Food for Thought: The Evolution and Growth of Pickleball

“It was a rainy day, we’ve all been through that,” recounts Ralph Munro, former Washington Secretary of State. “The kids were sitting around the living room with nothing to do.”

Boredom bred a devilish playground in 1965, when House Representative Joel Pritchard collaborated with Bill Bell and Barney McCallum to create a game designed to keep their children occupied—Pickleball. With wood-carved paddles and a whiffleball, the net was initially placed at a height to match the court’s badminton-specific dimensions. Lowered to 36 inches (34 in the middle) and met with painted perpendicular lines, today’s pickleball court has a much more tennis-friendly feel.

Legend holds that this peculiar sport earned its name from “Pickles,” Pritchard’s dog, but his wife insists that the name is instead derived from the mixed rowing crews found on pickleboats—a nod to the sport’s hybrid nature.

“We started hitting the ball around, though it was kind of fun,” says Bob O’Brien, one of those bored boys. “There were no rules of the game…and it just took off from there.”

Today, pickleball is most commonly played in a doubles format and employs familiar visual mechanics for those with a tennis background. An underhanded serve is delivered from one side of the court to the opposite service box, but only the serving team may earn points; the returners must break both members of the serving team before earning the right to serve themselves.

McCallum was instrumental in creating the playing instruments themselves; the first crude paddles were made from a bandsaw in his basement. Of two prototypes, it was the “M2” that quickly became the player’s paddle of choice. Though the shape has rarely changed, the composition of the paddle has undergone an evolution not unlike the tennis racquet.

“People made paddles out of plexiglass, drilled holes in them,” McCallum recalled. “An Asian engineer put dimes in the head of the paddle to change the swing weight.” Wood paddles are still available today, along with flashier contemporaries made from graphite and fiberglass, but McCallum hardly minds the contributions others have made to what began as a bounce-and-hit in the backyard.

“Everyone had their own idea, and that’s fun!”

That sort of “fun first” mentality is one equally shared by the other pickleball creators; through Pritchard passed away in 1997, Munro remembers the inventor’s eagerness to deem the development of pickleball as a group endeavor.

“Joel’s theory always was, ‘you could get a lot done if you don’t care who takes the credit!’”

It wasn’t until 1976 that pickleball began earning national notoriety; TENNIS Magazine called it America’s newest racquet sport just as the first pickleball tournament was played in Tukwila, Washington. A pickleball association was formed in 1984 and later revamped in 2005 to better organize and grow a game. It’s now part of physical education programs across the country.

“It’s a great game for kids to learn; I’ve taught my kids because it’s such an easy racquet sport to learn for hand-eye coordination,” says O’Brien. “The ball’s light, the paddles are light. It’s a great way to bring up kids.”
Pickleball’s popularity trickled down the west coast and quickly spread east, with some of most avid of the sport’s 400,000 players residing in Florida and Arizona. “The biggest growth has been among senior adult programs and retirement communities,” explained Doug Smith, McCallum’s nephew.

With the length of the court only a third that of a tennis court, seniors are drawn to the lower impact nature of the game. Pickleball enthusiast Sandra Carillo sums the sport up up in three words: “fun, fitness, and friendship.”

They were less diplomatic in Denver, with local pickleball ambassador Ken Marquardt calling tennis “so yesterday.” In just under a decade, the number of pickleball courts in Denver has expanded to 150, a timeframe which coincides with the revitalization of the USA Pickleball Association (USAPA).

Pickleball has seen even greater growth in Minnesota, as the Southwest Metro Pickleball Club, which boasts 209 members in just four years of operation, recently hosted a national tournament for 659 competitors.

“What’s happened is that the senior community that used to play racquet sports wants to continue to be active,” says Jerry Maas, one of the club’s six founding members. “But they can’t cover the amount of space you need to cover in tennis. So pickleball has become very desirable for them.”

Like tennis players, pickleball players can use ball machines, such as the Pickleball Tutor, to hone their skills when desired, or when an opponent isn’t available. Designed by Sports Tutor, it can replicate all of the shots featured in a typical match, ranging from lobs, serves, drives, groundstrokes, and even dinks—the tennis equivalent to a drop shot.

Competitive though the sport has become, McCallum still fondly remembers making a game anyone could play, and one that has undoubtedly stood the test of time. “We were trying to achieve balance among the players, with the equipment, people’s physical abilities, and create as few arguments [as possible].”

It’s a balance keenly felt by its players, who appreciate pickleball as a fun game and a serious sport. “I love the camaraderie,” Tallahassee-based Walt Cofer said. “The game is exciting. The people are just the nicest bunch of people you could ever play with. They will quickly forget all friendships when they’re out there on the court, though.

“We're serious about our pickleball.”