Hello! In years gone by a game of golf, a bike ride or a dog walk might have topped the list of potential Sunday activities. But, today, hundreds of thousands of people across America are increasingly turning to pickleball, the racket sport that's still taking America by storm.

Boredom, the mother of invention

Tracing its roots all the way back to 1965 when it was invented by a group of 3 dads who couldn’t find a shuttlecock to play badminton on a summer’s day, pickleball has had a slow-then-fast-then-really-fast rise in America. On that day in Washington nearly 60 years ago, the trio improvised with what they had: table tennis paddles, a plastic ball, and a badminton court — a combination that, once the net was lowered a few feet, proved an entertaining and accessible game to a variety of ages and abilities.

From those humble beginnings, it took the sport decades to really capture people’s interest, spreading organically across America, eventually being played in every state by 1990. But, cut to the present day, and pickleball has taken the US by storm: according to the Sport & Fitness
Industry Association, 8.9 million players played the sport in 2022, up more than 80% on the prior year, making it the fastest growing sport in America.

Making A Racket: Millions Of Americans Now Play Pickleball

Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association via ThePickleballDinks & Statista
Serving everyone

Arguably the main driver of pickleball’s popularity boom is its low-commitment versatility. Thanks to its perforated ball — which slows the game down — and smaller court, pickleball demands less raw athletic ability than many other sports, giving it a broad appeal, with many kids and seniors picking up the game.

In 2021, almost 73% of all record pickleball participants were ‘casual’ players who played fewer than 7x per year. In that same year, roughly 29% of pickleball players were aged 18-34 years old, while 21% were kids, ~20% were 35-54, and a whopping ~18% were 65+ — an astonishingly even demographic split for an increasingly mainstream sport. Out of those who play the most frequently, the older demographic was the dominant force, accounting for nearly one-third of that “core” player group.
Space invaders

Played on a badminton-size court, pickleball can be played indoors or outdoors, standing up or in wheelchairs, and it’s relatively space-efficient. In fact — much to the chagrin of die-hard tennis players everywhere (including Chartr’s editor) — you can nearly squeeze playing space
for 4 pickleball courts in the same area needed for 1 tennis court.

To meet the booming demand, the SFIA estimates that a further 25,000 pickleball courts — equating to a $900m infrastructure investment — are needed to keep up with demand, on top of the ~44,000 courts that are estimated to already exist nationwide.

Check the rules

As the sport continues to pick up momentum at both a grassroots and professional level (yes, there are a lot of pro pickleball tournaments now), people are increasingly flocking to the first online port of call when you want a quick summary of something you’d never heard of until recently: Wikipedia.
It wasn’t until the Covid era when the paddle sport really ratcheted up in earnest. Since then, as pickleball’s grown into a bonafide passion for millions of people — rather than a faddy pandemic pastime (looking at you, breadmaking and online yoga) — page views on the sport’s Wikipedia page have soared, as curious players look up the rules, the sport’s history and why on Earth it’s called pickleball (nothing to do with pickles and everything to do with…
rowing). Hits to the Wikipedia page even surpassed those of tennis in 2020, according to data from Pageviews.

Brokeback

Although the game can be enjoyed by all ages, pickleball is not without its risks. As its popularity has skyrocketed, so too have pickleball-related injuries: the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons recently reported that bone fractures resulting from pickleball have increased 90x over the last 20 years, the majority of which resulted from falls in the 60-69 age group.

That may put a strain on doctors in Utah, Arizona, Minnesota and Florida, where data from Google Trends reveals search interest in pickleball has been the highest over the past 12 months.
It’s fair to say that the Super Bowl isn’t under threat as the jewel in corporate America’s sporting crown, but pickleball is increasingly big business. Manufacturers of pickleball equipment are selling hundreds of millions of dollars worth of paddles, shoes and apparel every
year, while developers are eyeing up unused retail space, spending millions to convert them into prestige pickleball playing spaces around the country.

As the pro scene begins to take off, a battle for pickle supremacy has been quietly taking place between rival leagues. Last September two of the biggest — Major League Pickleball and the PPA Tour — announced a merger, with private equity investors injecting $50m into the combined venture.

Although prize funds at most pro events remain relatively small, top players can reportedly make 7 figures from sponsorship deals, prize money and appearance fees.

Love it or hate it, we haven’t had peak pickleball yet.

Thanks for stopping by! See you tomorrow or on the court.
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