



Invasion *of the* Pickleballers

Upon arriving at the eight new state-of-the-art pickleball courts at Gilchrist Park in Punta Gorda, a player coming off the courts approached with a smile and asked, "Are you coming over to the dark side?"

Cindy Morrell had been a longtime tennis player, playing team tennis at a solid level for a number of clubs in the area, including the decades old, sadly recently closed Fishermen's Village Racquet Club clay court facility among others.

A knee replacement that adversely affected her movement sparked the impetus to try pickleball, with its less-than-half-size court. In stark contrast to the long-range, uninspiring lobbing style of some in club tennis that she never relished, she added, "It's so much faster. Boom, boom, boom. I like the increased volleying action at the net, and the movement is easier for me now since it's mostly up and back, not much lateral!"

I counted 20 players on five of the eight courts with another 10 waiting under the shade trees for the next round of friendly matchups. Prominent group participant Sue Carmen told me that the city had contributed approximately \$20,000 to meet the demand for the conversion of two of the four existing tennis hard courts at the park – the other two were unoccupied during my visit on an early weekday morning – while the informal local association took up a collection and added another \$2,000 to the project.

Pickleball is currently reported to be the fastest growing sport in the nation. Both Punta Gorda tennis pro shops, Grand Slam Tennis Company and Wrigley's Tennis, have been stocking paddles, footwear, balls and accessories for some time now. And although it seems that it is suddenly on everyone's local radar, it is not new.

A 1976 Tennis magazine article proclaimed pickleball "America's newest racquet sport." But its genesis took place way back in 1965 in Washington state senator Joel Pritchard's backyard with a lowered badminton net, ping pong paddles, a plastic whiffle ball and hybrid rules. Neighbor Bob O'Brian is thought to have built the first permanent asphalt court in his backyard a couple of years later with their collective goal being to create a game that could be enjoyed by entire families.

In 1984, the United States of America Pickleball Association was formed "to organize and perpetuate the growth and advancement of pickleball on a national level."

Ambitious, yet by 1990 it was being played in all 50 states. Who knew? And now you can drop-in at any pickleball site around the country – there are hundreds of them (reference the USAPA website for locations) – and easily pick-up a game.

Linda Huber, a former Charlotte County USTA tennis league coordinator and player, is one of the first in our area to become fully aware of its widespread impact during a visit 10 years ago to the sprawling retirement community, The Villages, in Ocala, Fla., where it was already flourishing and today boasts 140 courts with 3,000 daily players in season.

After trying it there, she liked its "fast moving unpredictability" and was confident "that it could really take off." Prophetic.

As one of a nucleus of about a dozen players that first met working out at the South County Recreation Center in Punta Gorda four years ago, they started playing on the indoor basketball court with the facility providing taped lines and downsized nets.



After receiving the city's blessing, they gravitated to Gilchrist Park, where they provided their own nets after the city painted permanent lines on one of the four existing tennis courts, officially making its a multi-use court, only to have that court vandalized by, one can only imagine, misguided park-based tennis players who were less than pleased with sharing prime-time morning courts with these pickleball people, their ping pong like paddles and those funny sounding balls.

Cooler heads have since prevailed and detente has seemingly been realized.

Canadian Frances Gammie was also part of the mix early on when snowbird time came around. Dedicated to the game, along with her husband, Doug, she introduced dozens of additional players to the game with complimentary demos and clinics.

So, I had to see for myself.

I partnered with the diminutive 84-year-old Victor Mauro, who proceeded to jump over the 3-foot-plus side fencing with a single bound to retrieve an errant ball from the adjacent court during our chat. After that I happily matched-up with him against Morrell and her husband. After only a couple of practice shots, Mauro, eager to get me in the game, declared I was ready, which sounded exactly like some tennis players I know.

I was not.

With Mauro barking out rapid fire positional instructions, "Move up, now get back. No you can't go in the 'the kitchen!'" I actually whiffed on a ball that bounced under my paddle. I'm thinking, "What have I got myself into here? Fifty-six years playing tennis, a current national ranking and I completely whiff playing pickleball?"

The infamous John McEnroe refrain immediately came to mind: "You cannot be serious."

After what seemed like a very long time and growing trepidation, I finally won my first point, thrusting both arms into the air in celebration a la Novak Djokovic after winning this year's Wimbledon.

Mauro then assured me that it only takes a couple of sessions to "get the hang of it," but it was clear to me that it wouldn't hurt to get a little insight into the game and some coaching as well.

Enter pickleball pro Scott Tingley (www.ILoveToPlayPickleball.com), who agreed to meet with me and explain the facts of pickleball life.

Scott, somewhat reluctantly, first tried pickleball on that same make-shift court that Huber and her partners enjoyed at South County. It was love at first try.

In just three years he experienced a meteoric rise in playing skill to a USAPA 5.0 rating — playing tennis from age 10-16 at a USTA

national junior level didn't hurt — the very top of their national rating system based upon tournament results. He's now regarded as the area's pickleball guru, not only for his coaching at the Gilchrist Park facility and the Punta Gorda YMCA, but also for the mini camps, clinics and seminars he now conducts around the country.

His take on the game's rapid growth and attraction also focused on its upbeat tempo: "It's a faster pace than tennis and for all ages. You're only 14 feet away from your opponents. Games (a set in tennis parlance) are about 20 minutes. A 2-out-of-3 game match that goes the distance could be less than an hour, and the between point time is five seconds or so."

Interest piqued? Drop-in any morning at the friendly confines of Gilchrist Park, ask for Cindy and Doug, Sue or Victor and give it a go. Oh, and don't forget to get down low to avoid any humbling whiffs. 🎾



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