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Sage

Pickleball's pervasiveness

This sport is so popular, it's often hard to find a court. Older adults are preserving their mobility by playing, but injuries are still possible and noise complaints persist.

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Pickleball for the win

The sport, which is easy to learn and fun to play while also encouraging physical activity among older adults, is so popular in cities across Canada, it's hard to find courts much of the time.

BY HOLLY LAKE



Jean-Pierre de Beaumont, of Gatineau, Que., started playing pickleball when he retired and is now training for the Pan-Am Games. His paddle was signed by Catherine Parenteau, the Wayne Gretzky of pickleball. He bought it from her after he took lessons from her and cherishes it now, especially as he used it when he won the Canadian championships for his age (50-plus) and level. Photo: Dave Chan



For Jean-Pierre de Beaumont, it was love at first swing. In retirement, while playing darts at his local seniors association, he noticed something called pickleball listed among its programming.

"I knew nothing about this bizarrely named sport," de Beaumont says.

Curious, he headed to a sports centre near his home in Gatineau, Que., and joined games that were short a player. Soon, he was playing eight times a week.

It was a whole new sport for a guy who played badminton four times a week prior to leaving his job at CEGEP Heritage College. When he joined Public Works and the CRTC, from which he retired in 2016, he happened upon this new sport.

"I missed playing. When I discovered pickleball, I fell in love and started playing as often as I could," he says. "I love being stimulated by challenges in my life, to give the best of myself. Pickleball lets me be very physical."

Since he took that first fateful swing, de Beaumont has participated in more than 30 tournaments, including the Canadian Championships, and National Seniors' Games in Pittsburgh last July. It's the largest multi-sport event in the world for seniors.

"It was an extraordinary experience," says de Beaumont, who joined Federal Retirees in 2013. "It was an honour to be there."

Now, his sights are set on the 2024 Pan-American Masters Games.



Rosanne Quan, of Victoria, B.C., tried pickleball at her husband's urging and immediately found it "addictive." She now plays with four different groups five times a week. Photo: Adrian Lam



Rosanne Quan and her husband, Ken, play several times a week and they love it, but they've both had injuries. She lost a tooth and he tore his Achilles tendon. Photo: Adrian Lam

The perils of pickleball

There's a saying that it's all fun and games until someone loses an eye. Or a tooth, it seems. That's what became of Rosanne Quan's chomper while playing pickleball.

"It was such a fluke. The ball hit my mouth and I lost a tooth," the Victoria woman says.

Her husband, however, has fared worse on the court — he tore his Achilles tendon when he first started to play, which took nearly a year to heal.

"It's common," Quan says. "There are a lot of injuries."

A 2019 report in the *Journal of Emergency Medicine* estimated that 19,000 pickleball injuries occur every year in the United States. Of those, 90 per cent affected people over 50. It identified 300 pickleball-related injuries, including calf and ankle strains, Achilles tendon ruptures and plantar fasciitis. Overall, fractures accounted for a third of injuries. Analysts estimate pickleball-related medical costs could reach \$377 million this year south of the border.

Quan thinks part of the reason is that people are gung-ho for the game out of the gate.

"A lot of the seniors who play, they're young at heart," she says. "My husband's 70, he'll dive for any ball he can. I think a lot of us think we're not as old as we are."

But as we age, we don't fall, roll or bounce as well as we once did. Nathan Urquhart, an orthopedic surgeon who specializes in sports medicine, has seen an uptick in injured pickleballers in his Dartmouth office.

"I don't think there's ever been a sport that leads to as many injuries in older adults," he says.

The irony is that among younger players, pickleball is a weight-bearing exercise that enhances bone density. The tricky part with age relates to co-ordination and balance. People are prone to overreaching for the ball, losing their balance and pitching forward.

"When you're younger, you roll out of it a little bit more effectively," Urquhart says. "When you're older, you

put your arm out and you can break it in different locations."

They're known as FOOSH injuries — an acronym for fall on an outstretched hand. Pickleball is reactive and requires moving quickly from side to side and front to back. Glen Bergeron, a professor of kinesiology and an athletic therapist at the University of Winnipeg, says it's the side to side that gets people into trouble.

"We're not actually designed to move sideways," he says. "People may think the skillset is pretty easy, so they go after the ball and get themselves into situations they don't have the agility, balance or quickness to get out of."

Compounding the problem is the fact that a lot of people play in running shoes. They're designed for forward motion, not side to side, so the side support found in a tennis or basketball shoe is missing.

In addition to the side to side, the quick start-stop nature of pickleball can do a number on Achilles tendons, which weaken with age.

Pickle what?

So, what is this strangely named sport? Well, if tennis, badminton and ping pong had a baby, pickleball would be the result. It was invented in 1965, but has become a bit of a craze in recent years. It is, in three words, all the rage.

According to a 2022 survey by Pickleball Canada, one million Canadians are now playing at least once a month, with 45 per cent playing four times or more. It's the fastest-growing sport on the continent, one the USA Pickleball Association calls "highly contagious."

For his part, de Beaumont got the bug so bad, he became an instructor. Inspired by the many pickleball academies he encountered while playing across the United States, he started his own. Since then, he's taught hundreds of people to play, but doesn't charge a fixed amount for lessons. He invites his students to the court and afterwards, if they want to send him money, they can. For him what matters is the satisfaction of sharing the game that has given him so much.

"I have the pleasure of introducing retirees every week to this sport, which is as easy to learn as it is magnificent," de Beaumont says.



It took a year for Jean-Pierre de Beaumont to convince his wife, Chrystianne Pilon, to try pickleball. She, too, fell in love with the sport. Photo: Dave Chan

The good news? Most injuries are preventable

- **Start off slow.** Play once or twice a week and work your way up.
- **Do a proper warmup.** Go for a brisk three to five-minute walk around the court to get your heart pumping and muscles warmed up.
- **Do dynamic stretches that move your body in ways similar to the game.** Include side-to-side movements.
- **Do balance exercises every day at home.** Start with your eyes open, then work on closing them, says kinesiology professor Glen Bergeron.
- **Wear proper footwear** and ensure your paddle is the proper size.

"When done safely, pickleball has great physical benefits," Urquhart says, noting when so many are inactive, motion really is medicine.

"It's accessible and the social interaction part of it is awesome." The key is playing within your limits.

"Try not to get too competitive and over-extend because you can end up paying a significant price for it," he says. "It's like hockey — it's all good until the guys playing rec league decide they're in the Stanley Cup Finals. That's when they get in trouble."

While many clients have played racket sports, about half of them haven't. Either way, he says people pick it up in 10 or 15 minutes.

"I'm not saying they'll all be good players, but not everybody wants to be. They just want to enjoy themselves, meet people, be out in the sun and feel the wind."

No one who spoke to Sage about pickleball would argue with that. Suzanne Carrière says it's easy to learn — and easy to improve. She and her husband gave pickleball a one-time whirl while in Florida in 2017, and took to the court there again in 2021. While always active, racket sports were never in their rotation.

"But it didn't look difficult and I figured we couldn't be that bad because we both did a lot of sports," says Carrière, who has a black belt in karate.

Other players happily explained the rules, which she says are simple, and shared tips.

"We were hooked from there. It was something new, a challenge," says Carrière, who lives in Gatineau and retired from Statistics Canada in 2012, after which she joined the association.

"Anybody can play this. I see people who aren't in good shape, but are still very good. And it's not hard to get better."

Before long, Carrière and her husband were playing six days a week. They've made friendships with people from all over North America — they're all connected on social media and have pickleball partners wherever they travel.



Suzanne Carrière and her husband, André Dompierre, who live in Gatineau, played a lot of sports and this one hooked them because of its simple rules.

Pickleball's downside

Pickleball is beloved by those who play it, but it has its detractors — those who have to listen to it. And that can leave municipalities in a bit of a, well, pickle.

When pickleballs hit the sport's hard paddles, the noise produced is much louder than tennis. A Halifax couple had to stop sitting in their backyard in the summer, or opening windows because of the noise produced by three neighbouring pickleball courts. And, the two discovered a port-a-potty installed for said pickleballers had been attached to their back fence and was producing "pungent" odours, in addition to the sport's "ruthless" noise. Another neighbour compared the noise to being in a "psychological torture chamber."

There have also been lawsuits. A court in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont., ruled that a club there was violating the noise bylaw. The town and the club each had to pay a fine of \$1,000. The town of Okotoks, Alta., has introduced time limits (9 a.m. to 8 p.m. most days, compared to previous hours of 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays and Sundays) at a court whose noise had been irritating its neighbours.

A gentleman in Chilliwack, B.C., went on a hunger strike to protest the noise caused by a court near his home, put in two years after he moved there. After 50 hours with no food, he said he saw enough progress to stop, including an invitation to City Hall to discuss his issue.

An ego booster

It took a year after he started playing pickleball for de Beaumont to convince his wife, Chrystianne Pilon, to try it. Growing up, her relationship with sports was "miserable," as she was always the last person picked for school teams.

"She wasn't very good at the beginning, like most people," de Beaumont says. "But she fell in love with the sport. A few months in, she came home one day with tears in her eyes and said her life had changed."

It turns out she'd been at a court when three women asked her to join them as their fourth. "We know you're good," they told her.

Rosanne Quan of Victoria can relate.

"I'm not very athletic, I never played any sports," she says. "My husband used to drive me to work, drop me off and go play pickleball."

Once she retired as a benefits officer with Service Canada in 2018, she joined him on the court.

"I found it really addictive," says Quan, who joined Federal Retirees in January 2023.

While the exercise is great and tournaments are fun, the social aspect is the draw for this "people person." She plays with four different groups five times a week, and they've become friends off the court. "I've met so many wonderful people playing," she says.

That includes Fred, who, at 85, has lost some mobility and eyesight. Quan ensures he's her first partner of the day.

"We lose almost every game, but we have fun and that's all that matters," she says.

A tennis player since her teens, Suzanne Mainville-Lemay of Cornwall, Ont., says pickleball is a much more sociable game.

"I've played tennis for years and with a lot of the same 20 or 30 people, but you rarely become friends. You meet them, you play," she says.

"With pickleball, you sit down afterwards, you socialize. Maybe it's because of where we are in life. There

“She wasn’t very good at the beginning, like most people...But she fell in love with the sport. A few months in, she came home one day with tears in her eyes and said her life had changed.”

are barbecues and socials at Christmas, and the start and end of the year.”

She and her husband took up pickleball after his heart attack in 2021 because tennis was too physically demanding. Pickleball’s smaller court meant less running and a lighter racket and ball.

“If he plays every second or third day, he doesn’t get exhausted. But he still gets the cardio and movement,” says Mainville-Lemay, who retired from working in IT and informatics with Parks Canada after 30 years in 2015 and joined Federal Retirees in 2020.

Her grandkids now play, too. However, pickleball’s popularity means court time is elusive. She and her husband are considering moving to have more access.

While that would bring them closer to their children, Mainville-Lemay admits pickleball is the bigger draw.

“Well, yeah,” she laughs. “I worked for 30 years. I want to enjoy the next 30. It’s time to play.”

Young people play, too

It turns out other seniors aren’t her only court time competition. The game is growing fastest among players aged 18-34, 13 per cent of whom play at least 15 times a month.

Carrière’s 34-year-old son is among them. Earlier this year, she lent him a paddle and invited him to play.

“He just loved it, and before long, he was addicted,” she says. “He bought new

shoes and his own paddle. He plays in three leagues. He’s better than us now.”

Even tennis pros aren’t immune to pickleball’s pull. Last April, Andre Agassi teamed up with Andy Roddick to beat John McEnroe and Michael Chang in the Pickleball Slam. Afterwards, Agassi said he’ll keep playing “as long as I can walk — that’s how much I enjoy this game.”

Pickleball Slam 2 will pit Agassi and his wife, Steffi Graf, against fellow tennis legends Maria Sharapova and McEnroe in February.

Meanwhile, Quebec tennis star Eugenie Bouchard has said she will join a professional pickleball tour this year. “It’s a new wave of people wanting to play,” de Beaumont says.

“You’ll laugh, you’ll be lighter and you’ll enjoy life more by playing. It’s like going back to childhood. It’s sort of magical.” ■

Holly Lake is an Ottawa-based writer and very interested in taking to the pickleball court to see what all the fuss is about.



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