Level: B2: Upper Intermediate

Skill: Reading



Pickleball

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'Could be the next big thing': how pickleball is courting a new generation of players

""Don't be put off by the silly name," says Pam Fleming to a loud chorus of pop-pop-pop as paddles strike a plastic ball back and forth. "This game could really be the next big thing here."

The game is pickleball. It was created in the US in 1965 and its name was a play on "pickleboat" – where left over rowers who did not make the official teams would row together – to represent the game's hodgepodge of ping pong, tennis and badminton.

It has been making its way onto tennis courts across Australia, with anecdotal claims it is now the fastest-growing sport in the country.

There are an estimated 20,000 pickleball players in Australia, with "picklers" at an average age of about 58. But Ron Shell, the chief executive of Australia's National Pickleball League, believes in three years that will grow to at least 1 million and in 10 years it will be an Olympic sport.

Yet there is an obstacle: the need for dedicated pickleball courts, which are about a third the size of a tennis court, with a lower net.

Fleming, who is 52 and based in Sydney, came to pickleball in 2019 after her tennis partner said: "I've found a new sport for us." She says the usual solution is to tape down lines and string nets across existing tennis, netball or basketball courts. However, the sharing means limiting how often players can play.

That is starting to change. In September 2023, the first-ever dedicated pickleball courts in Sydney were unveiled on what used to be a multi-purpose tennis, basketball and netball court.

Some diplomacy is needed for pickleball to become a sport with its own courts. It is a lesson that has been learned from the US, where players are forecast to reach 22 million this year, but there is an ongoing battle.

Pickleball in the US is opposed on two fronts: tennis players unwilling to cede their courts and residents who complain about the noise. So, are the complaining residents of Australia about to find themselves a new enemy? Shell says they are doing their best to avoid it.

Shell thinks the noise is unlikely to be an issue because Australia's sport centres do not tend to be in residential areas like in the US. Also, new types of less noisy rackets are starting to come out.

Shell says they are in discussion with Tennis Australia with a pitch to "work together".

Shell adds that in the US, 40% of tennis courts have been converted to pickleball courts over the past four years because it just makes more commercial sense, and more people actually play pickleball day to day.

A spokesperson for Tennis Australia says it supports the integration of pickleball at existing tennis facilities but only where those courts are being under-utilised.

Investors also realised that there is money to be made. In November, an indoor pickleball centre will open in South Melbourne. Sydney may have a centre next year and, soon after, Brisbane and Perth.

Shell hopes this will make pickleball hip among the young and realise its potential as a cross generational sport.

Pickleball has long been seen as a "retirement village" sport, Shell says. Its initial popularity among older generations is due to its social aspect and accessibility: it's a workout, yet it's easier on the body compared to tennis.

"When I first started, I was just playing with my parents," says Sydneysider Mitch Hargreaves, 25, who won this year's men's singles at the World Pickleball Championships in Bali.

"It's very social, so you can just hang out with family members, with friends. It's really starting to grab the attention of a lot of younger people now, and it's only going to grow."

LIVEWORKSHEETS

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Skill: Reading

Pickleball

Game: True or False

LINK **Write the score here:**



Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity. You might have to change the form of the word.

accessibility anecdotal cede commercial dedicated diplomacy hodgepodge obstacle uptake retirement unveil utilise

1.They don't have evidence to support their idea – it's purely..... .

2. I call this my "everything soup". It's a..... of all the vegetables that I have left in my fridge.

3. My parents are very excited about their..... . They are planning on moving to the coast.

4. The government is investing millions of dollars to improve .....for wheelchair users in public facilities.

5. This channel is..... to environmental and science news.

6. The company is going to .....their new green office building next month.

7. Mexico .....a large area of land to the US in 1848.

8. Sexism is still one of the ..... that female athletes face today.

9. We thought the trip would be popular, but..... has been low.

10. That looks like a private jet, not a .....one.

11. I'm afraid you can't just tell them what you think. This situation requires a great deal of tact and..... .

12. Only hotel guests are allowed to .....the gym and spa facilities.

LIVEWORKSHEETS