



# PICKLEBALL:

The Fastest Growing Sport in the Country



Story and photos by Donna Bush

Most everyone has heard of this “new” sport sweeping the country, maybe even the world. Where did it come from? First of all, it is not new by any stretch of the imagination! Pickleball was founded in 1965 on Bainbridge Island, Washington by two dads, Bill Bell and Joel Pritchard, in an attempt to keep their bored kids occupied during their summer vacation. They took some old ping pong paddles, a plastic ball (think wiffle ball), and an old badminton court with a net and made up a game that the entire family, regardless of age or ability could play. Barney McCallum, another resident of the island, lent a hand at making plywood paddles with his bandsaw, which quickly turned into an after-work activity for the increasing number of players on the island. This eventually led to a commercial paddle-making business, Pickle-ball, Inc!

Currently, this oddly named game is

known as the fastest growing sport in America, with an estimated 5 million US players! One of their claims-to-fame is that anyone can learn the game and start having fun in under one hour!

Every state in the U.S. and all Canadian provinces now have some kind of pickleball venue, as well as 63 countries! The fun game has popped up in subdivision cul-de-sacs, homeowner’s driveways, unused tennis courts, public gymnasiums, health clubs, retirement communities, cruise ships and more.

Not only is there pickleball, but there’s Pink Pickleball this month to support Breast Cancer Awareness. There’s a variety of events going on: Dink for Pink, Pickled Pink, Paddle with a Purpose, Pickle Me Pink, and Picklin’ for a Cure.

So, how did the game get its name? There are two versions floating around. The first is that it was named after the

family cocker spaniel, Pickles, who was said to chase the ball and run off with it in his mouth. While this is an enduring story of a beloved pet, most pickleball websites dispute it based on the account of the game’s creation by Joan Pritchard, Joel’s wife. She grew up in Marietta, Ohio and loved watching the Marietta College rowing crew races. After the conclusion of the main regatta, the non-starters would compete in a just-for-fun contest known as a “pickle-boat race.” As told by her son, “They sort of threw the leftover non-starter oarsmen into these particular pickle boats. She thought pickleball sort of threw bits of other games into the mix (badminton, tennis, ping pong); and decided that ‘Pickle Ball’ was an appropriate name.”

The game is easy and affordable to learn, as all you need is some basic gear to get started. If you become addicted then you can always upgrade to better

equipment. To begin playing, you just need a paddle, a ball, appropriate attire and a court to play on. Don't think you need to pay expensive court fees either. Most communities have lots of free courts available. Here in Slidell, there are 3 free indoor courts in the gym at John Slidell Park. Cross-Gates Family Fitness health club on Military Road in Slidell offers pickleball for a fee (either membership or a guest fee) on one outside court and from 2-4 indoor courts in the gymnasium. City of Slidell Parks and Recreation plans to repurpose a baseball field at Fritchie Park to house pickleball courts in the near future.

How did the game end up in Louisiana? Tom Burkhart stumbled across a pickleball set when he was a physical education teacher at Baker Middle School approximately 40 years ago. The faculty decided to give the game a try and loved it. They added it to their curriculum and the students were just as smitten. Tom told me that he single-handedly played the mixed doubles winners and if they were able to beat him, they would receive an 'A' for the semester. He said, "I never had to give an A!" Tom went on to become the Regional Director for the USA Pickleball Association over a 6-state area – Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Mississippi and Tennessee. He traveled all six of these states, promoting the game. Judging by the number of players, he was quite successful.

Pickleball paddles are larger than

ping pong and smaller than tennis rackets. They can run the gamut in price depending on the material and quality. I personally recommend playing the game a bit before spending a ton of money on the sport. All the players I've met are willing to let you try out their paddle before you decide what feels most comfortable for you.

Pickleball balls are still similar to wiffle balls. They are lightweight with holes in them. There's a difference between indoor and outdoor balls. Indoor balls are lighter, airier and made of softer plastic with 26 larger holes. While they are easier to play with indoors, they cannot hold up to windy conditions in an outdoor game. This is why outdoor balls are heavier and have 40 smaller holes.

You don't need any fancy apparel; comfortable athletic clothes with good court shoes are perfect.

Basic rules of pickleball are a little tricky to grasp when you first start playing. My best advice is to play often with more experienced players; who, in my opinion, are very tolerant of newbies and willing to teach you the trickiest parts of the game.

Similar to tennis, the game can be played as singles or doubles, with doubles being the most popular. It is played on a badminton size court, 20' x 44', with a 7-foot no-volley zone on each side of the net. The ball is served diagonally, starting with the right-hand service square. Points are only scored by the serving team.

## PICKLEBALL TERMINOLOGY

**Dink** – A soft shot that arcs over the net and falls into the opposing non-volley zone (NVZ).

**Drop Shot** – a soft shot hit off a bounce from deep in the court and landing in the opposing NVZ.

**Fault** – Any action that stops play because of a rule violation.

**Groundstroke** – A ball hit after a bounce.

**Kitchen** – Pickleball slang for non-volley zone (NVZ).

**Let** – When the ball touches the net on a serve and lands in the receiver's proper service court. Like tennis, these are replayed.

**Lob** – a lofted shot that sends the ball high overhead and deep.

**Overhead smash** – a hard overhead shot directed downward into the opposing court, usually as a return from an opposing lob, high return or high bounce. Also known as a Yum-yum!

**Paddle** – the equivalent of a racket in tennis. Can be made of wood, composite or graphite.

**Pickled** – the equivalent of getting "skunked" in other sports, scoring zero points in the entire game. If you lose 11-0, you've been 'pickled.'

**Pickler** – A pickleball addict.

**Rally** – Continuous play that occurs from the time the ball is served until play ends in a fault.

**Ready Position** – Ideal position to receive the ball for return. Paddle is out in front of the player's body at chest height, with a neutral grip prepared for either forehand or backhand. Weight is evenly balanced with the knees bent.

**Side Out** – when service passes to the receiving team.

**The Party's at the Kitchen** – advice to get to the NVZ after your 3rd shot.

**Third Shot Drop** – The shot taken after your return of serve and meant to land softly in the opponent's kitchen or NVZ.

**Volley** – A ball hit in the air before it bounces.

**Yips** – When a player cannot successfully execute a skill they have performed hundreds of times before without error.

**Yum-Yum** – Overhead smash (see above).



The winner is the first team to score 11 points, leading by 2. For more in-depth details of the game, Google “pickleball rules.”

Can you really learn the game and start having fun in an hour or less? Yes! I attended my first Meet the Coach session a few months ago. The coach and helpers handed each of us a paddle with instructions on the proper way to hold it and we began hitting the ball back and forth over the net. We started fairly close to the net, just outside the no-volley zone. I learned that this was known as dinking, and it is incredibly fun! Little by little, I grasped some of the finer points of the sport – how to serve, how to keep score, proper stance, and much, much more. All the players were exceptionally friendly, helpful and encouraging. Some of my big take-aways were: play often, participate in beginner drills, observe more experienced players and watch how they approach the game. There’s a lot of strategy involved in playing. Think chess, not checkers. The more I learned, the more addicted I got. I’ve subscribed to probably a dozen pickleball newsletters and YouTube channels! I’m excited to say, I’ve moved up to intermediate drills!

Pickleball is a great way to stay active for any age or activity level. I’ve met and played with 75, 78 and 80-year old pickleball enthusiasts and read about 90-year old winning players. Lest you think the game is only for older adults, I recently heard of an 8th grader who learned of the sport from his grandmother and went on to win a national championship at the age of 14, competing in the 19-34 age group! Even before the win, Head athletic gear reached out to offer him a sponsorship. Pickleball tournaments now include Next Gens – starting at age 6. Think about it - they don’t have a big court to cover and are quick and agile.

While pickleball attracts both male and female, young and old, it also attracts a whole new array of female entrepreneurs! First up is Melissa McCurley, Founder of PickleballTournaments.com who was employed at American Express as Director of Data and Voice. Her mom invited her to play in a pickleball tournament as her partner. Knowing she was in IT, one of the players asked her to look at the system they were using to run tournaments. She did and, three months later, purchased the company, which today is the leading pickleball tournament management software company.

Stacie Townsend was a partner at a full-service law firm in Florida where she specialized in business law. She had played softball throughout college, then professionally and internationally. Her parents invited her to play pickleball. She was paired with an older man, Charlie, who had a wicked spin and ability to place the ball between their opponents. Thanks to her softball athleticism, Stacie was quick on the court and able to keep the ball in play. They

won their first game and Stacie learned that Charlie was 90 years young! From that first win where she fell in love with the sport, she went on to create The Pickler, whose mission is “to promote the sport of pickleball and inspire others to play pickleball.” They have a free newsletter, blogs and podcasts offering tips on the game and also sell pickler gear. The list of females goes on and on - from app developers, media and content developers, several apparel and gear lines, and an author of “Pickleball for All.”

I spent some time with Pickleball Coach and Ambassador, Terri Lamperez, who has been playing the game for 11 years and coaching for 3. One day, after finishing a tennis game, she heard this noise coming from the gym – tap – tap – tap. She opened the door and asked what it was. A player answered “Pickleball” and invited her in to play. She thought it was kind of fun. Tennis friends warned her not to play this new game or it would mess up her tennis skills. Not heeding the warning, Terri began playing once or twice a week and decided she enjoyed it more than tennis, with part of this being the camaraderie of the players. She invited her tennis partner to try it and they played their first pickleball tournament about 10 years ago.

I asked Terri what she loved about the game. “Pickleball gives me a reason to wake up every morning and to spread a little joy for somebody else. This game is open to everyone. Nobody is left out - regardless of age or skillset. The other thing I love is introducing the game to the next generation. Pickleball is a game that grandparents can play with their grandchildren, unlike baseball or soccer.” Terri also shared that the pickleball community is a family, whether you are playing at John Slidell Park, Crossgates, Picayune, North Carolina, Florida or your next cruise ship! I can attest to this fact. When my husband was working in Japan with Typhoon Hinnamnor approaching his location, everyone in my pickleball family offered concern, support and prayers.

Having always coached sports - whether it was tennis, softball, soccer or swimming - it was only natural that Terri would bring her passion and love of the game to coaching. “My favorite thing is to see the person no one expected to do something get it right. The players who inspire me are the ones nobody else wants to play with.”

Soon, Terri will wear a new hat as she becomes an ambassador for Legacy, a new company making pickleball paddles with a vision of making the sport available to everyone, not just the big name winners. Their goal is to celebrate the everyday hero, whether that is a wheelchair or amputee pickleball player, a mid-60's mom who was never good at sports, an inner-city youth, or your 85-year old neighbor who picked up a paddle for the first time.

There's even a version of pickleball that can be played at the beach or on a lawn, known as Sandy Pickle. Since the ball won't bounce on sand or grass, the game takes

on a few different characteristics. The court is smaller and the net is higher. It's a volley-only game. One pass or "bump" is allowed by your partner, similar to volleyball. Serving is more of a freestyle type and scoring is different. Check out [sandypickle.com](http://sandypickle.com) for more information.

The most unique place I've heard of pickleball was the New York Stock Exchange board room when Major League Pickleball (MLP) hosted a pickleball expedition while onsite to ring the opening bell! Yes, there are pickleball leagues and teams! In fact, our own former Saints quarterback, Drew Brees, is part owner of the MLP Austin, TX Mad Drops. He's been playing the game himself for about 1-1/2 years. While the sport is not included in the Olympics, yet, there's a good chance it will be added to either the Paris 2024 or Los Angeles 2028 games.

Pickleball isn't just a sport anymore, it's now a play written by Jeff Daniels that will make its debut in September at the regional theater, Purple Rose, in Chelsea, Michigan. If you haven't

already guessed it, it will be a comedy poking fun at the fastest growing sport in the nation. Part of the fuel for his writing has come from his wife of 42 years infatuation with the sport.

This amazingly fast-growing sport is enjoyed by thousands of players in our vicinity with 70-90% playing for the fun and camaraderie of it. But it is also a huge boom to the economy of the areas with the drive and insight to embrace pickleball. Terri shared that a Philadelphia YMCA built 12 courts,

hoping to attract 300 new members. They ended up with 1400 new members! Not only this, but hotels, restaurants and shops spring up around pickleball

complexes to support the crowds flocking there for tournaments or just a fun game.

To learn more about the sport, sign up for pickleball newsletters, check out pickleball YouTube videos or join the Northshore Pickleball Facebook page.

No matter your age or your athletic ability, come give pickleball a try. Who knows? You might just fall in love with it like I did!



## UPCOMING PICKLEBALL EVENTS

**October 8th & 9th**  
**Pelican Park Pickled Pink Pickleball Tournament**  
to support Breast Cancer Awareness

**October 14th - 16th**  
**Louisiana Senior Games**  
in Baker, LA includes Pickleball

**October 22nd**  
**Cross-Gates Pink Pickleball Fundraiser**  
for Breast Cancer Awareness