across Europe. Her entire career is self-funded, with prize money at European events barely covering travel costs, but that could well change in time.

PickleballEngland recently met the criteria to be recognised by Sport England and has started the pre-application process, which could open it up to National Lottery funding to push it on to the next level too. Mitchell says changing the perceptions of tennis stalwarts – as well as accessing their courts – will be key to its growth in the UK.

"For those tennis players who haven't played, I think they are a little bit snooty about it," she says. "They don't see it as a proper game. However, it probably wouldn't surprise you if I told you that probably half of the people that play Pickleball either used to play tennis or still play tennis."

"We're really going to benefit from the fact pickleball is getting a lot of airtime in the US. It's helping us leapfrog. It won't take us the time it's taken the US to get to five million active players. There are 22,000 badminton courts in the UK and if we run out of those, there are 24,000 tennis courts where we could ask to put dual lines on. There's no ceiling for us, but finding a way to work with tennis is going to be the trick."