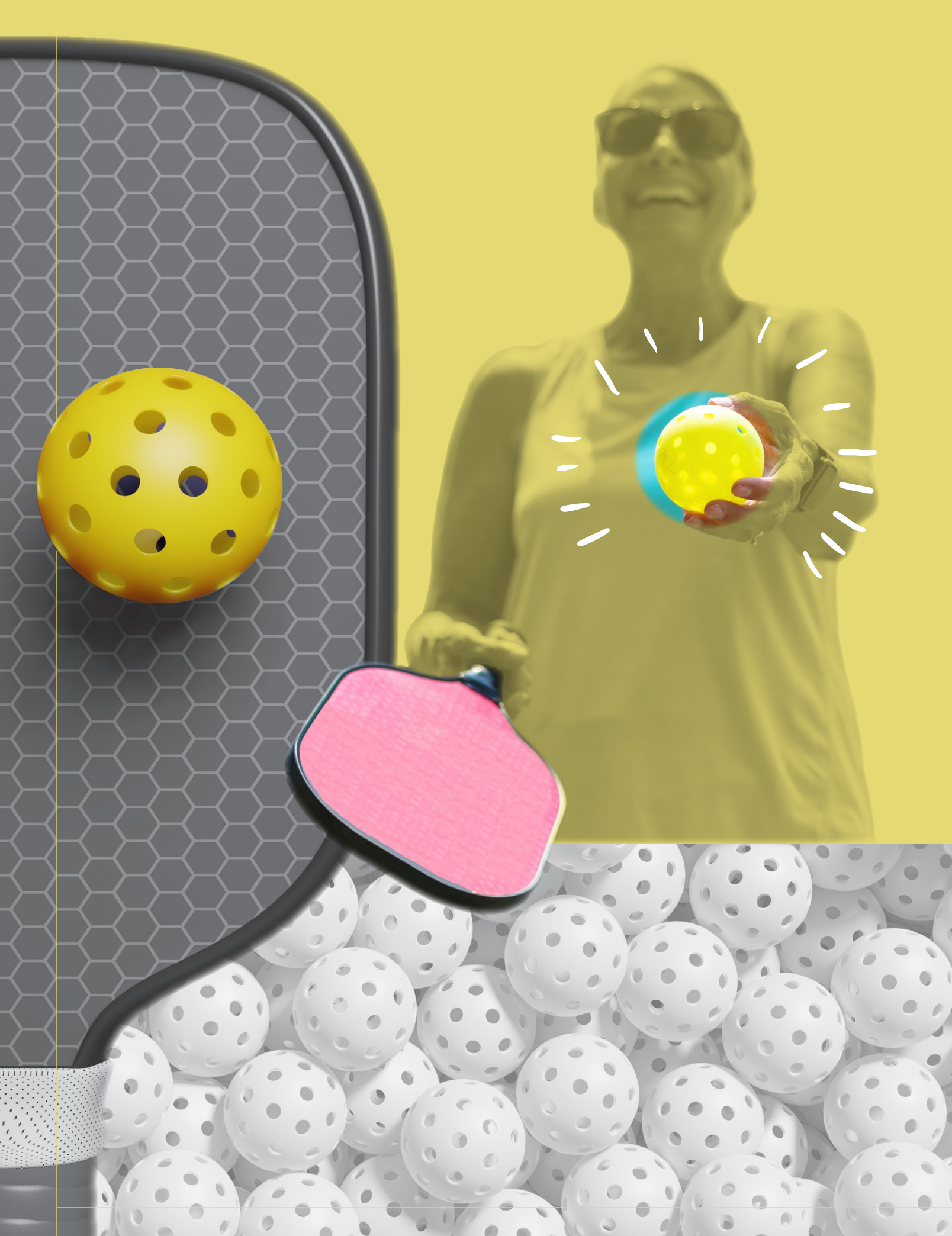


Pickleball: How This Game Transforms Lives Physically, Mentally, and Socially

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BY KYLE LARAMIE, CEO OF VETERANS CARE COORDINATION





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Pickleball has taken the United States by storm in recent years, captivating players of all ages and skill levels. This engaging game combines the elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis, creating a unique and exciting experience. In this article, we will delve into the remarkable growth of pickleball in the United States and shed light on its significant impact on older adults' physical, mental, and social well-being.

The Origins

Pickleball's roots can be traced back to the summer of 1965 when Joel Pritchard, Bill Bell, and Barney McCallum invented it in Washington state (Simon, 2022). The sport was born out of a challenge from Pritchard's teenage son to create a game that combined various sports using table tennis paddles, a wiffle ball, and a badminton net. The game involved singles or doubles players volleying the ball over a small tennis court net. The first to reach eleven points would win—but with a requirement to win by two points. Terms like “dinking” and “the kitchen line” were coined, referring to specific shots and areas on the court. The kitchen line is an area near the net that a player is allowed to step into once the ball lands in that area of the court. Dinking is a term used to describe a soft shot into the kitchen, preventing the opponent from attacking the ball out of the air.

From there, the friends needed to come up with a name but couldn't agree. However, there was always one constant when they played: their dog, Pickles, would run onto the court and pick up the ball during their games. So one evening, while the families were on vacation, JoAnn Pritchard suggested: Why not call it “pickleball” after the family dog? It stuck, and the name has remained the same ever since.

While it's been around for almost 50 years, the true explosion in pickleball's popularity occurred in recent years across the United States. The Association of Pickleball Professionals (APP) reports a staggering 159% increase in pickleball participation in the last three years, with an estimated 36.5 million players in 2022 (Mackie, 2023). This surge can be attributed to several factors. Pickleball's versatility allows it to be played on various surfaces, including gym floors and indoor or outdoor courts, in recreational centers, schools, and retirement communities. In addition, it requires minimal equipment and is relatively easy to learn, making it appealing to people of all ages and abilities.

The Power of Community

Another crucial factor contributing to pickleball's growth is the strong sense of community it fosters. Enthusiasts find joy in the game's social aspect, forging connections and building friendships both on and off the court. Local clubs and organizations have sprouted nationwide, providing platforms for players to unite, compete, and support each other on their pickleball journeys. The sport has also attracted investments from well-known celebrities like Tom Brady, LeBron James, Mark Cuban, Brené Brown, Heidi Klum, Anheuser Busch, and more, further solidifying pickleball's position in the sports industry. The Professional Pickleball Association (PPA) and APP organize tournament-style events for players of all ages and skill levels, including tours for seniors (50 and over) and super seniors (60 and over). These inclusive and supportive tournaments provide players with the opportunity to participate alongside professionals based on their skill level, creating an environment that nurtures growth and competition while encouraging camaraderie among participants.

Physical Health Benefits

Pickleball offers a fun and engaging way for seniors to stay healthy and active. As we embrace our golden years, it becomes crucial to engage in activities that cater to our physical abilities while providing a range of health benefits. The smaller court size in pickleball reduces running and stress on the body compared to other racket sports, making it a senior-friendly game. Additionally, it offers several physical health benefits, such as:

- **Strengthened muscles:** Playing pickleball engages various muscle groups, including the forearms, biceps, triceps, hamstrings, quads, glutes, and core muscles (Paddletek, n.d.).
- **Low impact on joints:** The game's low-impact nature reduces joint strain, making it an excellent option for those with joint issues or recovering from injuries.
- **Improved balance and coordination:** The rapid back-and-forth rallies in pickleball sharpen reflexes, balance, and hand-eye coordination, thereby helping to minimize falls and increasing agility.
- **Weight management:** Regular participation and increased activity in pickleball can contribute to weight loss. Playing pickleball burns eight to 11 calories per minute, similar to running (Paddletek, n.d.).
- **Cardiovascular health:** Pickleball involves constant movement, including lateral shuffling, jogging, quick sprints, and dynamic strokes. These aerobic activities elevate heart rate, promote a healthy heart, improve endurance and stamina, and burn calories (Burns, 2022).
- **Staying active:** Because pickleball is fun to play, it's been shown to increase older adults' willingness to exercise and stick to their exercise goals (Wray et al., 2021), which in turn supports all the health benefits above.

According to Scott Moore, a Senior Pro and CEO of High Performance Pickleball, "I think it's the greatest sport ever for so many reasons, but mainly because it is a multi-dimensional sport. The social aspect is amazing as it seems easier to make friends than any other sport. It's one of the most mental strategic games, so you can get older and better with age. It's also extremely physical when you play hard and therefore has significant health benefits" (K. Laramie, personal communication, April 2023). Moore has earned 12 gold medals (championships) and holds the record for most wins on the Senior Pro Tour today.

Social and Mental Health Benefits

The positive impact of pickleball extends beyond physical benefits to include social and mental health advantages. Many older adults can feel isolated and lonely, negatively affecting their overall well-being. Pickleball provides an accessible doubles sport that improves physical health and enhances the quality of life through new friendships and social engagement. In addition, the sport has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety in seniors, as demonstrated by a study published in the *Journal of American Geriatrics Society* (Cerezuela et al., 2023). The social and mental health benefits of pickleball include:

- **Mental stimulation:** While pickleball is a physical activity, it requires quick strategic decision-making, anticipating opponents' moves, and sustained focus, keeping the brain sharp and active.
- **Decreased stress and anxiety:** Increased activity stimulates the release of endorphins, reducing stress and fostering a positive outlook (Cerezuela et al., 2023).
- **Boosted self-esteem:** Learning and improving at the sport instills a sense of achievement, boosts self-confidence, and promotes personal growth.
- **Engaging in healthy competition:** Pursuing skill enhancement fosters a healthy competitive spirit while promoting cooperation and sportsmanship. One study (Heo et al., 2018) concluded that the competitive nature of pickleball reduced depression in older adults because they experience the sport as a "serious" leisure activity. At any age, people can build a career in pickleball and work toward meaningful goals, like competing in tournaments, which (according to the study) prompt feelings of progress and optimism.
- **Socialization:** Pickleball attracts players of all ages, bridging generational gaps and allowing older adults to interact and form relationships with younger generations. These interactions promote mutual respect and valuable social connections. Through all of the social aspects that pickleball facilitates, it can enhance the player's mental health by reducing isolation and providing a sense of community and a supportive environment for seniors to learn and play the game. Older adults who played pickleball during the pandemic expressed higher life satisfaction and lower levels of loneliness as compared to others who stopped playing (Casper et al., 2021).

Professional pickleball player Dylan Frazier, a 21-year-old phenom ranked in the top 10 worldwide, emphasizes the social aspect of pickleball: “I have met so many friends through pickleball who are in their teens and well into their 70s. These people I have built long-lasting relationships with and still stay in contact with on a regular basis. I find these relationships are something I will always cherish, thanks to pickleball.” Scott Moore adds, “It is one of the most generational activities I have played; I have friends that are 9 to 90 something” (K. Laramie, personal communications, April 2023).

Getting Started

If you're an older adult seeking a fulfilling lifestyle that contributes to your mental, physical, and social well-being, consider trying pickleball. You may be pleasantly surprised by how much you enjoy the sport. Pickleball offers year-round playing options, both indoors and outdoors. To get started, you can explore online platforms such as local sports directories, social media groups, and specialized pickleball websites. These resources can help you find nearby games, playing partners, and valuable tips and tutorials. Whether you choose to play singles, doubles, or mixed doubles, at any skill level, finding a game is relatively easy.

Kassandra Gehrke, a women's professional pickleball player and CEO of Empowher Pickleball Trips, encourages newcomers, saying, “I was a Physical Education Teacher who was introduced to pickleball, and I fell in love. I have now made it my career, and when I started, I hadn't played a racket sport. If you are interested in getting started, go to a local YMCA, a park, a community center, or find a local teaching professional to take a lesson. You will find more and more people willing to help you get started” (K. Laramie, personal communication, April 2023).

Pickleball paddles can be purchased from local sporting goods stores or the sporting sections of general merchandise retailers. In addition, many parks or community centers have coaches available for lessons or clinics to provide instruction and rules for starting your pickleball journey. As you progress, you'll find numerous opportunities for open play, where you can show up, have fun, and meet new people. If you want to engage in tournaments, you can look for local and national competitions on websites like pickleballtournaments.com. These tournaments often have age and skill-specific events, starting at 19+, 35+, 50+, 60+, 70+, and 80+.

Simply put, pickleball offers a wide range of health benefits for older adults, impacting them physically, mentally, and socially. Its remarkable growth in

popularity can be attributed to its accessibility, vibrant community, and the numerous advantages it provides. Pickleball is an excellent choice if you're looking for a new sport that invigorates your body and mind while offering a fun and inclusive environment. Don't hesitate to contact fellow pickleball players for guidance and support, as most players are happy to help newcomers feel welcome. Enjoy the game and have fun on the court! •CSA



Kyle Laramie, CEO of Veterans Care Coordination, is a dedicated advocate for senior independence & well-being. At VCC, he helps Veterans and surviving spouses maintain independence at home through the VA Pension with Aid & Attendance benefit. As a sponsored pickleball athlete by Didadem Sports, aspiring to play in the Senior Pro division at 50, Kyle is committed to inspiring active aging. Reach him at klaramie@vcchc.com.

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