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Fast-paced action is a hallmark of pickleball.

New Ways to Court Fitness

Racquets and Paddles Get a Sporting Makeover

by Randy Kambic

Two fun ways to use tennis courts for fitness are showing big increases in popularity.

Meet the New “Pickleball”

You may not have heard of it yet, but pickleball is a mixture of tennis, squash and table tennis, and it’s one of the fastest-growing sports in the country. The USA Pickleball Association (USAPA) at usapa.org estimates that 2.5 million players are active now, with the number expected to multiply to 8 million by next year.

Regulation tennis courts especially marked for pickleball facilitate its smaller, 20-by-44-foot playing area. The need for less running about appeals to older players and others, as does the distinctive thud when the hard paddle hits the plastic ball. (Sample video at Tinyurl.com/WinningPickleballShot.)

Christine Barksdale, 48, of Vancouver, Washington, USAPA’s managing director of competition and athlete services, played league tennis from childhood into adulthood until she transferred her passion to pickleball. She assesses that half of participants are “totally focused on pickleball,” while the rest see it as a way to improve their volleying skills for tennis. “It definitely improves reflexes. It’s easy for beginners to pick it up and have fun.” It also introduces kids to racquet sports.

Stretching the shoulders before playing is advised by licensed sports massage therapist Brian Horner, who works with athletes at pickleball, tennis, racquetball and beach volleyball tournaments in Arizona, California and elsewhere. The shoulder is like the handle of a whip in these sports, says Horner, who authored the new ebook *Complete Guide to Winning Pickleball (PickleballTournaments.com)*. "If it isn't operating normally, when more pressure is applied it can strain the elbow and wrist." Swimming, especially backstrokes, is advised because therapists regard water as a friend of shoulders.

"Sixty to 70 percent of the people that play [here] are retired," says Steve Munro, owner of the West View Tennis Center, in Morgantown, West Virginia. He also sees the sport as a nice transition for older tennis players.

Pickleball was invented in Washington's Bainbridge Island in 1965 by then Congressman Joel Pritchard and businessman Bill Bell. Along with the Pacific Northwest, some other major pockets of popularity include Chicago, Phoenix, southern Utah, Orange County, California; and Collier, Lee and Miami-Dade counties, in Florida.

Tennis Goes Cardio

Participants of Cardio Tennis, a Tennis Industry Association program, benefit from high-intensity, aerobic, interval training, using functional movement to run to return shots and move around the court in preparatory footwork drills. It also increases stamina and endurance, which enhances both regular tennis performance and overall fitness.

According to *CardioTennis.com* (which includes a sample video), men can burn between 500 and 1,000 calories in one, hour-long class; women, between 300 and 500. Estimates put the number of players currently engaging in such clinics at 1.82 million nationwide.

"Tennis is a chief component of Cardio Tennis, but it's much more. It's a group fitness activity, a major workout that increases the heart rate," says Chris Ojakian, a global Cardio Tennis trainer and executive director of racquet sports with Elite Racquet Sports, of Marina del Rey, California. They manage and operate tennis programs at facilities nationwide.

A session often consists of a five-to-seven-minute dynamic warm-up including stretching, tossing tennis balls and light tennis play; more tennis lasting 10 to 12 minutes, including "cardio blast" sideline activities like quick footwork drills and jumping jacks when changing sides; 30 minutes of point-based tennis games with constant rotation of players and more cardio blasts; and a five-to-10-minute cool down.

"Participants are moving during the times they'd be waiting their turn to hit the ball in regular tennis clinics, and it works on the kind of quick footwork that's done in competition," explains Ojakian, the 2011 U.S. Professional Tennis Association California Pro of the Year.

Sessions, which also include party music and heart rate monitors, are "so fast paced and fun, people often can't believe when they're over," he enthuses. "It accomplishes so much in one hour."



Sideline drills enhance skills during Cardio Tennis sessions.

Larry Carlat, of Venice, California, editor in chief of *PurpleClover.com*, credits participating in Cardio Tennis sessions with Ojakian twice a week and a healthier diet in the last three-plus years for losing 25 pounds. "You're never standing still for more than a couple of seconds, and my footwork has improved," says the 20-year tennis player. "Chris also provides tennis tips during classes. It's fun and run!"

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