

*About 2,000 residents participate in the thriving pickleball program at The Villages active adult community in central Florida.
Photo: The Villages Daily Sun*



Increase program participation with pickleball

Want your programming to attract and retain more older-adult participants? Consider incorporating this fast-growing sport in your setting

by Barbara Wintroub

Active-aging professionals are always looking for ways to increase both the physical activity levels of their members or residents and the amount of people who participate in their programs. Pickleball, “the fastest-growing sport in North America,”¹ is an activity that can help attract and retain participants. In fact, this sport for all ages is increasingly popular with older adults. It is played now in senior living communities, YMCAs, community and seniors centers,

fitness clubs, parks, schools and other settings, such as the Senior Games.

Many readers may be thinking, What in the world is pickleball? The game is a mix of several familiar sports (tennis, paddle tennis, badminton and table tennis), and offers older adults an enjoyable way to exercise, be outdoors, and meet new friends. In addition, with places to play now located throughout the United States and Canada, individuals can continue this activity when they travel.

(For those who are curious about how pickleball got its name, the sport began in 1965 as a backyard kid’s game in Washington state. One of the founders had a family dog named Pickles, who would run away with the ball during games.)

A big part of pickleball's appeal for older adults is its ease and accessibility. "Anyone can play this game," says Mark Friedenberg, past president of the USA Pickleball Association (USAPA), which was formed in 1984 to promote the sport's growth and development. Friedenberg, who turned 60 recently, is a top-ranked player in the US. He believes that "there is no such thing as a handicap in pickleball." To illustrate his point, he notes that "two top players in the Pacific Northwest are diabetic, one is deaf, and another player has a prosthetic leg and shows no mercy in tournament play."

Playing pickleball

So how is pickleball played, and why is it a great fit for older adults? Participants each have a flat surface paddle (slightly larger than a table tennis paddle), which they use to hit a yellow plastic whiffle ball over a net that is 36 in. high at the ends and 34 in. high in the middle. Because the ball has holes, it travels at a much slower pace than a tennis ball, helping older eyes track its position. The size of the court—20 ft. wide by 44 ft. long—is smaller than a tennis court, and the more compact playing space is less demanding to cover for those with hip or knee problems. On each side of the court, a non-volley line runs parallel to the net at about 7 ft., creating a zone that keeps the players at least 14 ft. apart during rallies (see Figure 1 on this page). This distance allows for longer, more exciting rallies and games. And while singles and doubles are played using strategies similar to tennis, doubles is the preferred pickleball game for older players. [Ed. Readers can view live video of a pickleball game on the USAPA website. See "Resources" on page 82 for site information.]

Top-ranked player and instructor Alan Christensen, who runs the pickleball program at the Johnson Ranch Racquet Club in Roseville, California, has been instrumental in bringing back age 50-plus players who had stopped playing tennis because of age, injury or lack of interest. In Christensen's view, pickleball has a lot to offer older players.² For example, the sport is easy to learn, he says. New players can enjoy fun rallies within 30 minutes of picking up a pad-

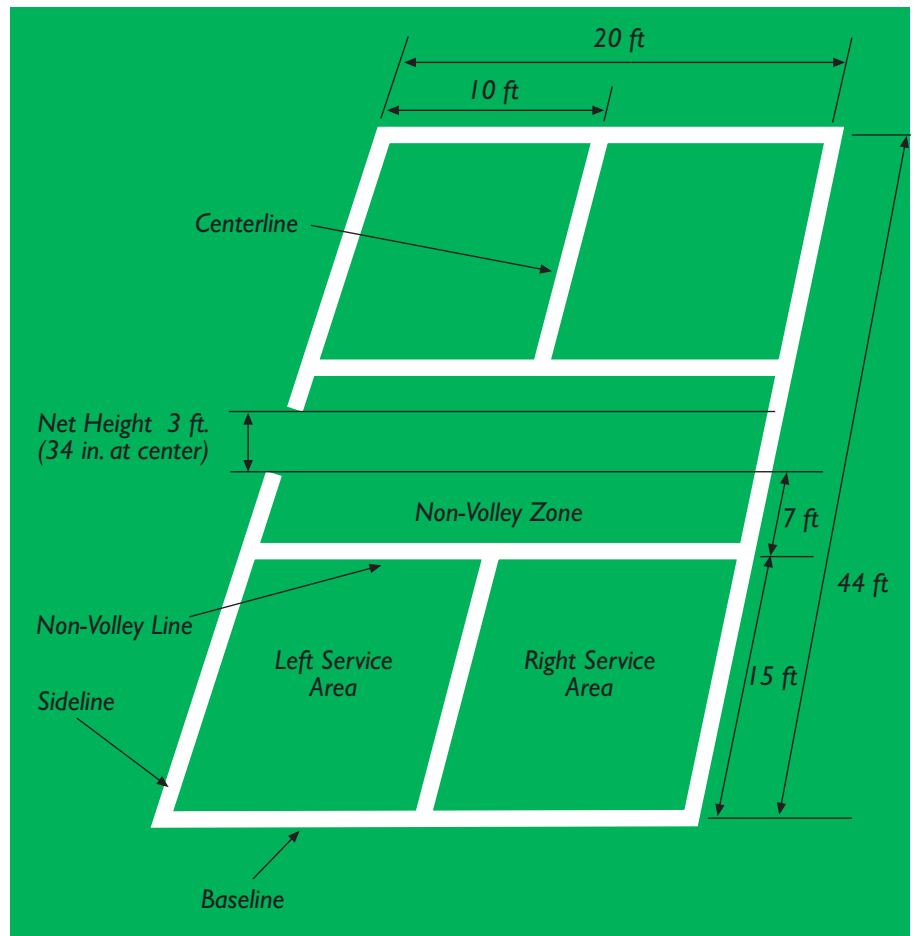


Figure 1. Pickleball court dimensions. Courtesy of the USA Pickleball Association

dle. Pickleball also doesn't require the mobility of tennis, allowing those who cannot run to still play a competitive game. And because the sport is control oriented, not power oriented, an older competitor can play against a younger competitor, or a woman against a man.

Further, there is a lively social atmosphere in pickleball, according to Christensen. Doubles is the most popular game because it allows husbands and wives to play together against other couples, he explains. In addition, the court is small, which promotes conversations, fun, and interesting interactions.

Realizing pickleball's potential in older-adult communities

Because of its appeal for older adults, pickleball is springing up in senior living communities across North America. In 2008, an article in *Masters Athlete*³ magazine listed the best places to live for pickleball, and the winner—North America's

"Pickleball Paradise"—was The Villages active adult community in central Florida. The success of pickleball at The Villages shows the sport's potential to attract and retain older participants.

The Villages' recreation department runs the busy pickleball program, which boasts 150 outdoor courts and 2,000 players, according to the *Masters Athlete* article. "The sport can be played year round at courts throughout the community," says The Villages' John Rohan, director of recreation. "There are leagues, tournaments and socials for all skill levels of players. There are lessons and programs from the beginner to the expert, and there are opportunities for all players to participate in a fun recreational atmosphere."³

In Surprise, Arizona, there are thriving pickleball clubs at Arizona Traditions, Sun City Grand, Sun City West, Sun

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Pickleball is attracting older-adult players in all kinds of settings, including competitions such as the Huntsman World Senior Games in St. George, Utah, pictured here. Courtesy of the USA Pickleball Association

City, and Happy Trails RV and Golf Resort. Bill Booth, president of USAPA (which is based in Surprise), lives at Sun City Grand. Booth started this active adult community's pickleball program in 2002,⁴ temporarily converting a tennis court into four pickleball courts. The enthusiastic response from residents led to eight permanent courts. [Ed. The USAPA website features a section about court conversion. See the "Resources" box for site information.]

To build the program at Sun City Grand, Booth and his wife gave free pickleball lessons to more than 500 people. Then "the game sold itself," he says. Another key to growing the sport, according to Booth, was to set aside a special time for drop-in play. This allowed individuals to rotate in and out of the court, playing others of similar skill level and enjoying opportunities to interact.

Today, Sun City Grand's pickleball club has over 700 members, including about 170 couples. The community also now features 12 pickleball courts. Another four courts are on the drawing board.⁴

Promoting the game

Organizations that want to encourage healthy, active aging for their members or residents have a winner in pickleball. The sport's elements make it a perfect fit for older-adult participants—from the ease in learning the game, to the slower pace of play and smaller court size, to the opportunities to compete and socialize. Plus pickleball is a whole lot of fun.

Organizing clinics, clubs or tournaments are some of the ways that active-aging professionals can promote pickleball to their members or residents. Once courts are available and people have a chance to try the game, many will become regular players and eager ambassadors for the sport. Their enthusiasm will help to build a vibrant pickleball program, which will in turn encourage individuals to stay active and thrive at any age.☞

Barbara Wintroub is the owner and educational director of Retrofit Pilates Rx in Santa Monica, California, and an official ambassador for pickleball in the Los Angeles area. As a member of the Baby Boom generation, Wintroub inspires others

through her athletic success. She has completed an Ironman Triathlon competition in Roth, Germany; international marathons at The Great Wall of China and in Antarctica; and hundreds of short course triathlons and ultra distance races. She has also completed a marathon on all seven continents, placing her in the 7 Continents Club, an elite group of 40 women worldwide who have achieved this goal. Recently, she participated in the Huntsman World Senior Games, where she won gold in tennis and silver in pickleball. For more information about Wintroub, visit www.retrofitpilates.com/barbara.html.

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Resources

Pickleball Canada

<http://pickleballcanada.org>

USA Pickleball Association (USAPA)

www.usapa.org

Learn more about pickleball at the USAPA website, including how the game is played, how to convert tennis courts for pickleball use, and how to become an official ambassador for the sport.