

Understanding the Fundamental Reasons for the Growth of Pickleball

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ABSTRACT

It's no secret that Pickleball as a sport has been rapidly increasing in popularity. Sometimes called "mini tennis", this newer sport, incorporating the use of a wiffle ball and smaller plastic paddles, has reached record numbers in 2022 with participation growing 85.7% since 2021. Pickleball has surpassed sports such as soccer, tennis, and even basketball in the US. This paper seeks to analyze the reasons behind this rapid growth, as pickleball remains the fastest-growing sport in America for the fifth consecutive year. The results of this analysis conclude that the rapid rise in Pickleball is due to three main reasons: the sharp increase in pickleball participation due to the Covid Pandemic, where sports involving social distancing were more sought-out; the fact that people see Pickleball as less competitive and therefore more inclusive and enjoyable; and because the risk-benefit ratio works in favor for most recreational departments.

Introduction

Invented by Joel Pritchard, Bill Bell, and Barney McCallum, Pickleball was created to bring families together for some summertime fun in 1965. Pickleball then spread rapidly, with the first corporation formed in 1972 to protect the rising sport¹. The sport is a cross between badminton, ping pong, and tennis, however, the rackets are smaller, more like larger table tennis paddles, while a perforated wiffle ball is used to play. Pickleball itself is played much like tennis, with some slight differences easy for learners to pick up. Doubles is the most common pickleball format², with two players on each side allowing for a more dynamic gameplay with more interaction and social bonding between players. In this article, it's important to note that popularity refers to the total participation among people in that particular sport. For example, football might be the most viewed sport in the US, but it's far from the sport with the most participation, as seen in Figure 1. Before analyzing the reasons for Pickleball's unusual growth, it must be established that this sport has seen tremendous growth in the past few years.

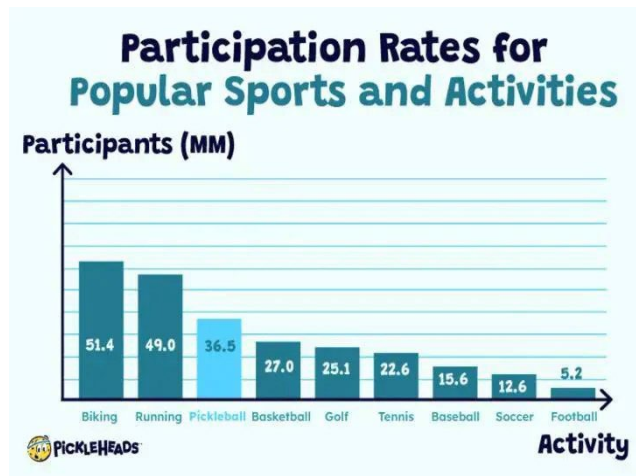


Figure 1. Participation Rates for Popular Sports and Activities

Source: SFIA Single Sport Participation Report on Pickleball

Remaining the fastest-growing sport in America for the fifth consecutive year³, Pickleball has surpassed all other common sports such as soccer, baseball, tennis, basketball, and football in participation rates, trailing only biking and running. The fact that in 2010 pickleball would not have even been in the graph shown in Figure 1 demonstrates the almost exponential rise in Pickleball participation in the twenty-first century⁴.

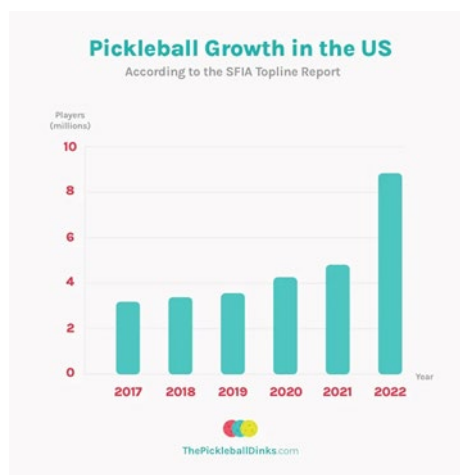


Figure 2. Pickleball Growth in the US. Source: SFIA Single Sport Participation Report on Pickleball

The Impact of Covid 19

Now that Pickleball has been established as a sport that has seen tremendous growth over the past few years, as seen in Figure 2, the question remains to be answered, why? Pickleball in itself incorporates many aspects that make the sport popular amongst participants of all ages, such as its longevity, less emphasis on competition, and its ease for recreation departments to implement⁵, but a rather sizable contribution to Pickleball’s stunning rise is the

environmental shift as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. Notice in Figure 2 how during the beginning of lockdown in 2020, participation seemed to increase at a faster rate than before.

The lockdown that resulted from the pandemic caused many to suffer from depression and anxiety⁶, and numerous studies have shown that sports and physical activity can provide various social and mental benefits⁷. As a result, Pickleball skyrocketed as a leisure sport by almost 40% from 2019 to 2021, for it provided the necessary daily activity⁸ while maintaining proper social distancing. USA Pickleball representative Laura Gainer puts it plainly, “Compared to other sports where you have a lot of contact with each other, in pickleball you're very rarely getting close to each other”.⁹ It's important to note that participation in other sports involving social distancing, such as tennis also increased during the Pandemic¹⁰.

Longevity and the Benefits of Playing Pickleball

While the pandemic may have spread pickleball's popularity, one of the inherent reasons why so many people turned to this sport was because of its longevity. Longevity in sports can be defined as an athlete's ability to sustain participation in a particular sport¹¹. Think of football, as the average age of a football player is 26. A person would hardly expect to see the elderly demolish each other in a game of tackle football. There's a clear prime, and past that prime, it's difficult to enjoy the sport as before, unlike pickleball, in which the average age of participation is 35 years.

Ages	Total	Core	Casual
6-17	21.2%	14.2%	23.9%
18-34	28.8%	16.8%	33.5%
35-54	20.4%	17%	21.8%
55-64	12%	19.2%	9.2%
65+	17.6%	32.7%	11.6%

Figure 3. Pickleball Demographics - Players by Age

Source: SFIA Single Sport Participation Report on Pickleball

In Figure 3, core players refer to participants who enjoy the sport more than 8 times a year, while casual refers to players who still play, but less often. Consider how the total percentages are distributed across all five age groups with the amount of players ages six to seventeen not too dissimilar to the amount of players ages 65 and up. Because of this inclusivity, pickleballs allow for a more diverse array of players of all different ages. Similar to tennis, a 16-year-old could walk onto a court and play with someone 50 years older than them. This kind of diversity isn't seen in many mainstream sports, where players' primes are usually between 20 and 30 years old. In Figure 1, the top sports with the highest participation rates don't necessarily have an age at which that sport no longer becomes viable. It's common to see a 70-year-old biking on the street, while it's rare to see someone the same age out playing tackle football. The

constant comparisons between pickleball and football are being made to show that just because a sport is highly viewed doesn't mean that it's highly played.

The reason pickleball doesn't seem to have a prime age range is because as a sport it's not difficult to learn. While a player has to be coordinated and physically healthy to play, "it doesn't take too much out of your body", Arthur Kreiswirth remarks, an 80-year-old pickleball player¹². Pickleball generally involves short sprints back and forth around the court, while the ball strikes aren't as impactful as are in Tennis. Because of this, Pickleball provides many health benefits, as all sports involving physical activity do. In a 2016 study published in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, 12 middle-aged players burned 40% more calories during a 30-minute pickleball game than during 30 minutes of walking, increasing their heart rates to within the moderate-intensity exercise zone. A small six-week study of 15 people ages 40 to 85 who played an hour of pickleball three days a week showed improvements in cholesterol, blood pressure, and cardiorespiratory fitness¹².

This highlights another factor that pickleball and many other leisure sports include that makes them more attractive to a variety of ages: The level of effort is adjustable. People can play with varying levels of competition, whether it's a casual match or something more competitive. The workout a player will get depends on the level of competition decided before the match. A less competitive and more casual pickleball match will result in a mild exercise similar to a light jog, whereas a more competitive match can put more strain on the body. This ability to vary the level of effort allows more ages to play leisure activities like pickleball, running, and biking more than other sports¹³. For example, while it is possible to play football with less or more effort, it's difficult to casually tackle an opponent the way it's possible to casually hit a ball, or casually jog a mile. In Figure 3, the differences between casual vs core players suggest that players enjoy pickleball at a variety of different exercise levels.

Understanding Pickleball as a Leisure Sport

It's a widely held belief that sports are a zero-sum game. This term comes from the fact that when one side wins, the other side loses, hence the net gain is zero¹⁴. In multiple studies, around 75% of winners felt feelings of joy or satisfaction upon winning, while a greater percentage of losers felt feelings of anger or disappointment upon losing¹⁴. This mixes with the American emphasis on exceptionalism and success, with ex-redskins coach George Allen putting it perfectly: "The winner is the only individual who is truly alive. I've said this to our ball club: 'Every time you win, you're reborn; when you lose, you die a little.'" (Tutko and Bruns 1976, 5). Many athletes have embraced a "win at all costs" mentality, and this creates toxic and resentful environments instead of embracing sociality and fun. This unnatural obsession with sports can dissuade many up-and-coming athletes from even trying out a new sport¹⁴.

That's where leisure sports come in, and while pickleball may not be as exciting to watch as a college football game, one of the reasons it's so popular is the decreased emphasis on winning. Leisure sports are sports that are played for reasons such as relaxation, enjoyment, and personal growth¹⁵, and while there are professional pickleball leagues that emphasize competition and success, the majority of pickleball is played more leisurely. As stated before, like other leisure sports like biking and running, pickleball can be played at many different levels, the most common of which is recreationally¹⁶. When looking at Figure 3, the majority of players play recreationally. Very few of the older players in the core category play competitively. The bedrock principle of "open play" requires many players to show up and compete with whoever else is present. When playing, it doesn't matter if your opponent is older, younger, left, right, male or female. All that matters is working together to play the best that both teams can achieve, leading to less emphasis on crushing the opponent rather than pushing the limit of what you as a player can do. Similar to biking, running, swimming, or any other leisure activity, personal growth is emphasized rather than success or loss¹⁶.

Easy Integration by Recreation Centers

Pickleball makes it easy and fun for new learners to enter and prolong their enjoyment within the sport, however, its relatively small size coupled with its versatility allows country clubs and recreation centers to easily transition to this growing trend. A normal pickleball court is 20 ft by 44 ft, meaning that approximately four pickleball courts can fit on a tennis court¹⁷. As doubles is the most common format, this means that sixteen players can technically play in a space the size of a tennis court. This space conservation far outweighs many other popular competitive and leisure sports. Running requires a large track, biking calls for a trail, often miles long, and golf, football, soccer, and basketball are all larger fields with a lower concentration of players per square meter. When choosing between different sports fields to install, pickleball remains one of the cheapest and most versatile⁵.

Adding on to this idea of versatility, pickleball truly is a versatile sport. It transcends normal sporting boundaries such as the court surface, with the variation being played on basketball, multi-purpose courts, driveways, streets, sidewalks, and any other hard surface¹⁸. Of course tennis courts are the ideal court, but this ability to surpass the natural boundaries of sporting surfaces allows recreation centers to repurpose old or unpopular courts into fresh and new pickleball ones¹⁸. There's ample evidence of this, as already many sporting centers are converting to pickleball. In Southern California, the Santa Monica Tennis Center invested 250,000 in a new pickleball facility¹⁹. Just outside of Sarasota, Florida, real estate developers have already invested \$180 million into The Pickleball Club, a 15-court facility expected to have over 600 members¹⁹.

Conclusion

Since its conception more than 50 years ago, pickleball has turned from a backyard makeshift activity to a sport with multiple professional leagues. Very few other sports, leisure or not, have seen this kind of success within American society, as Pickleball already has major brand sponsors, with Familiar names like Holland America,

Anheuser-Busch, Skechers, and Carvana all signing recent pickleball deals¹⁹. There are many reasons why Pickleball has grown the way it has. Environmental factors that resulted from the Covid lockdown presented pickleball as a cheap, fun way to exercise while also maintaining social distancing. Social factors like leisureness and different levels of play allow for both casual and competitive participants, while the ease of play allows for the integration of many different ages. Finally, the size and variability allow recreation centers to easily implement pickleball courts on any surface while minimizing the space required.

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