

16 MAY 2026

wp WORLD PICKLEBALL MAGAZINE

THE GAME YOU DON'T SEE

WHY PICKLEBALL MATCHES ARE DECIDED BEFORE THE SHOT

INSIDE THE ENGLISH OPEN

HOW A WORLD-CLASS EVENT IS ACTUALLY BUILT

THE GLOBAL GAME IS SPLITTING

STRUCTURE. PRESSURE. SEPARATION.

BASE OF THE
SEXES
SWING ON THE REGO

THE DRAW

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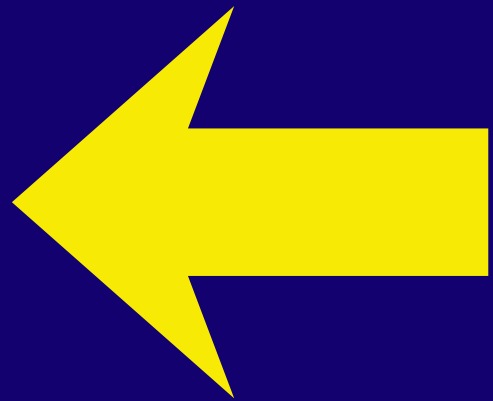
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FROM THE EDITOR

There comes a point where growth stops being impressive.

Pickleball is there now.

For years, the story has been easy to tell. More players. More courts. More countries. The kind of expansion that makes everything feel inevitable. But growth on its own does not tell you what a sport is becoming. It only tells you that it is moving. What matters now is what holds.

This month, that shift is impossible to ignore.

Across the game, the same pattern is emerging. Not everywhere, and not at the same speed, but clearly enough to matter. The sport is no longer moving in one direction. It is beginning to organise itself.

At the top, the margins are tightening. Matches are no longer decided by who can hit more shots, but by who understands when not to. The calendar is heavier. The pressure is constant. Consistency is no longer an advantage. It is a requirement.

Beneath that, structure is starting to take shape. Leagues, pathways, and systems that are not trying to be louder, but trying to last. The kind of work that does not announce itself, but defines what the sport becomes over time.

And underneath all of it, the same foundation remains. Courts. Communities. People turning up, often without a plan, and finding something that keeps bringing them back.

That is the part that cannot be lost. Because if there is a thread running through this issue, it is not growth. It is control.

Lee Whitwell opens the magazine by taking us inside the part of the game most players never see. Not the shot, but the decision before it. Not technique, but reaction. The moment where matches are actually decided.

Everything else builds from there.

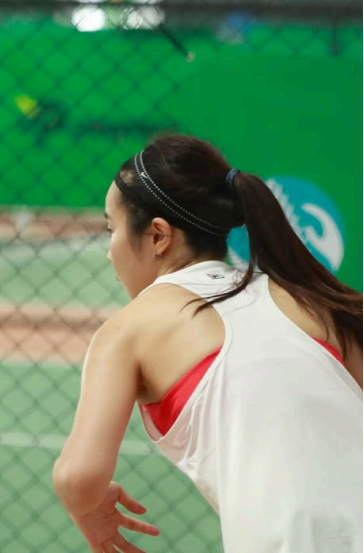
From players who are learning how to handle pressure, to coaches and organisers trying to build systems that can support it, to events like the English Open, where the difference is not ambition, but execution. Not what is promised, but what is delivered. Across the world, the same question is being asked in different ways. Not how fast can this grow. But what can it sustain. Because once structure, pressure, and performance begin to align, the game changes. Results start to separate players properly. Systems begin to matter. And the noise begins to fall away. What is left is clearer.

Not a sport trying to prove itself.

A sport deciding what it will tolerate.

Chris Beaumont, Editor-in-Chief





IN PICTURES

WPC Bangkok 2026 lit up the courts with yet another amazing tournament – catch a quick peek at the energy from across the event.

Pics courtesy of @wpc.global



LEE WHITWELL: THE GAME YOU DON'T SEE IS THE ONE THAT MATTERS

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

There is a point, somewhere deep into a match, where the rallies stop being about the ball.

The movement is still there. The rhythm, the patterns, the familiar geometry of pickleball. But something shifts. The decisions slow down. The air tightens. Players begin to hesitate, to reach for shots that are not quite there.

In a long dink exchange, it often looks harmless at first. Eight, ten, twelve balls traded safely crosscourt. Then one player presses, just slightly. The ball sits a fraction higher. The reply comes a touch quicker. And suddenly the rally breaks, not because of brilliance, but because someone has forced a moment that wasn't there.

At that level, the difference is rarely technical. It is emotional. It is the moment where patience gives way to urgency, where a player decides they need to take control, rather than trust the pattern that got them there.

This is where Lee Whitwell believes the match is decided.

Not in the swing, but in the space before it.

"I don't need to beat you," she says. "I need you to beat you."

"Most players don't lose because they were outplayed. They lose because they sped up."

At the highest level, where margins are thin, Whitwell is not trying to overpower opponents. She is waiting. Watching. Letting pressure build until it turns inward.

The mistake, when it comes, rarely looks dramatic. A ball pushed half a foot too far. A volley mistimed by a fraction. A decision taken just a moment too early. But to Whitwell, those errors are not accidents.

They are the end result.

Whitwell's relationship with the game has never been purely physical. She talks about patterns, about pressure, about presence. About how matches are shaped long before the final points are played.

"You can occupy space in someone's head," she says. "And once you're there, you don't need to do much."

That is not theory. It is the layer of the sport that decides matches.

At the level where everyone can execute, the difference is not who can hit the better shot. It is who can stay clearer for longer. Who resists the urge to rush. Who recognises the moment before it arrives.

Most players don't lose because they were outplayed. They lose because they sped up.

That understanding sharpens with time. Whitwell has seen the sport evolve, expand, professionalise. She has competed long enough to understand both the level required and the cost of maintaining it. The physical side does not disappear. If anything, it becomes harder to manage. The repetition. The strain. The constant need to adapt just to stay at the same level.

"You have to understand your body," she says. "You have to know what you can do, and what you can't."

There is no illusion of ease here. Only management. The players who last are not the ones who push hardest every day. They are the ones who learn where the edge actually is, and how not to cross it too often. They understand recovery as well as effort, and they treat longevity as something that has to be worked at deliberately, not assumed.

But if the body sets the limits, the mind defines the edge. What Whitwell returns to, again and again, is control. Not control over the opponent, but over self. Overreaction. Over expectation. Over the instinct to force a point instead of letting it come.

This is where matches tilt.

Not in the obvious exchanges, but in the moments where one player decides they need to do more, and the other is content to do less. There is discipline in that restraint. And there is a kind of quiet confidence behind it. The belief that if you stay present long enough, the other player will give you what you need.

Away from the pro game, Whitwell sees something else entirely.

"There are millions of people playing who don't care about pros," she says. "They care about what it gives them."

That matters more than most people in the sport want to admit. Because it challenges the idea that pickleball revolves around elite competition. It doesn't. The pro game is visible, but it is not the centre. The centre is everywhere else. Public courts. Club sessions. Temporary nets on borrowed space.

People turning up after work, not to chase rankings, but to feel something different to the rest of their day.

Pickleball works because it fits into lives easily. But it stays because it gives something back. Routine. Connection. A sense of progress that is immediate and shared. It is also, quietly, a rare kind of competitive space.

One where improvement is visible within weeks, where players of different backgrounds can share a court, and where the balance between challenge and enjoyment is easier to find than in most sports.

That balance is difficult to manufacture. In pickleball, it tends to appear naturally.

That is why the sport holds people. Not because of what happens on the biggest stages, but because of what happens every day.

"I don't need to beat you. I need you to beat you."

And yet, the same patterns run through both worlds. The hesitation under pressure. The rushed decision. The attempt to force a point that isn't there. Whether it is a pro final or a club game, the mistake often looks the same. The difference is only how clearly it is understood. Whitwell's perspective cuts through that.

"I don't need to beat you. I need you to beat you."

It is not just a tactic. It is a way of seeing the game. Because once you understand that, pickleball stops being about hitting better shots. It becomes about making better decisions. And in that moment, the game you thought you were playing changes completely.



THE FIRE CHIEF WHO FOUND PICKLEBALL: CLARE FRANK'S ONE-YEAR QUEST

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

"The fear of death was not in my mind, but the fear of losing pickleball was... there was some insane gravity going on, pickleball gravity that makes you need to play the game."

Clare Frank was sitting in an operating chair, wide awake, while a doctor sliced into the back of her neck to remove a lump. For someone who spent three decades running toward blazing flames and retired as California's first female chief of fire protection, high-stakes situations were nothing new.

But as the scalpel did its work, her mind didn't drift to the possibility of chemotherapy or mortality. Instead, it locked onto a single, unexpected fear:

What if this means I can never play pickleball again?



It was in that moment that Frank realised how much hold the sport had taken. To understand why a plastic whiffle ball carried that kind of weight, she embarked on a spontaneous, year-long journey across the country, chronicling her experiences in her upcoming book, *Just One More Game: A Pickleball Quest*.

Joining the *World Pickleball Podcast* for a 7:00 a.m. interview—sounding a little "froggy" but eager to talk shop—Frank broke down the pull of the sport, the psychology of the "agro" player, and what she learned from courts stretching from Baja, Mexico, to a maximum-security prison yard.

THE "AGRO" MINDSET

Spend any time around a paddle rack and it becomes clear that pickleball courts mirror human behaviour. Frank describes the ecosystem as a collection of distinct personalities—from the upbeat "cheerleaders" to the spin-heavy "ping-pongers" and the rule-focused traditionalists.

She places herself firmly in one category.

"Firefighting is all about... you put the fire out," Frank explains. "You go towards the fire, you open up on it, and then everyone's safe. So that's kind of how my body learned."

On court, that translates into an aggressive, fast-paced style—hitting hard, taking risks, and favouring instinct over patience. She knows that to keep improving, she needs to access a more measured, strategic side of the game. But the pull is always there. Left unchecked, she defaults to what feels natural: attack first, think later.

WHAT THE GAME REVEALS

Her year-long journey wasn't built around theory. It was built around moments. One of the most striking came inside Donovan State Prison, a maximum-security facility. Playing alongside inmates, she saw how quickly the game strips away hierarchy. During one rally, an inmate drove an easy put-away straight into the net. All four players burst into laughter. For a brief moment, everything else disappeared.

Outsider. Insider. Rival. Teammate. Everyone on the court was the same.

At the U.S. Open Pickleball Championships in Naples, Florida, the scale shifted completely. Frank watched 55-year-old tennis legend Andre Agassi partner with 18-year-old phenom Anna Leigh Waters against a pair of teenagers.

"To get to watch Andre Agassi play any sport is a treat," she says. But what stood out wasn't just the star power. It was the mix. Generations sharing the same court, the same space, the same stakes. A combination that rarely exists elsewhere in sport.

Then there were the days that felt less structured, but just as revealing. Driving from court to court with friends, chasing clear skies and dry surfaces, she recalls the group looking "very much like junkies chasing a fix."

Pickleball, she realised, taps into something deeper. Not just exercise. Something closer to reward. A cycle of play, connection, and repetition that keeps pulling people back.

HONOURING SOMETHING BIGGER

The most meaningful moment of the year came in Los Barriles, Mexico. The tournament happened to fall on World Down Syndrome Day, a date that carried personal significance. Frank's late sister, Annie, had been born with Down syndrome.

Struggling early in the event, Frank and her partner paused, checked in, and asked for help. What followed was a shift. Channelling Annie's stubbornness, they fought back, defeated the top seeds, and walked away with gold.

As the conversation moved toward what comes next, the ideas remained open. A sequel. A global version of the same journey. Or, as joked during the podcast, a breakdown of which dog breeds would dominate the kitchen line.

(For the record, Frank backs a Golden Retriever to enjoy every second while losing most points, while the smarter money is on a Belgian Malinois.)

But the answer she was looking for is already clear. It wasn't found in theory or explanation.

It was found in moments like the one in that chair. When everything else fell away, and the thing she wasn't ready to lose wasn't the life she had built.

It was the game she had discovered.



"It starts with something simple. Whacking the crap out of a whiffle ball."



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE GAME YOU BUILT YOUR LIFE AROUND IS TAKEN AWAY

"I just remember thinking to myself, just don't miss a ball. You know how to play pickleball. Just play." Forced out of tennis by chronic illness, Molly O'Donoghue made her mark in Europe and India in less than a year.

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

The athletic trajectory of Molly O'Donoghue doesn't follow a normal path.

At 15 years old, a promising regional junior tennis career in the UK was abruptly derailed by an invisible opponent. What started as symptoms of extreme fatigue quickly deteriorated to the point where the teenager found herself entirely unable to walk up a flight of stairs. A gruelling six-month hospital stint followed, culminating in a life-altering diagnosis: ulcerative colitis.

For a competitor who had wielded a tennis racket since the age of four, the physical demands of elite court sports were suddenly off the table.

"I just couldn't go back," O'Donoghue admits. "I couldn't get that level of fitness back, especially being so newly diagnosed. I was still trying different medication... I just needed a couple of years to get better."

Yet today, O'Donoghue is a European Pickleball Championship gold medalist, an English Nationals titleholder, and a sought-after draft pick in India's World Pickleball League. Her transformation from a medically retired junior to a global pickleball professional took a matter of months. This is the story of how a random Instagram ad, a 5:30 a.m. Melbourne tram ride, and a stubborn competitive instinct combined to shape one of pickleball's fastest-rising players.

THE AUSTRALIAN AWAKENING

To understand O'Donoghue's rise, you have to understand the physical resilience required just to get her onto the court. The medical turning point came when her treatment shifted to a subcutaneous EpiPen-style injection taken every two weeks, replacing the six-week hospital IV trips that had previously tethered her home. The medication gave O'Donoghue her life back, allowing her to resume solo travel and eventually head to Melbourne, Australia, for a study abroad program during her time at Edinburgh University.

It was there, in early 2024, that the algorithm intervened. An advertisement for a local pickleball club called "The Jar" popped up on her Instagram feed. Looking to make some Australian friends, she decided to give it a try. The hook was immediate.

"At first it was the community that it gave me, and then it very quickly went from the community to 'I want to win,'" O'Donoghue says. The timeline for that competitive shift? "A week."

Armed with her latent tennis instincts, O'Donoghue became obsessed. Living in Brunswick, an hour away from the purpose-built courts, her routine became a reflection of that shift. She would wake up at 5:30 a.m., ride the tram down to the courts just as they opened, and drill for two hours with a local woman before heading back to her university classes.

RETURNING TO THE UK: THE UNKNOWN WILDCARD

When O'Donoghue returned to the UK three months later to finish her university dissertation, the transition was a culture shock. Gone were the sun-drenched, purpose-built courts of Australia, replaced by taped lines in local leisure centres.

She assumed her brief pickleball career was over. However, a quick Google search led her to the UK Premier Pickleball League (PPL) draft. She entered her name without a DUPR rating—an unknown entity in a rapidly growing community. But Thaddea Lock, spotting the raw potential, took a flyer and drafted O'Donoghue for her Premier team.

Just eight months after picking up a paddle in Melbourne, O'Donoghue entered the English Nationals. Paired with Sara Tsukamoto, a friend she had met and trained with early on, the duo approached the tournament with zero expectations.

"We spoke about it the night before and we're like, 'Let's just go have fun. Our matching outfits had arrived. We were like, we're going to look great either way,'" O'Donoghue recalls.

They didn't just show up; they won. O'Donoghue and Tsukamoto captured the Women's Doubles Gold, defeating heavy favourites Mollie Knaggs and Mercedes Baxter Chinery in the final. The next day, O'Donoghue added a Mixed Doubles Silver alongside Tom Turney. She followed this up with a "double crown" run with Louis Laville, pulling off a comeback from 8-2 down in the second set of the final.

By the end of 2024, the player who didn't know what pickleball was in January was representing Team England at the inaugural European Championships in Southampton, helping her country take the overall crown.

THE GLOBAL STAGE: INDIA AND AMERICA

Success in Europe was just the beginning. The global nature of modern pickleball soon came calling in the form of the World Pickleball League (WPBL) in India. Drafted to Pune United for the league's inaugural season, O'Donoghue found herself playing in front of large, vocal crowds, with matches broadcast to millions of households on Sony TV.

Pune United mounted a late-season surge to reach the final against Bengaluru. Though they fell short, O'Donoghue had shown she could compete on that stage. Her performance caught the attention of the champions, and Bengaluru recruited her for Season 2, where she played under head coach Oli Strecker alongside US Open singles champion Dusty Boyer.

"When you asked about the turning point... I thought, this is something that you could probably do full-time," she says.

Recognising the need to keep improving, O'Donoghue spent nearly two months training in the United States, hitting with players such as Simone Jardim and Tina Pisnik. The exposure to the American game highlighted a key area for development.

"My dinking... the level of dinking in America is just above anywhere else I would say right now," she explains. "I'm definitely too impatient. I definitely pull the trigger way too quickly."



It is something she is now working to change. Back in the UK, at the Hurlands courts, she drills those situations repeatedly, knowing that what works in Europe will not always hold up elsewhere.

THE ROAD AHEAD

As the 2026 season begins, the schedule stretches across Portugal, Germany, and the Paris Open. Her goals are clear: qualify for the RTA Finals, continue improving in both mixed and women's doubles, and return to the United States for further development. But the way she measures progress has shifted.

"I think this year I probably won't measure in results, but I want to measure in how I feel I've improved," she says.

From a hospital bed in Southport to courts in Mumbai and across Europe, the trajectory doesn't quite make sense on paper. But it doesn't need to.

She's back competing, travelling, and building something on her own terms.

"I just couldn't go back. I couldn't get that level of fitness back."



SEYMOUR RIFKIND: THE MAN WHO WROTE HIS GOALS IN CEMENT

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

Seymour Rifkind learned early that goals become harder to abandon once other people can see them.

As a teenager in Illinois, he built a set of parallel bars in his backyard with his father. Two oars from a rowboat. Pipes. Holes dug into the ground. Cement poured to hold the whole thing in place.

Before the cement dried, he wrote into it what he intended to become.

The 1969 Illinois state parallel bar champion.

The 1969 state all-around champion.

One of those goals was plausible. The other was not. At that point, Rifkind had barely begun working the other events. That was the point. Once it was in the cement, it could not quietly disappear.

"When I got sick, when I wasn't feeling well, I'd see that written in the cement," he says. "Or sometimes a friend would say, 'What do you mean you're not going to work out? I thought you said you were going to be state champion.'"

The lesson stayed with him. A goal kept privately can be negotiated with. A goal made visible starts to own you.

"A goal kept privately can be negotiated with. A goal made visible starts to own you."

That is the thread running through Rifkind's life, from gymnastics to coaching, from ultra-endurance to pickleball. He does not just imagine systems. He tries to build them.

Rifkind's drive did not arrive from nowhere. He grew up as the son of a Holocaust survivor. His father spoke about what had happened, not occasionally, but constantly. There were stories of deprivation, loss and survival. Stories a child might not have been ready to hear, but heard anyway. His father, Rifkind says, carried guilt because he survived when others did not. His older brother, described as the smartest, did not. His younger brother, described as the sweetest, did not. His father called himself the troublemaker.

The troublemaker survived.

Rifkind was named after the younger brother. That history became more than family memory. It became pressure. It became purpose. It became a need to make his father proud, to give some meaning to survival that had never quite made sense to the man who lived through it. "I took it upon myself," Rifkind says, "to do everything I could to make him feel proud."

That sentence explains more about his career than any title does. The Hall of Fame. The teaching organisation. The World Pickleball Federation. The schools project. The Olympic ambition. They are not separate achievements. They are expressions of the same instinct. Make the goal visible. Build the structure. Refuse to let it drift.

When Rifkind first started talking seriously about pickleball's future, most people laughed. In 2015, he told athletes that pickleball could become the most popular sport in the world and that his goal was to see it in the Olympics.

"I got a bunch of giggles," he says. "Nobody took it seriously."

He understood why. At the time, pickleball was still viewed by many as a recreational game, closer in perception to horseshoes than to a serious global sport. Dedicated courts were scarce. In some places, there were probably more backyard courts in the Pacific Northwest than formal pickleball courts anywhere else. But Rifkind saw something others did not. Not just popularity. Possibility.

Today, he says the sport is in around 90 countries, and he has personally introduced it to more than 40. That matters. But it is not the most interesting part of his story. The more interesting part is what he thinks pickleball still lacks.

For Rifkind, the sport's future is not secured by participation numbers. It depends on teaching, standards, facilities, equipment control, player pathways and governance. That may sound dry until you hear how he talks about coaching.

His background in gymnastics shaped everything. In gymnastics, he says, nothing is natural. To teach it properly, you have to understand anatomy, physiology, kinesiology and how the body moves. If you get it wrong, people get hurt. He brought that thinking into pickleball. Not because pickleball is dangerous in the same way. Because bad teaching creates bad habits, and bad habits become the foundation of a sport if nobody stops them early.

His teaching curriculum was built around stroke development, efficiency and evidence, not just the opinions of great players. That distinction matters to him. A great player is not automatically a great coach.

"People equate a great player being a great coach," he says. "That's the furthest thing from the truth."

That is one of Rifkind's sharpest points.

"A great player is not automatically a great coach."

Pickleball cannot rely on charisma and playing level alone. It needs people who can teach, explain, adapt and correct. It needs education, not just demonstration.

That is why his organisation overhauled its level one curriculum. What was once four hours in a classroom and four hours on court became 12 hours online and four hours on court. The reason was simple: consistency.

The material is now available in 20 languages. Everyone gets the same message. Instructors can study before they arrive on court. The classroom part no longer depends on whether a particular tutor happens to be a strong public speaker. For Rifkind, that is not administration. It is infrastructure. The kind people do not notice until it is missing.

He is especially proud that higher education has started to take the curriculum seriously. He says European University is basing a graduate-level pickleball major on IPTPA's curriculum, with other university partnerships also developing.

That is where his vision becomes clear. He does not want pickleball merely played everywhere. He wants it taught properly everywhere.

The challenge is that the game itself keeps moving. At beginner level, the fundamentals remain. But at the top, pickleball is changing fast. New athletes. New shots. New equipment. New patterns. Rifkind sees the sport entering another phase. First came the early pickleball players. Then came athletes from tennis and other sports, players who already understood training, pressure, nutrition and competition. Now, he believes, the next generation is arriving. Pickleball natives. Players trained in the sport from childhood, without needing to unlearn tennis mechanics. That is where Asia enters the conversation.

Rifkind is convinced that countries such as China, Vietnam, Malaysia and India will soon produce players capable of standing with the best in the world. His reasoning is not vague. He has seen the training culture up close. In China, he has watched five-year-olds at table tennis centres hitting thousands of balls a day. He is careful about the methods, and says some of it would be considered unacceptable in the western world. But the discipline and repetition are undeniable.

At a PCL Rising Stars event in Hainan, he watched 14 to 18-year-olds from across Asia and was stunned.

"I was blown away by how good these kids were," he says. "Every single one of these kids had every single skill."

Some, he says, were already 5.0 players. They had positioning, pressure management, sportsmanship and joy. That combination caught his eye. Not just skill. Readiness.

"The secret sauce to pickleball will always be there: the community, the friendships, the laughs, the giggles."

The next step is more formal still. Rifkind says IPTPA is working with partners in Asia on what he describes as the first full residential pickleball academy in the world, aimed at players aged 14 to 18. Coaching, nutrition, off-court training, recovery areas, ice baths, saunas, treatment rooms. A proper high-performance environment. If it works, he wants academies on every continent so players do not have to move to the United States to get better. That is not a small idea. It is the same cement again. A goal made visible.

But Rifkind is not romantic about where the sport stands. He sees problems everywhere. Ratings. Equipment. Governance. Illegal paddles. Counterfeit approvals. Line calls. Safety. Too many people arriving too quickly without enough structure underneath them. His concern about paddles is especially sharp.

At professional level, an illegal paddle creates an advantage. At recreational level, it can change someone's first experience of the sport entirely. He describes a beginner being told to move up to the kitchen line, only to face someone with an overpowered paddle trying to smash the ball at them.

"They're thinking, 'I don't want to get up to that net. This isn't fun. This is intimidating.'"

That, for Rifkind, is not a small issue. It cuts directly into what makes pickleball work. If equipment turns the sport away from play and towards intimidation, the game loses something important.

The same applies tactically. Rifkind rejects the idea that dinking is dead. He has heard that argument from people in Asia who claim the sport has become a power game. His answer is simple. Watch Ben Johns. If the highest-level doubles matches still produce long dink rallies, then the chess match has not disappeared. It has changed. He believes equipment has added speed and spin, but the best players still understand how to take away what opponents want to do. That is why, in his view, Johns remains the standard. Other players may have quicker hands or more explosive athleticism. But pickleball, at its best, is still a game of counters, adjustments and control.

That is why Rifkind's view of the sport is more complicated than simple evangelism. He wants growth, but not chaos. He wants professionalism, but not at the expense of play. He wants global expansion, but not without teaching standards. He wants the Olympics, but knows the sport cannot get there while governance remains fractured.

At one point, he says plainly that people at the highest levels of the Olympic movement love pickleball and want to see it there. But the first requirement is one international federation. That, he argues, has been the central governance problem. This is the uncomfortable truth in the middle of his optimism.

Pickleball is not being held back by lack of interest. It is being tested by its own speed.

And yet, for all the systems talk, Rifkind keeps returning to something softer.

Play.

He has seen professional players finish matches and then coach the players who beat them. He says that does not happen in tennis. The culture is different.

"The secret sauce to pickleball will always be there," he says. "The community. The friendships that develop, the laughs, the giggles."

Then he says the line that explains why he still believes in the sport. "It's playtime." Not childish. Not unserious. Playtime. A word adults often lose, then spend the rest of their lives trying to recover. That is why the systems matter. Not to make pickleball colder, more bureaucratic or more controlled. To protect the thing that made it powerful in the first place.

Seymour Rifkind once wrote a goal into wet cement because he understood, even then, that ambition needs form. Decades later, he is still doing the same thing. Only now the cement is different.

Curriculums. Federations. Academies. Coaching standards. Global pathways. Olympic ambitions.

The scale has changed. The instinct has not. Make the goal visible. Then build until the world has to take it seriously.

**"It's
playtime."**



THE GLOBAL ARCHITECT: HOW A 'RIDICULOUS' SPORT TURNED LOUIS LAVILLE INTO EUROPE'S PICKLEBALL PIONEER

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

- Laville holds **87 professional gold medals** and was the first European player to achieve a **6.0 DUPR rating**.
- He traded his London desk job for the Australian and Indian pro circuits, learning crucial tactical advantages.
- Now back in Europe, the co-founder of the UK's Premier Pickleball League is chasing his **100th career gold**.

It was almost a decade ago when Louis Laville's mother returned from a holiday in the United States with a peculiar new obsession. Like she always did, she had jumped into the deep end of a random new sport.

"You've got to stay out of the kitchen," she told her son, trying to explain the rules. "You've got to let the return bounce."

To a young, sporty Laville—a former Surrey squash player who boasted strong hand-eye coordination—the concept sounded entirely unnatural. "That sounds ridiculous," he remembered thinking. "That sounds stupid." But his mother had already booked them a session for Sunday in London. Paired up with Faye Plummer for his first-ever match,

Laville quickly realised he had a knack for it. Armed with youthful athleticism, he ignored the traditional, slow-paced dinking game of the era, opting instead to speed up lobs against the older players across the net.

"I wanted a win," Laville jokes today. "I think that's kind of the fast roots of where it all happened."

Fast forward nine years, and that initial Sunday session has turned into a globe-trotting professional career. Laville is an eight-time national champion, a seven-time European champion, and the first Global Pickleball Alliance (GPA) World No. 1.

THE AUSTRALIAN CRUCIBLE AND THE ART OF THE "SPEED UP"

For years, Laville dominated the European circuit, relying on exceptional fast hands, sharp tactical awareness at the non-volley zone, and the ability to patiently outlast opponents. In the finals of the 2024 European Championships in Southampton, he famously anchored the right side against Spain, waiting out grueling dink rallies until the perfect moment to counter and strike. But the real turning point in his career—and his transition from a dominant European player to a genuine global threat—came a little over a year ago.

Entering the Major League Pickleball (MLP) draft for Australia, Laville had a sky-high DUPR rating but no guarantees. When he was selected by the Southern Stars, everything changed.

"My boss came in at 8:00 a.m., and the letter was ready to go," Laville recalls about the morning he quit his day job to pursue pickleball full-time. What he was walking away from was stability—a regular salary, routine, and a clear path outside the sport—for something far less certain. The Australian circuit proved to be a crucible. Unlike Europe, where the sport was still largely played on makeshift badminton or indoor tennis courts with inconsistent bounces, Australia boasted perfect, dedicated acrylic facilities. This environmental shift had bred a completely different style of play: aggressive, off-the-bounce speed-ups.

"In Australia, because they're playing on perfect courts... a lot of players just speed up off the bounce," Laville explains. "If anything is a slow dink, it would just be sped up. And it's not aimed necessarily to win the point. It's a speed-up aimed at your body to force a pop-up."

Players like George Wall were masters of this combo attack. For the first time, Laville found himself constantly on the defensive, forced to adapt or perish. By training daily on the Gold Coast, he not only learned to defend the speed-up but incorporated it into his own arsenal—particularly on the right side in men's doubles. He eventually won the MLP Australia title with the Bondi Pickleball Club, capping off a transformational year down under. "I felt like my level hugely improved over the year," he says. "I've kind of got this shot in my arsenal that I've basically had all year to practice and get better at."

THE INDIAN CAULDRON: THE WORLD PICKLEBALL LEAGUE

If Australia honed his technique, India tested his nerve. Laville was drafted into the inaugural season of the World Pickleball League (WPBL), joining Pune United. Nothing could have prepared the players for the scale, razzmatazz, and intensity of the franchise-based league. Team owners were Indian celebrities. Matches felt more like heavyweight boxing bouts or IPL T20 cricket clashes.

"The semi-finals was one of the best pickleball evenings I've experienced," Laville says. "There was a celebrity event beforehand, which meant the crowd was full... literally 500 to 1,000 people. It was just really, really loud the whole match. Even the ref was struggling to keep the crowd quiet. It was like a cricket event."

Under immense pressure in a boiling arena, Laville and his mixed doubles partner Molly O'Donoghue won the decisive tiebreaker (the "dreambreaker") to send Pune United to the finals. By Season 2, the secret was out. As Laville notes, "The level in Season 2 was significantly stronger... Anyone who hadn't signed a PPA contract that was eligible to sign up had signed up." Playing for the Hyderabad Superstars, Laville found himself sharing courts with players who had beaten the likes of Federico Staksrud and Ben Johns. It was a masterclass in elite, high-stakes competition—and it solidified his standing as a player who thrives under the brightest lights.

"My boss came in at 8:00 am, and the letter was ready to go."

BUILDING THE EUROPEAN FUTURE

Now back in Europe, taking double gold in Stockholm and embarking on the RTA Tour, Laville is uniquely positioned to see the stark contrasts in how the sport is growing globally.

While Asian leagues are heavily fueled by high-net-worth individuals seeking prestige—"They want to be treated like the VIP... and they probably don't care if they don't necessarily make money back," Laville observes—the European model is far more pragmatic. Investors in the UK and Europe are looking for sustainable, five-year returns on their investment.

This cautious approach has led Laville to take matters into his own hands. Seeking a way to guarantee high-level competition for Britain's top players, he co-founded the Premier Pickleball League (PPL) in the UK.

"It was kind of to give the best players more opportunities to play against each other," he says. The league has since expanded to include a Challenger division that actively develops the next generation of talent. "This year, the level and depth of all the teams was so much stronger that it's not a forgone conclusion that the best guy can carry their team."

For a professional whose livelihood depends on the sport, sustainability is key. Laville is quick to credit sponsors like Franklin and Skechers for allowing him to treat pickleball as a true profession, rather than a weekend gamble. "There's not enough money in the sport from a playing point of view, especially in Europe at the moment, to give up your full-time job unless you've got people helping you out," he admits, noting that players who rely entirely on tournament winnings to survive quickly lose their love for the game.

CHASING THE CENTURY MARK

Looking ahead to the end of 2026, Laville's ambitions remain sky-high. He plans to hit the APP tour in the U.S. as an international ambassador (with stops in Detroit, Kentucky, Kansas, and Florida), defend his European titles, and rack up more GPA points.

But there is one specific number looming on the horizon: 100. Currently sitting at 87 professional gold medals, the century mark is well within reach.

"I am really wanting to get to 100," Laville confesses. "That would be the epitome of my pickleball career if I could get to that... the biggest thanks to all the partners and people I've played against and with for the last 10 years."

Until then, he'll keep travelling, threading speed-ups through bodies, and competing at a level that continues to rise around him. "I really enjoy playing pickleball and travelling and competing," Laville smiles. "That's where I'm really fortunate to be able to do this full time."





THE ANALYTICAL RISE OF THEO PLATEL: HOW AN ACCOUNTANT FROM NICE CONQUERED EUROPEAN PICKLEBALL

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

It is late April 2026, and Théo Platel is looking at the numbers.

The 24-year-old Frenchman has already collected 12 titles from his first 10 tournaments of the year, a staggering hit rate that has pushed him to the top of the European RTA Tour men's doubles rankings. For a player who naturally leans towards analysis, these are the kind of figures that matter. But the numbers alone don't explain why Platel has become the defining face of French pickleball. To understand that, you have to look at how he sees the game.

FROM TENNIS PRODIGY TO A HUMBLING EDUCATION

Platel's racket-sport pedigree was forged early. By the age of 13, he had achieved a 15/1 tennis classification, placing him among the top 10 juniors in the South of France. It provided a strong technical foundation, but as Platel is quick to point out, a tennis background doesn't automatically translate. His introduction to pickleball arrived by chance in the summer of 2021. After a padel session with his older brother, Julien, a local initiation session changed the trajectory of his sporting life. What followed was a familiar experience for many crossover athletes: a quick lesson in humility.

"We played 60-year-old people," Platel recalls. "I was like, 'Okay, I should beat this guy just by looking at him.' And it's not good to do that. They beat me easy."

That moment stayed with him.

"I had to understand this game... to understand how he beat me and how I can beat him later. That's why I really love pickleball. Tactic is really a big part of the sport."

THE DATA-DRIVEN PROFESSIONAL

Platel's edge comes from how he processes the game. "I was working as an accountant," he says, laughing at the correction after initially calling himself a scientist. "For me, analysis is easy. When I see a game on YouTube... I really want to understand why this guy played this type of shot and what it brings to him." Rather than copying what top American players do, he breaks it down.

When he wanted to add a backhand flick, he didn't just replicate the movement. He watched the same matches multiple times, isolating when the shot was used and why it worked. Only then did he take it onto the court, repeating the pattern again and again until it became reliable. It is a demanding approach. A typical day in Nice can include two hours in the gym followed by two hours of structured drilling. With limited high-level match play available locally, much of his development has come through repetition rather than competition. That discipline shows in his consistency.

THE MATH OF A CHAMPIONSHIP PARTNERSHIP

For three years, Théo's rise was closely linked to his brother Julien, who was both partner and sounding board. The combination worked, culminating in an appearance for Team France, but the intensity of competing alongside a sibling eventually led to a change. By 2025, Julien had stepped into a full-time coaching role, allowing Théo to explore new partnerships. His thinking around doubles is, unsurprisingly, methodical.

"If you play with someone and you're a really good left-side player... but you make [your partner] play on the right side, maybe they are at 50 percent," Platel explains. "Together you're like 150 percent. But imagine if you play right side where you're not too bad, and your partner feels good on the left side. It will be 80 percent and 80 percent—which is 160 percent."

He found that balance with Great Britain's Ben Cawston. Platel dictates from the front of the court, while Cawston—one of the quickest hands in Europe—anchors the defence and counter-attacks. Off the court, their friendship allows for direct, honest feedback. On it, the partnership has become one of the most reliable combinations on the tour.

THE MENTAL REBUILD

The rise to the top of the rankings has not been straightforward. Platel admits that 2024 was a difficult year. Expectations rose quickly, and so did the pressure that came with them. Funding his own travel, often at a cost of around 800 euros per tournament, added another layer of stress.

"Before that, I was like, 'Okay, I'm number one, I cannot lose any matches,' which is impossible," he says. That mindset became a problem. To move forward, he had to reset. "If I lose, it's just a match. He was better. I will practice 10 times harder and I will be better to beat him." It sounds simple, but it marked a shift from protecting his position to improving it. That shift showed.

"80 percent and 80 percent — which is 160 percent."

THE "AMERICAN DREAM" AND THE FUTURE OF FRENCH PICKLEBALL

Platel is now looking beyond Europe. He has launched a crowdfunding initiative to spend six months competing on the PPA and APP tours in the United States, where the depth of competition remains unmatched. Back home, the landscape is changing as well. In January 2026, the French Tennis Federation (FFT) officially took over the governance of pickleball, giving the sport institutional backing and a clearer pathway for growth. As France's top-ranked player, Platel is working closely with the federation, aware that rapid growth needs structure to sustain it. When asked what advice he would give to a 4.0-level player trying to improve, he returns to his core principle.

"People play the point in a way that they *want* to win the point... they try to do something big and take some risk," he says. "Just put the ball maybe twice in, maybe three times, and then your opponent is going to pop up the ball. Work on your consistency."

CHASING THE MARGINS

Looking ahead, Platel's goals are clear. He wants the double crown on the European Pro Tour. A strong showing at the French Nationals. And a chance to test himself consistently against the best in the world. But more than that, he is chasing refinement. Because for all the numbers, all the titles, and all the progress, his view of the game hasn't changed. It's still something to be solved. Not through one big shot. But through a series of better decisions.

And right now, that's a calculation he's getting right more often than anyone else in Europe.

FEATURE



THE BOARDROOM TO THE BASELINE: HOW A SWEDISH EXECUTIVE IS SHAPING EUROPE'S PICKLEBALL CIRCUIT

St. Anton am Arlberg, Austria. Surrounded by former national and European racket sports champions at the Arlberg Pickleball Championship, Gustaf Geterud heard the tournament announcer pause. Unsure of Geterud's athletic pedigree in a field of elite athletes, the commentator hesitated.

Geterud simply shouted back across the court: "Business background!"

He wasn't kidding. A former CEO, COO, and the current Head of Talent Acquisition for Coop in Sweden, Geterud does not possess the traditional athletic resume. He describes himself as a "books guy" who was never an athletic wonder. Yet, with a formidable 5.110 DUPR rating and a reputation as the first Scandinavian player to execute the Erne and the shake 'n bake, the corporate executive is quietly helping shape the continent's competitive pickleball scene. Through his analytical mindset, tactical discipline, and institutional leadership, he is bridging the gap between European potential and North American professional standards.

THE CORPORATE TACTICIAN

In a high-pressure corporate meeting, clarity of thought is paramount. You have to step back, read the room, and shift momentum in your favour. For Geterud, the pickleball court is no different.

"I don't have a talent to rely on," Geterud admits. "What can I do instead? Well, I have to think of and find other ways to stay ahead."

This mentality manifests in a highly process-driven approach to practice and a strategic focus on neutralisation. Instead of matching his opponents' raw power or agility, Geterud drills specifically to survive as the underdog. He recalled a recent matchup at the European Pickleball Open in Malaga against a former top-1000 tennis player from Spain. Knowing he couldn't beat the Spaniard with speed or explosiveness, Geterud executed a precise, low-impact game plan.

"If I keep it low and on his feet, he cannot use his skill set," Geterud noted. "That shouldn't be possible. A guy like me... but somehow it did."

His training philosophy is equally analytical. Rather than practising to dominate every point at a single pace, Geterud deliberately modulates his level. He adjusts his game to the calibre of his opponent, allowing him to elevate his play when facing a 5.5-level athlete and intentionally practising the defensive patterns required to survive against superior shot-makers.

THE TRANSATLANTIC SHIFT

In the early days of the European pickleball boom, the prevailing strategy was simple: hit the ball as hard as possible. Geterud, who travels to the United States annually to train, experienced a sharp contrast when he first brought his aggressive, power-heavy European style to American parks.

"If you drive the ball, they will look at you like, 'What are you doing?'" Geterud says of his time in the US. "The game style in the US is so much more about patience, about building up the point."

Embracing this approach, Geterud adjusted his game. Playing as a Gamma Europe Ambassador, he uses a paddle designed with a T700 carbon surface and a foam-injected core that dampens vibration. This allows him to execute high-level resets, absorbing pace and dropping the ball softly into the non-volley zone. Opponents in Europe, often more accustomed to power exchanges, find themselves drawn into longer, more controlled rallies where Geterud's patience becomes the advantage. This shift has proven highly effective, contributing to a fourth-place finish in the APC Finals Mixed Doubles rankings alongside his partner, Isabelle Eriksson.

ARCHITECTING THE CIRCUIT

Geterud's impact extends beyond the court. He serves as an unofficial tournament director, the official match and player analyst for the Road to Arlberg (RTA) tour, and a key organiser for the WPC Series Sweden Open.

At Pickla Park in Stockholm—a facility quickly becoming a high-performance hub for the sport—Geterud recently organised the RTA 2000, an event with a €9,000 prize pool that attracts talent from across the continent. He has also used his network to bring American expertise into the European system, recently facilitating clinics in Stockholm with Erik Paillet, a top-50 US pro with Swedish roots.

As global entities like the PPA begin exploring expansion into Europe and Asia, often bringing exclusivity contracts with them, Geterud's background in talent acquisition gives him a clear view of the situation.

"Don't try to lock players in like PPA has tried to do in the US," Geterud advises. "Be the best tour, have the best opportunities for players, and players will come."

THE SCOUT'S EYE

That same background makes Geterud one of Europe's most attentive talent watchers. While some nations look to recruit players with distant heritage to strengthen national teams, he keeps his focus on development within the system. His current standout to watch is Francesca Rumi. After watching the former Italian tennis player defeat established Spanish players such as Sabrina Mendez and Maria Fernandez Costantino, Geterud pointed to her reach, reactions, and awareness as key strengths.

"Just that ability to read the game and see who's in an off position and then do a seemingly very easy shot that sets up an opportunity... I seriously think she will be number one in Europe before the end of the year," he said.

Whether he is scouting emerging talent, managing a tournament budget, or executing a precise third-shot drop, Gustaf Geterud is showing that the future of European pickleball does not only come from traditional sporting backgrounds. In some cases, it is being built by people who understand structure just as well as skill.



YOUR INNER CHIMP PLAYS PICKLEBALL TOO

BY LEE WHITWELL

Pickleball is fun. Effortlessly addictive, in fact. It brings people together, gets us moving, and gives us a place to play again — something most of us didn't realise we were missing. But beneath all of that, there's something else going on. Because how we play is a direct reflection of how we handle life. Same reactions. Same patterns. Same triggers. And the truth is, most people don't even realise it.

We've all seen it. The paddle slam. The exaggerated sigh. The "sorry" after every missed shot, like they're apologising for existing. The look at a partner that says *that was definitely your fault* without actually saying it. And the best part? Every single one of us has been all of those people.

Because here's the truth no one really talks about. It's not about the ball. It's not about the score. It's not about that one dink you just sent into the net. It's about your brain. More specifically, the part that loses its mind when things don't go your way.

There's a concept from *The Chimp Paradox* by Steve Peters that explains this perfectly. He calls it the chimp. The emotional, reactive part of your brain that doesn't care that you said you were "just here for fun." Your chimp cares about one thing: don't look stupid, don't lose, and don't be judged.

So when you miss an easy ball, it takes over. You can see it everywhere. The spiraler who misses one shot and suddenly the next five points are a full-blown identity crisis. The over-apologiser saying “sorry” on repeat, not because they’re polite but because they’re trying to soften the blow of perceived failure. The blamer — the ball was bad, the sun was in their eyes, their partner didn’t move — anything but sitting with the discomfort of *I messed that up*.

The silent one, no eye contact, just internal combustion while pretending everything’s fine. And then the classic — “I’m fine.” They are, in fact, not fine. None of this is about skill. It’s about how we handle pressure, discomfort, and that quiet fear that people might be judging us... over a game with a plastic ball. You miss an easy putaway. Silence. Your shoulders tighten, your partner avoids eye contact, and suddenly that one shot feels like it defined the last five minutes of your life. That’s not the shot. That’s the story you just told yourself about it. Most people think they’re reacting to the point. They’re not. They’re reacting to what the point means to them.

And here’s where it gets deeper.

When we were young, we played without thinking. We played until the street lights came on. There were public service announcements asking parents if they knew where their kids were, because we were just out there playing. Free. No pressure, no image to protect, no internal narrative running in the background. Somewhere along the way, we grew up. We became more aware, more guarded, more concerned with how we’re perceived. Our world got smaller. Our play got replaced with responsibility. And then along comes pickleball — a sport that somehow gives us permission to play again. But we don’t show up as blank slates. We show up carrying things. Work stress that doesn’t switch off. Family responsibilities. Relationships that are thriving or quietly falling apart. Divorce. Loss. Grief that hasn’t quite settled. The uncertainty of starting over somewhere new. The pressure to hold it all together while, underneath it, something feels like it’s shifting. And most of the time, we manage. Until a missed shot cracks the surface.

Suddenly it’s not just about the point. It’s frustration that was already there. Pressure that didn’t have an outlet. Something small tapping into something much bigger. And it comes out sideways. That’s your chimp, and sometimes it’s not reacting to the game at all. It’s reacting to everything you brought onto the court with you. As children, no one cared if we messed up. As adults, we think everyone is watching. They’re not.

Because here’s the truth no one really talks about. It’s not about the ball. It’s not about the score.

They’re too busy dealing with their own chimp, carrying their own version of all of the above. The person across from you isn’t analysing your game — they’re trying to regulate their own reaction. Your partner isn’t keeping score of your mistakes — they’re hoping they don’t make the next one. Everyone is navigating their own internal dialogue, their own insecurities, their own pressure to get it right. We just assume the spotlight is on us, when in reality, everyone feels like they’re standing in it.

And maybe that’s where something unexpected happens. Because despite all of that — the reactions, the internal noise — pickleball has quietly become a place where connection breaks through anyway. Between points, conversations start. Quick comments turn into longer ones. Familiar faces become friends. Strangers become people you look for when you walk onto the court. A simple “good shot” can turn into a conversation you didn’t know you needed.

It becomes more than a game. It becomes a canvas. A place where, even in the middle of our own reactions, we find connection. Where people feel seen without needing to explain everything they’re carrying. Where belonging doesn’t require perfection, just presence. And for a moment, whatever we brought onto the court with us feels a little lighter.

We don’t come back to get better at pickleball. We come back to get better at handling ourselves when things don’t go our way. Every game is a reset. A quiet promise — this time I won’t get annoyed, this time I’ll stay calm, this time I won’t care so much.

And sometimes you don't. But sometimes, you do. You pause. You breathe. You let it go. And that moment feels bigger than the point you just lost.

So how do you control it? You don't eliminate the chimp — that's not the goal. You just get faster at catching it. Pause before you react. Don't attach meaning to every mistake. And remind yourself of something we forget far too easily: You're not being evaluated. You're just playing.

And maybe that's the real magic of all of this. In a world where we're supposed to have it together — managing careers, relationships, expectations — pickleball gives us a space where we get to be a little messy. A little imperfect. A little human.

Where we lose our cool sometimes, find it again, and come back the next day anyway. Not because we need to win. But because we need that feeling. We think we're playing pickleball. But really, we're relearning how to play, how to feel, and how to handle ourselves when things don't go our way.

And if you can do that on a pickleball court — with people watching, emotions high, and your chimp ready to take over — you can probably do it anywhere.

**We think
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playing
pickleball.
But really,
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how to
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REFEREE'S ROOM: INSIDE THE US OPEN

BY TARA CREASEY

The US Open remains the biggest event in the world for referees. In 2026, as the tournament celebrated its 10th anniversary, every match was fully officiated — a scale that reflects both the size of the event and the standards now expected at the top level of the sport.

This year, the referee team included 135 officials from across the United States, Canada, Europe, and beyond, including 11 European Pickleball Federation-credentialed referees. I had the privilege of being selected for the second time, and returning with prior experience made a noticeable difference. The format, the venue, and the expectations all felt familiar — but the standard had clearly moved on again.

Preparation was extensive. Officials were required to pass online tests and take part in a series of briefings to ensure consistency across every court. The goal was simple: deliver a level of officiating that players — both professional and amateur — can trust.

That standard runs deeper than just calling lines. It covers player welfare, court management, communication, and the ability to handle unusual situations under pressure. At an event of this scale, referees are not just rule enforcers — they are part of the structure that allows the tournament to function.

The days themselves were demanding. Early starts, late finishes, and long

hours in the heat meant that preparation off the court — rest, hydration, recovery — became just as important as performance on it. Each morning began with training sessions led by the Head Referee, setting the tone for the day and reinforcing the detail that separates good officiating from great officiating.

Referees worked in rotating “pods,” moving between matches across different courts. It created a constant rhythm, with little downtime and a wide range of scenarios to manage. Some officials even took on double shifts — not for the faint-hearted, but a reflection of the commitment within the group.

What becomes clear quickly is that consistency is the real challenge. Not knowledge of the rules, but applying them identically across dozens of matches, players, and situations. That is where pressure shows, and where good officiating is defined.

One of the most valuable aspects of the week happened away from the court. In the referee tent, discussions never really stopped. Situations were debated, interpretations were challenged, and experiences were shared — from technical rule clarifications to medical time-outs, wheelchair play, and hybrid formats. It was a learning environment in the truest sense. The standout experience came through officiating wheelchair hybrid matches. For many referees, this introduced a new layer of rules and considerations, requiring constant focus and adaptation.

In one match, a call hinged on whether a player had lifted from the seat at the exact moment of contact. It sounds simple written down. In real time, with pace and pressure, it was anything but.

It also led to very specific discussions — including how to correctly phrase calls relating to movement and contact — that underline just how detailed the role can become.

More than anything, the week reinforced the role referees play in the wider ecosystem of the sport. The players, the spectators, the organisers — all rely on a level of consistency and clarity that often goes unnoticed when done well. To be part of that environment, and to share the court with such a broad and committed community, remains a privilege.

The US Open is not just a test of players. It is a test of the systems around them — and of the people trusted to hold those systems together.





DRILL BITS: SIX HABITS THAT MAKE YOU TOUGH TO BEAT

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

Small adjustments. Big difference. These six repeatable habits will improve your control, positioning, and decision-making without overcomplicating your game.

If you are looking for simple, practical ways to become harder to play against, you do not need gimmicks or wholesale changes. The difference at higher levels is often built on a small set of repeatable habits that improve positioning, decision-making, and control.

These six concepts are used consistently by strong players. Each one is paired with a drill you can take straight onto the court.

1. CROSSCOURT KITCHEN CONTROL

The Concept: On arrival at the kitchen line, hitting straight ahead too early often hands control to your opponent. A crosscourt dink gives you margin, opens angles, and forces the other side to prove they can manage the rally before you change direction.

The Drill: "Mandatory Crosscourt"

- **Setup:** Both players at the kitchen line
- **Execution:** Start a dink rally. Your first **three dinks must go crosscourt**
- **Focus:** Keep the ball low and angled. After three successful crosscourt dinks, the point goes live

2. GRIP PRESSURE AWARENESS

The Concept: Using the same grip pressure on every shot limits control. Soft shots require soft hands. A relaxed grip allows the paddle to absorb pace and keep the ball low.

The Drill: "3-to-8 Squeeze"

- **Setup:** One player at the baseline, one at the kitchen
- **Execution:** Baseline player drives. Kitchen player calls "Three" and resets with a relaxed grip
- **Focus:** Let the ball settle into the paddle. Build the habit: **soft hands for control, firm hands for attack**

3. THE TWO-STEP TRANSITION

The Concept: Charging forward blindly after a third shot creates problems. Good players move with control, assess the ball, then commit.

The Drill: "Read and React"

- **Setup:** Both players start at the baseline, feeder opposite
- **Execution:** Partner hits a drop. As contact is made, take two controlled steps forward
- 1. **Focus:** Good drop → move in ("Go") High drop → hold or recover ("Hold")

4. DEFENDING THE DEAD DINK

The Concept: When a speed-up is coming, guessing loses points. Positioning wins them. Aligning your body with the ball removes your opponent's simplest option.

The Drill: "Chest to the Ball"

- **Setup:** Both players at the kitchen
- **Execution:** Partner feeds attackable dinks
- **Focus:** Move so your **chest is directly behind the ball** before contact. Block, don't swing

5. FORWARD MOMENTUM ON DRIVES

The Concept: Stepping back to create space reduces power and delays your transition. Stepping forward transfers weight into the shot and keeps you moving toward the net.

The Drill: "Step-Through Drive"

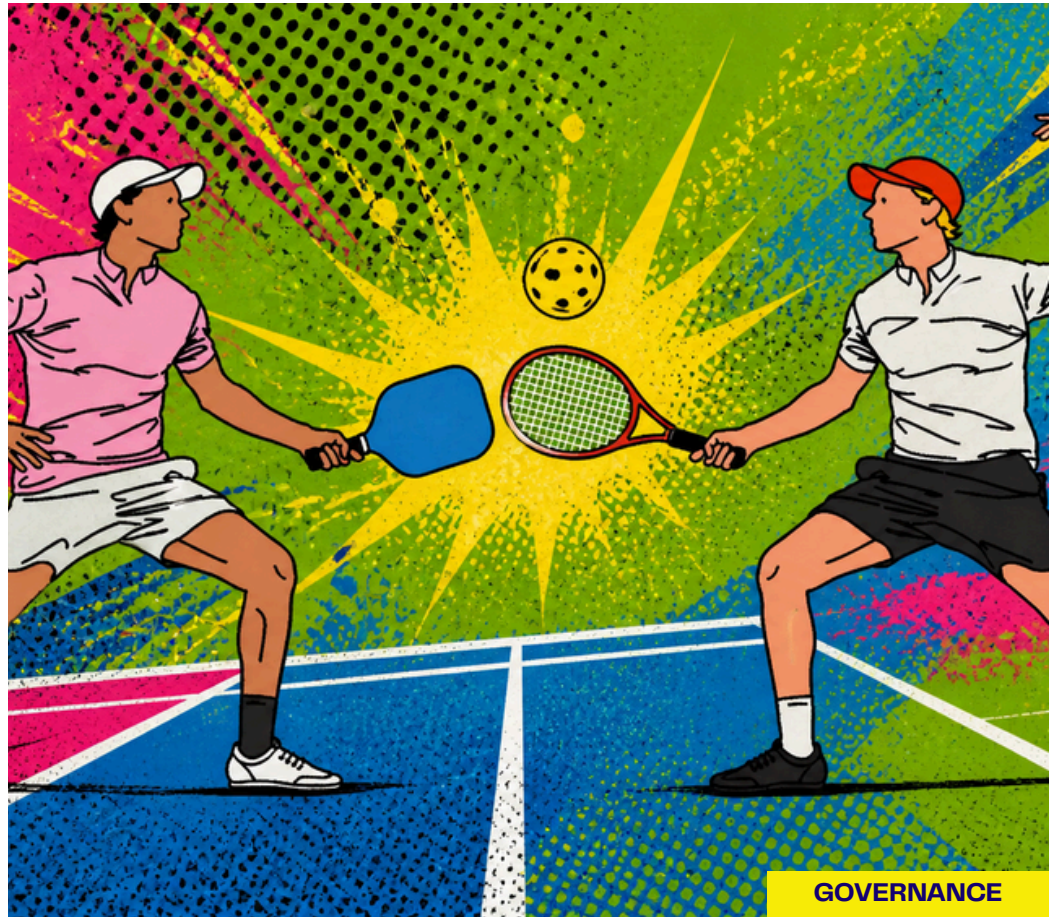
- **Setup:** Start just behind the baseline
- **Execution:** Step forward into each drive with your lead foot
- **Focus:** Your momentum should carry you forward after contact.

6. BACKHAND FLICK POSITIONING

The Concept: Most backhand flick issues are positional, not technical. Standing too wide closes your swing path. A small adjustment opens multiple attacking options.

The Drill: "Inside-Step Setup"

- **Setup:** Start slightly wide at the kitchen line
- **Execution:** As the ball comes to your backhand, take **one small step inward**
- **Focus:** From that position, practise three targets: crosscourt, middle, and line



PICKLEBALL'S GOVERNANCE CHALLENGE: WHY INDEPENDENCE FROM TENNIS IS NOW ESSENTIAL

BY KAREN MITCHELL

The State of Play 2026 report from Sporting Goods Intelligence highlights a shift that is now impossible to ignore across racquet sports: the boundaries between tennis, padel and pickleball are blurring. Facilities are shared, players are crossing over, and investment is flowing across all three. But within that convergence lies a defining question for pickleball's future: who actually governs the sport?

The Hidden Conflict: Tennis Governing Pickleball

In many countries, national tennis federations have taken on responsibility for emerging racquet sports, including pickleball and padel. On the surface, this is logical:

- They have infrastructure
- They understand racquet sports
- They are already connected to funding and government systems

However, this creates a structural conflict of interest. Tennis is no longer just a partner sport. It is a direct competitor for players, facilities, and investment. The same report points to increasing player crossover and the rise of multi-sport facilities, where decisions are made based on revenue, utilisation, and growth potential.

In that context, expecting tennis-led organisations to objectively prioritise pickleball's long-term development is becoming unrealistic.

WHY ONE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION MATTERS

This is where the need for a single, recognised International Federation (IF) for pickleball becomes critical—not just for coordination, but for structural independence.

The WPF has been clear on this point: structural independence from tennis is necessary, and it remains a central objective.

A credible IF would not replace national bodies, but it would set the framework within which they operate.

1. ENABLING INDEPENDENT NATIONAL GOVERNANCE

A recognised IF can establish minimum governance standards that all national bodies must meet.

Crucially, this includes the ability to require:

- Dedicated pickleball leadership structures
- Clear separation from competing sport priorities
- Accountability to the global pickleball community

This does not exclude tennis federations from playing a role—but it ensures that pickleball is not structurally subordinate to them.

2. PROTECTING THE INTEGRITY OF THE GAME

Recent developments at the professional level underline another growing risk. The United Pickleball Association has introduced its own rulebook for its pro tour and Major League Pickleball. Innovation is valuable. Fragmentation is not.

Without a single governing authority:

- Multiple rulebooks can emerge
- The sport risks divergence between professional and recreational play
- Global consistency is weakened

A unified IF must act as the final authority on the laws of the game, ensuring that innovation happens within a coherent global framework.

3. SUPPORTING THE PATH TO GLOBAL RECOGNITION

For pickleball to achieve full international recognition—including potential Olympic inclusion—it must demonstrate:

- Unified governance
- Global rule alignment
- Credible institutional structures

These are not optional. They are prerequisites. Without them, the sport's global ambitions become harder to realise.

4. NURTURING ONE OF PICKLEBALL'S GREATEST STRENGTHS

One of the most compelling insights from the report is pickleball's unique participation profile. In England, for example, women outnumber men in the sport, making it the only major racquet sport where this is the case. This is more than a data point. It is a defining strength of the sport.

But it is not guaranteed to persist. It requires:

- Inclusive competition structures
- Equal visibility and opportunity
- A continued focus on accessibility and social play

A fragmented governance landscape risks losing this advantage. A unified IF can ensure it is protected and developed intentionally.

5. A GLOBAL SPORT WITHOUT GLOBAL DATA

There is another, often overlooked, challenge facing pickleball's development: we do not yet have a reliable global picture of the sport. The State of Play 2026 report is telling in this regard. Tennis and padel are presented with clear global participation figures—106 million and 35 million players respectively—yet pickleball is largely represented through US data alone. This is not because pickleball is small. Quite the opposite is true.

The sport is now played in 75+ countries, with rapid growth across Asia, Europe and beyond. But many of these nations are at very different stages of development:

- Some have established national bodies and club systems
- Others are driven by informal, community-led play
- Many lack the infrastructure to systematically track participation

The result is a fragmented and unreliable data landscape:

- No consistent definition of “player”
- Limited visibility on clubs, courts, or participation frequency
- No global benchmarking across regions

By contrast, tennis and padel benefit from centralised reporting structures, coordinated through their international federations.

This is not just a statistical issue—it is a strategic one. Without reliable global data:

- It is harder to secure government recognition and funding
- Commercial partners lack confidence in the scale of the opportunity
- International comparisons are weakened
- Long-term planning becomes reactive rather than evidence-based

A single International Federation would play a critical role here—not just in governance, but in measurement. It could:

- Define global standards for participation data
- Coordinate reporting across national bodies
- Build a credible, unified picture of the sport’s growth

Because ultimately, what gets measured gets supported.

CONCLUSION: A MOMENT THAT REQUIRES CLARITY

Pickleball has grown rapidly by being accessible, social, and adaptable. But as the sport matures, those same qualities need to be supported by clear structures. The question is no longer whether pickleball will organise itself globally, but how quickly it can do so with clarity. National bodies are already making alignment decisions in the absence of a single recognised International Federation—often based on governance principles such as democratic representation, structural independence, and the need for credible global data.

If pickleball is to fulfil its global potential, those principles must converge into a single, shared framework for the sport.



THE PICKLEBALL PARADOX: WHY THE WORLD'S FASTEST-GROWING SPORT IS STILL WAITING FOR FANS

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

The courts are full. The barriers to entry are practically nonexistent. Across the globe, millions of people are picking up paddles and experiencing the instant appeal of the world’s fastest-growing sport.

But there is a glaring disconnect at the heart of pickleball’s rise: the courts are packed, but the metaphorical grandstands remain empty. You can put 30 avid, paddle-obsessed players in a room, have a generational talent like Ben Johns walk through the door, and there’s a good chance no one would even look up. Pickleball has solved the hardest problem in sports—getting people to actually play. What it hasn’t solved is how to turn those millions of players into a genuine fandom.

For **Calvin Innes**, an award-winning executive creative director, fandom strategist, and co-founder of the agency The Forge, the answer to this “Pickleball Paradox” lies in shifting the sport’s focus from mechanics to world-building.

“It’s solved the most difficult problem, which is access. There are very few barriers to entry,” Innes explains. “But what that doesn’t do is solve the attachment issue. It comes down to a really simple thing: it’s storytelling. It’s world-building.”

THE 'USER' VS. THE 'FAN'

To understand pickleball’s current ceiling, you have to understand the difference between a traditional marketing audience and a true fandom.

“It’s storytelling. It’s world-building.”

Right now, pickleball has a large base of what Innes would call "users." They value the sport for fitness, social interaction, and fun. But fans are different. Fans are deeply invested; the sport, the players, and the culture become part of their identity.

"Traditional audiences are quite passive," Innes says. "They consume what they are fed. You hope a certain percentage will hook into it. Whereas fans are deeply invested. They care. They naturally amplify the message."

Innes points to Formula 1 as a useful blueprint for this transition. Prior to Liberty Media's takeover in 2017, F1 was largely closed off—a sport for traditionalists who cared deeply about engine mechanics and technical detail. The drivers' personalities were largely hidden behind helmets and PR constraints.

When Liberty opened the sport to social media and greenlit *Drive to Survive*, they didn't just market the cars; they built a narrative around the people involved. Drivers like Lewis Hamilton crossed into fashion and music. Suddenly, millions of new fans cared about the sport—not because they understood aerodynamics, but because they were drawn into the stories. "A huge amount of the new audience for Formula 1 doesn't necessarily care about the drivers or teams; they care about the world and the narrative and the story," Innes notes. "As soon as you can move beyond focusing purely on the mechanics of the sport... it opens up possibilities for much more interesting storytelling."

EMBRACING THE QUIRKS

If pickleball wants to build this kind of narrative infrastructure, it needs to stop trying to blend in and start leaning into what makes it different. To an outsider, pickleball is full of quirks. The scoring system can feel confusing. The non-volley zone is called the "Kitchen." Even the name itself feels unusual. But rather than smoothing these edges, Innes argues that the sport should lean into them. "These are all elements that make it unique and make it interesting," Innes says. "Rather than just being a difficult scoring system, lean into it, celebrate it, and make it part of the discussion."

Every major sport has its own eccentricities. Tennis has an unusual scoring system; cricket matches can last for days. Over time, those quirks become part of the identity. Pickleball has the opportunity to do the same—turning its differences into a shared language for its community.

THE POWER OF ADJACENT FANDOMS

One of the biggest mistakes niche sports make is assuming their fans only care about that one sport. In reality, fandom overlaps. Pickleball players are also interested in travel, fashion, fitness, and other sports. Finding those intersections—what Innes calls "adjacent fandoms"—is key to growing the sport's reach. The UFC built audiences through personalities and anticipation. Niche sports like competitive tag and Hyrox have grown quickly through social media.

For pickleball, that means creating content beyond full match replays. It means trick shots, personal journeys, and giving different types of players a platform—underdogs, technicians, and personalities alike. "It needs to feel like every game is part of something bigger," Innes says. "If you're able to lean into that tension, that conflict, that's powerful. People like to follow a story rather than just a match."

THE ULTIMATE TESTING GROUND: THE ENGLISH OPEN

The theory of world-building will soon be tested at scale. This August, the English Open will move to the NEC in Birmingham, featuring 60 courts and becoming the largest indoor pickleball tournament in the world. An event of this size cannot rely on logistics alone; it must also work as a narrative event. That process does not begin on finals day. It starts months in advance—identifying key matchups, uncovering player stories, and allowing those involved to document their own journeys.

"The biggest mistake people go to... is going for the quick win," Innes warns. Instead, leagues and media need to build gradually, creating the conditions for stories to develop. "It's about access. Open it up completely. Allow people to put their own personalities into it."

The courts are full. The next step is giving those players a reason to care beyond the game they play.



HOW A CANADIAN OXFORD STUDENT IS BUILDING THE UK'S FIRST COLLEGIATE PICKLEBALL SYSTEM

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

Like many before him, Theo Young's initiation into pickleball was equal parts humbling and eye-opening. Shortly after picking up a paddle, the former tennis and table tennis player found himself staring down a pair of septuagenarians armed with "boomsticks." Despite their limited mobility, the result was a swift 11-2 defeat.

"It's an equaliser," Young admits. "They looked like they could barely get around the court, but you know when the game started it was clear that it was over".

But while the sport's older demographic has formed the bedrock of its global explosion, Young—a Canadian master's student currently studying education research at the University of Oxford—is on a mission to reshape its image. He believes that "pickleball can be young and stylish," and he's setting out to prove it by launching the first unified collegiate pickleball ecosystem in the United Kingdom.

On May 30th at Courtside in Stourbridge, Young's vision will become reality when he hosts the **DUPR UK University Pickleball Championships, powered by JOOLA.**

SPOTTING THE GAP IN THE MARKET

When Young arrived in the UK in September 2025, he noticed a glaring disconnect. While individual university pickleball clubs were popping up and playing in local leagues in places like Newcastle and Aberdeen, there was no central inter-university competition.

"I was kind of like, it's kind of wild that there are these organisations that are having trainings and sessions weekly and there's no uniting competition at all," Young says. Drawing on his background as a sports team captain and organiser, he set out to build one.

His blueprint was the United States collegiate pickleball scene, a well-established system where top teams—like Florida Atlantic University, boasting an average DUPR of 5.6—compete in super-regional qualifiers culminating in massive national championships. To bring this level of legitimacy to the UK, Young went straight to the source. He booked a call with Jacob Smith, DUPR's Head of High School and Collegiate Pickleball. While DUPR's collegiate focus is primarily domestic, they granted Young the crucial sanctioning to operate as the official DUPR collegiate championship of the UK. He didn't stop there. He partnered with Dylan Stevens of London's Lemon Pickleball after meticulously combing through the DUPR database to find and recruit active 18-to-23-year-old players within a 100-mile radius. Securing the backing of equipment giant JOOLA—who sponsors the US college tour and is eager to replicate that success in Europe—and official sanctioning from Pickleball England provided the final layer of credibility.

THE BLUEPRINT FOR MAY 30TH

The upcoming inaugural tournament is designed to balance elite competition with mass accessibility. Expecting between 15 and 20 universities to descend on Stourbridge's purpose-built acrylic courts, the format will feature four doubles games per matchup, culminating in a "DreamBreaker". However, reflecting the UK's preference for doubles play, the tiebreaker will be a *doubles* DreamBreaker rather than a singles format. To ensure competitive balance, the event is split into two divisions: "Improver" (generally for players under a 3.5 DUPR) and "Open" (3.5 and above). The demographics of the entrants suggest Young is successfully reaching a new group of players.

"In the improver category, I'd say around 80% of players will be entering their first tournament, which I think is really cool because I think it is definitely a new demographic," Young explains. The "Open" division promises its own intrigue, serving as a coming-out party for international students and recent UK arrivals who are highly skilled but haven't yet made their mark on the established tournament circuit.

Crucially, Young is fiercely committed to keeping the sport accessible for students. At just £15 for entry, it is billed as the cheapest pickleball tournament on purpose-built courts in England in 2026. Young's ultimate goal is to use any excess revenue from livestream advertising to subsidise travel costs for distant teams, such as Aberdeen, ensuring geographical distance doesn't price students out of the competition.

REBRANDING THE SPORT: "SEXY, YOUNG PICKLEBALL"

Beyond the logistics of brackets and court surfaces, Young is intensely focused on media and aesthetics. He recognises that for collegiate pickleball to thrive, it needs to shed the "old person" stigma and embrace a more dynamic, athletic identity.

"I definitely feel myself cushioning me talking about pickleball to my non-pickleball friends," Young admits. "I don't want to sound like... there's just a connotation around it".

To combat this, Young is collaborating with Alex Heyman of Alikos Sports to produce high-quality, "glitzy" media for the event. Instead of relying solely on an 8-hour livestream—which will be broadcast on Pickleball England's YouTube channel—the focus will heavily incorporate stylised graphics and bite-sized social media clips designed for Instagram to make the tournament look like a premium, professional event.

This emphasis on youthful branding extends to Young's next venture: **New Wave Pickleball Club**. Operating as a PPL (Premier Pickleball League) Challenger team, New Wave will exclusively feature players under the age of 25. It's a calculated move to inject what Young calls "sexy, young pickleball" into the European scene, complete with the kind of slick media days and social media storytelling seen in major American sports.

"Around 80% of players will be entering their first tournament."

THE FUTURE OF UNIVERSITY PICKLEBALL

While Young's Oxford squad—which he jokingly guarantees will be "the best-looking team there"—prepares to face stiff competition from combined London universities and traditional sporting powerhouses like Loughborough, Young's eyes are already looking past May 30th.

The long-term vision includes integrating pickleball into BUCS (British Universities & Colleges Sport), the governing body for higher education sport in the UK. Furthermore, driven by enthusiasm from JOOLA, Young is highly optimistic about expanding the collegiate model into continental Europe, creating cross-border rivalries and relationships.

For now, though, all roads lead to Courtside. By taking the framework of the American collegiate system, securing the backing of major players like DUPR and JOOLA, and injecting a fresh dose of youthful branding, Theo Young isn't just organising a tournament. He's putting a structure in place for the next generation of UK pickleball.



THE RACE TO BUILD UK PICKLEBALL'S NEXT GENERATION

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT, ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FROM KAREN MITCHELL

On May 30, a group of university students will walk into a purpose-built pickleball venue in Stourbridge and play for something that did not exist a year ago. Not a title in the traditional sense. Not a ranking that feeds into a global tour. Something earlier than that.

A pathway.

The inaugural UK University Pickleball Championships will bring together teams from across the country, many of them playing their first structured competition. The level will vary. The experience will be uneven. Some players will arrive as unknowns. That is the point.

Because for all the conversation around professional tours, investment, and global expansion, the future of pickleball in England is being decided somewhere else entirely.

In schools, universities, and junior leagues where the sport is still being introduced, shaped, and understood.

WHERE GROWTH ACTUALLY COMES FROM

Pickleball's rise is often explained through accessibility. It is easy to learn, relatively inexpensive, and adaptable to different spaces.

That makes it easy to start.

It does not guarantee that it lasts.

Long-term growth depends on something more deliberate. It requires players to move from first experience to regular participation, and from participation into something that feels structured and worth returning to.

That is where schools and education begin to matter. Not as an add-on, but as a system.

Pickleball England's long-term ambition reflects that. The target is to reach 10,000 schools and inspire more than 400,000 junior participants by 2030, alongside the creation of a connected inter-school and club competition pathway.

Those numbers are significant, but the mechanism behind them is more important.

It is not about exposure. It is about continuity.

MAKING IT WORK INSIDE SCHOOLS

Introducing a sport into schools is rarely as simple as enthusiasm.

Teachers need to feel confident delivering it.

Sessions need to fit into existing structures.

Equipment has to be available, affordable, and practical.

Without those pieces, even well-intentioned programmes struggle to last.

That is why much of the current work is focused on making delivery easier rather than more ambitious. Teacher training is being developed through Continuing Professional Development programmes.

Curriculum frameworks are being aligned to Key Stages so that pickleball can slot into existing PE structures. Equipment packs are being designed to remove cost as a barrier. None of this is visible from the outside.

But it is the difference between a sport being tried once and a sport being embedded.

FROM FIRST HIT TO FIRST COMPETITION

The next step is connection.

A school session on its own is not enough. Players need somewhere to go next. That is where the emerging competition structure begins to take shape.

On May 31, the day after the university championships, the **Junior Pickleball League – South** will launch in Eastleigh. Built around a doubles league format, it is designed to introduce younger players to competition in a way that emphasises communication, resilience, and confidence rather than immediate results. These events are early, and they are small.

But they represent something more important than scale. They create a link between introduction and progression. From school sessions to after-school play. From after-school play to local competition. From local competition to something that begins to resemble a pathway.

WHAT COMES NEXT

The structure is still forming. There are gaps. Access is uneven. The system is not yet complete. But the direction is becoming clearer.

Pickleball in England is not just expanding outward. It is beginning to build inward, creating the kind of framework that allows participation to turn into habit, and habit into long-term involvement. That matters, because the future of the sport will not be decided by how many people try it once.

It will be decided by how many keep playing.

And that decision is not made on a professional court. It is made much earlier than that.



US LEGENDS LEAGUE EXPANDS — BUT THE REAL STORY IS WHAT IT'S BUILDING

BY DANI MACKEY, USLPBL

If the schools and university systems define how players enter pickleball, leagues like the US Legends Senior Pro Pickleball League are starting to define how long they can stay in it.

The growth of pickleball is easy to measure in numbers. More players. More courts. More events. What is harder to measure is structure.

And that is where the US Legends Senior Pro Pickleball League is starting to matter. Because Season 2 is not just bigger. It is more defined.

EXPANSION IS THE HEADLINE. STRUCTURE IS THE STORY.

The headline is straightforward:

- 50+ division expands from 12 to 16 teams
- New markets: Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio, North Carolina
- Established bases remain: Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, Florida, New Jersey

On the surface, that looks like growth. But look closer and it is something else. It is **geographic anchoring**.

The league is no longer a collection of teams. It is starting to look like a national system, with coverage across multiple regions rather than isolated pockets.

That matters if this is going to last.

THE 60+ DIVISION CHANGES THE CONVERSATION

The most important move is not the expansion of the 50+ league.

It is the launch of the **60+ pro division**.

Six teams. Six states. A new competitive tier. That decision quietly shifts the narrative around pickleball. This is no longer just a sport people can play later in life. It is a sport where players can continue competing at a high level with structure, identity, and recognition. Most sports fade players out. This one is building a pathway that keeps them in.

THE 35+ DIVISION COMPLETES THE LADDER

With 35+, 50+, and now 60+, the USLPL is creating something few pickleball organisations have managed:

A clear competitive ladder.

- 35+ → competitive entry into senior elite play
- 50+ → established competitive tier
- 60+ → extension of elite longevity

That is not accidental. It is a framework. And frameworks are what turn events into leagues, and leagues into systems.

THE COMBINE MODEL IS A SERIOUS SIGNAL

The Richmond tryouts in August matter more than they seem.

Not because of who makes it. But because of how players get there.

- Combine-style evaluation
- 4.5+ entry standard
- Multi-dimensional assessment

That is a move away from open participation and toward selection.

It introduces:

- standards
- visibility
- accountability

That is how credibility builds over time.

PARTNERSHIPS ARE STARTING TO FOLLOW

Two details here matter:

- Skechers as official footwear partner
- DUPR as official rating system

Neither changes the league overnight.

But both point in the same direction: external validation. DUPR integration also connects results to the wider competitive ecosystem, linking the league into something larger than itself.

WHAT THIS ACTUALLY MEANS

There are three things happening at once:

1. Expansion
2. Segmentation
3. Standardisation

Individually, these are normal. Together, they are how a sport starts to organise itself.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Pickleball still has a fragmentation problem. Different tours. Different formats. Different standards. What the USLPL is doing, quietly, is addressing one part of that problem: age-based competitive structure at scale.

Not perfectly. Not completely. But clearly.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The USLPL is not the biggest league in pickleball. It is not the most visible. But it is asking a question the sport will need to answer: **What does a long-term competitive structure actually look like?**

Season 2 will not fully answer that.

But it is the first time the question is being asked with intent.

Six teams. Six states. A new competitive tier.



BEHIND THE SCENES

INSIDE THE ENGLISH OPEN: HOW A GLOBAL EVENT IS ACTUALLY BUILT

BY KAREN MITCHELL

From the outside, the English OPEN is scale.

Rows of courts. Thousands of players. Matches running from morning to night. From the inside, it is something else. It is sequence.

Everything begins with the venue. Not as a backdrop, but as the decision that shapes everything else.

For the 2026 English OPEN, that decision took months. The requirement was clear: create space to grow without compromising the player experience. In practice, that meant testing, rejecting, and retesting. Early rollout courts exposed issues beneath the surface. Electrical ducting affected play. What appeared viable did not hold up under use. Multiple venues were assessed before the final choice was approved by resident professionals James Chaudry and Thaddea Lock. That decision set the direction of the event. It also set the timeline.

The NEC is secured at least five days before play begins. Not as a buffer, but as a requirement. In that window, an empty hall becomes a tournament. Sixty courts are built to consistent, pro-approved standards. Walkways are planned to manage movement. Space is allocated for vendors, spectators, and broadcast.

Nothing is placed casually.

The build itself is not complex. It is dependent. Materials arrive in sequence. Courts are constructed, then coated, then painted. Lines are applied only when surfaces are fully dry. Each stage relies on the previous one being complete.

A delay does not stay contained. It moves.

At the same time, the rest of the event is assembled alongside it.

Referees are recruited and assigned, with medal matches guaranteed coverage. Tournament systems are configured so draws, schedules, and results are clear in real time.

Volunteers are brought in, briefed, and placed across multiple roles.

No part of this operates in isolation. Venue readiness affects court build. Court build affects scheduling. Scheduling affects staffing, communication, and player experience. The event functions as a system.

Only once that system is stable do the additions come in. Electronic line calling. Paperless operations. Enhanced livestream production. These are not starting points. They are additions. And they only work if the fundamentals underneath them do not shift.

This is where the English OPEN separates itself. Not through scale alone, but through control.

The numbers are visible.

Nearly 3,000 players.

58 countries.

The largest indoor pickleball tournament in the world.

But the meaning sits underneath them. The sport is no longer proving that people want to play.

It is proving that it can build events at this level, repeatedly, without breaking.

That is the shift. And it is not visible from the stands.

THE ENGLISH OPEN – COMPLEX TO DELIVER. ORGANISED METICULOUSLY.

Many moving parts. One clear plan. Getting the Basics Right first.



SUCCESS THROUGH PREPARATION

- CLEAR PLAN** Detailed planning with milestones & deadlines
- INTERDEPENDENT WORKSTREAMS** Connected, coordinated & aligned to outcomes
- GREAT PEOPLE** Experienced leaders & passionate volunteers
- RIGHT SEQUENCING** Build, paint, line, set up – every step in the right order
- AMAZING OUTCOME** A world-class event for players, fans, sponsors & our sport

GETTING THE BASICS RIGHT IS OUR MANTRA

PLANNED IN DETAIL. DELIVERED WITH PRECISION. THE ENGLISH OPEN.



KAZUHIRO NOMURA AND BURGER KING JAPAN: PICKLEBALL AS EARLY-STAGE ADOPTION IN JAPAN

BY FABRIZIO LAVEZZARI

A CAREER SHAPED BY RESTARTS

Kazuhiro Nomura's career has never followed a straight line, and he does not present it as one. Born in Germany and moving repeatedly between the United States and Japan, Nomura describes his early years less as a steady progression than as a series of adjustments. That pattern—entering systems, understanding how they work, and moving on when circumstances change—would later define both his professional trajectory and his involvement with pickleball.

After university, Nomura joined Kirin Beer, where he spent more than a decade working in sales and marketing. One of his most formative assignments involved Budweiser, the American brand produced under licence in Japan. At the time, Budweiser's market share was extremely small, competing in a market dominated by domestic brands such as Super Dry and Ichiban. It was not an environment where results came quickly. Instead, it required sustained effort in positioning, communication, and persistence. Nomura often refers to this period as his introduction to overseas business within a Japanese corporate structure—learning how brands operate when they do not start from a position of strength.

Around fifteen years into his career, he made a decision that still runs counter to expectations in Japanese corporate life. Rather than remain inside a large and stable organisation, he chose to leave. He recalls the decision as unsettling, in part because he did not even know how to change jobs. He relied on headhunters and stepped into unfamiliar environments where rules, communication styles, and expectations differed sharply from what he had known. One subsequent role lasted just over a year and a half and proved difficult. Nomura describes it as a period that forced him to confront how much of what feels like common sense inside a long-established company can become ineffective elsewhere.

Another move proved even more challenging. He joined a China-linked business operating in Japan at a time when geopolitical tensions were intensifying. Within months, contracts with major telecom companies were terminated, and the business effectively collapsed. He faced the real possibility of leaving Japan again if new work could not be secured. That period led him to think more deliberately about his next step. It eventually brought him to Burger King Japan, where he joined as marketing director and later became CEO. At the time, the company operated around 77 stores. Over the following years, that number grew to roughly 340, with revenues rising to close to 50 billion Japanese yen. The experience placed Nomura at the centre of a large-scale brand turnaround and would later shape how he assessed new initiatives—especially those still at an early and uncertain stage.

DISCOVERING PICKLEBALL WITHOUT A MAP

Pickleball entered Nomura's life during the COVID period, not as a business opportunity but as a personal return to sport. He had played tennis since elementary school and also during his high school years in the United States. During the pandemic, a former tennis acquaintance contacted him through Facebook, describing a growing interest in pickleball. Curious, Nomura searched for information in Japan and found very little: few venues, almost no visibility, and no clear structure for participation.

At the time, he assumed the sport would not become popular in Japan. What shifted his view was not a single moment, but gradual exposure. A dinner at the Tokyo American Club led to introductions within the small but emerging pickleball network. More importantly, it provided practical information—where people were playing, who was organising sessions, and how to get involved.

Nomura began playing indoors at gyms in areas such as Akasaka and Tamachi. Less than a year later, he played outdoors for the first time, connected to a summer event that would later be referred to as a Burger King Cup. As his playing frequency increased, so did the structure of his practice. He moved away from casual rallies towards more deliberate drills, spending extended time on specific aspects of the game and training with younger coaches and professional players rather than simply playing matches.

What kept his interest was the nature of the game itself. Pickleball appealed through its structure: rallies that extend beyond ten shots, the importance of placement over power, and the cumulative effect of small decisions made under pressure. While many concepts are easy to understand—often reinforced through online videos—execution remains difficult. That gap between understanding and performance is what keeps the game engaging.

BURGER KING JAPAN AND EARLY INVOLVEMENT

Burger King Japan's involvement in pickleball developed alongside Nomura's personal engagement, but it did not begin with a large announcement or a clearly defined campaign. Positioned between dominant mass-market players and niche brands, Burger King Japan has historically relied on partnerships and selective engagement rather than direct competition. In that context, pickleball became a practical test case: a sport still forming its audience, where early support would be visible to participants rather than the general public. That support took several concrete forms. Burger King Japan began sponsoring tournaments, including an early event where the company participated as a platinum sponsor, followed by plans for additional competitions. In 2025, Burger King Japan was also among the largest sponsors of two major tournaments organised by the Pickleball Federation of Japan (PJF), marking a step-change in the scale and visibility of its involvement. That same year, the company launched pickleball-themed menu items across its stores nationwide, extending its engagement from event venues to a broader consumer touchpoint. At this stage, the impact was measured less in brand recognition and more in visibility among players themselves—those directly involved in organising and competing.

In parallel, the company contributed operationally to events. During a tournament in Nagasaki, Burger King Japan ran a food truck serving spectators and participants. The intention was not spectacle, but function. Food and drink are part of what allows tournaments to run smoothly, particularly in regional settings where infrastructure is still limited. Pickleball also became a setting for internal and partner engagement. Nomura organised a tournament and practice session involving suppliers and business partners, drawing around 80 participants. Framed as a small internal cup, the event created shared time on court rather than formal networking, using the sport itself as the medium for interaction.

CONSTRAINTS, COURTS, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

One constraint comes up repeatedly: courts. The shortage of facilities—especially in Tokyo—remains the most significant

bottleneck for pickleball in Japan. Interest exists, but access does not expand quickly enough to convert that interest into regular participation. Without places to play, momentum stalls.

Overseas, pickleball is often integrated into broader leisure environments, with courts positioned alongside food, drinks, and spectator spaces. These models are of interest, but translating them into dense Japanese cities is not straightforward. Even temporary or modular court solutions are part of the discussion, reflecting how space constraints shape every aspect of development.

Pickleball also intersects with a longer-term demographic shift at Burger King Japan. Around six years ago, the company reassessed a customer base that had skewed older and male and began working to broaden its appeal, including among younger customers and women. In that context, pickleball is relevant not because it guarantees youth adoption, but because its culture and entry points are still forming.

Taken together, the picture is consistent: initial curiosity during COVID; scarcity of information and facilities; gradual network formation; increasing structure through coaching, tournaments, sponsorship, and consumer-facing initiatives; and a persistent infrastructure gap that continues to shape the pace of development.

What distinguishes Nomura's position is proximity rather than enthusiasm. He is a player still learning the game, an executive overseeing a brand experimenting with early support, and a participant in the operational realities of events and facilities. His involvement does not present pickleball as inevitable or universal. Instead, it shows a sport still being built—incrementally, unevenly, and with practical challenges that cannot be skipped.

In that sense, his relationship with pickleball reflects the stage the sport currently occupies in Japan: present, promising, and very much in progress.



PLANTING THE GAME: HOW PICKLEBALL IS TAKING ROOT ACROSS AFRICA

BY CAPT. COLLINS MUNENE

When Ron Ponder arrived in Antananarivo with a paddle bag and a bucket of balls, there was no federation waiting for him. No courts marked out. No local rankings or leagues.

There were only a few curious people, drawn by the simple question of what this new game might be. That is how pickleball begins in many parts of Africa. Not with infrastructure or investment, but with someone willing to show up, teach, and stay long enough for the first rally to take hold.

THE FIRST LAYER: PEOPLE BEFORE STRUCTURE

Across the continent, pickleball is not being introduced through campaigns or top-down programmes. It is being carried in by individuals: coaches, volunteers, federation builders, and players who believe the game should be accessible to anyone willing to pick up a paddle.

That philosophy has been formalised through the Confederation of African Pickleball's "Pickleball for the People" initiative, a framework built around a simple idea. The sport should not be confined to clubs or gated systems. It should be taught, shared, and embedded in communities from the ground up. The model is deliberately practical. Ambassadors travel with basic equipment, run clinics, train local coaches, and leave behind enough knowledge and structure for the game to continue. The goal is not visibility. It is continuity. One visit, handled carefully, can do more than introduce a sport. It can establish a rhythm of play, a small community, and eventually the foundations of a federation.

THE SECOND LAYER: THE WORK THAT MAKES IT POSSIBLE

But enthusiasm alone is not enough. At some point, growth depends on something less visible: equipment, logistics, and the ability to move

people and resources across borders that are not always easy to navigate. This is where figures like John Shaffer, through the Good Sport Foundation, have become central to the sport's development. Shaffer's approach is direct. Equipment goes where it is needed. Travel is funded. Courts are built. Connections are made. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, that meant supporting a national delegation to attend the African Games, ensuring not just participation, but preparation. Paddles, shoes, and balls arrived ahead of the team, alongside advice on court construction that would leave a lasting footprint.

In Rwanda, Malawi, and Seychelles, similar interventions have ensured that interest in the sport is not lost simply because there is nothing to play with. In Kenya, the model expanded further. A community event, run in partnership with the Kenya Mental Health Alliance, used pickleball not as a competitive outlet but as a social one. The purpose was not performance. It was connection. That idea runs through much of the work being done across the continent. The paddle, in this context, is not the point. The connection is.

THE THIRD LAYER: NETWORKS THAT SCALE IT

If grassroots work plants the game, and logistical support sustains it, the next step is scale. That scale does not arrive automatically. It depends on access to networks that can connect sport to schools, businesses, and institutions.

In East Africa, one of those networks is Rotary. At the Rotary District 9214 Conference in Munyonyo, Uganda, pickleball was introduced not as a finished product, but as an idea that fits within an existing ecosystem. Business leaders, educators, and policymakers were already in the room. The sport simply needed a way in. The logic is straightforward. School partnerships build participation. Corporate leagues support infrastructure. Coaching pathways create continuity. These are the same pillars used to grow organisations. They are now being applied to a sport still in its early stages on the continent. In that environment, pickleball is not competing for attention in isolation. It is being carried into rooms where decisions are already being made about investment, community programmes, and long-term development.

WHAT STILL HOLDS IT BACK

For all the progress, the constraints are clear. Access to courts remains inconsistent. Equipment still needs to be sourced and distributed. In many regions, the structures required to track participation or organise competition are still being built. Growth is uneven. Some countries are establishing federations and regular play. Others are still at the stage of first contact, where the sport is introduced to a group for the first time. What is striking is not the speed of expansion, but the nature of it. There is no single model being applied across the continent. Development is shaped by local conditions, by available space, by community leadership, and by the ability to connect with the right partners at the right time.

A SPORT BUILT ONE PLACE AT A TIME

Taken together, the pattern is clear.

Pickleball in Africa is not being rolled out. It is being built—through people, supported by resources, and scaled through networks that already exist.

It starts with a coach or a volunteer, often with very little. A paddle, a few balls, a group willing to try something new. That is the first layer.

If it holds, it is supported. Equipment arrives. Courts are marked. Players travel. That is the second layer.

If it continues, it connects. Schools, businesses, and organisations begin to take notice. The game moves beyond the court and into a wider system. That is the third layer.

Not every introduction reaches that point. Some stop at the first stage. Others take longer. But the ones that do progress tend to follow the same path. Which is why the most accurate way to understand pickleball in Africa is also the simplest. It does not begin with a plan or a federation.

It begins the same way it did in Antananarivo. With someone turning up, putting a paddle in a hand, and seeing what happens next.



THE WORLD GAME

HE TOOK PICKLEBALL TO A HELICOPTER PAD IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA — BUT NOT FOR THE REASON YOU THINK

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

Mark Palm did not bring pickleball to one of the most remote places on earth to grow the game. He did it because, at a moment when very little else could, the sport gave him something back.

- Mark Palm used pickleball during chemotherapy for B-cell lymphoma and carried that experience with him long after treatment
- He introduced the sport to remote communities in Papua New Guinea by setting up a court on a helicopter pad 50 miles from the nearest road
- The story matters not because pickleball can travel anywhere, but because people keep choosing to take it with them

THIS STORY DOES NOT START IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

It starts in a hospital.

Before Papua New Guinea, before the U.S. Open, before the helicopter pad, there was a diagnosis. B-cell lymphoma.

For Mark Palm, sport was no longer about competition. It was about survival. Surfing and other physical outlets fell away. Pickleball did not. It was manageable. It was repeatable. And it kept him moving.

More importantly, it kept him connected.

That mattered more than anything else.

WHAT COMES BACK STAYS WITH YOU

After treatment, Palm did what many players do. He kept playing. He improved, competed, and eventually won his age group at national championships in 2022. On paper, that gave his story a familiar sporting shape. It offered a recovery arc, a return to competition, a clean line from illness to achievement. But that is not the part that makes this story worth stopping for. The part that matters is what he took with him afterwards. Palm runs Samaritan Aviation, a non-profit serving remote communities in Papua New Guinea. In one location, around 50 miles from the nearest road, there was almost no usable infrastructure and very little spare space. There was, however, a helicopter pad.

So he used it.

A net. A few paddles. A flat surface. That was enough. There was no programme to launch. No strategy deck. No attempt to build a market. Just a game, carried into a place where it otherwise would never have arrived.

WHY IT WORKED SO QUICKLY

According to Palm, the reaction was immediate. Children gathered. Games formed. The mood changed. That is the detail that matters. The point is not simply that pickleball can be played anywhere. Everyone in the sport already knows that. The equipment is light, the court is compact, and the entry point is low. But pickleball is often explained through how easy it is to play. That is not why it spreads.

It spreads because people recognise something in it quickly. Movement. Competition. Laughter. Rhythm. A reason to stay in the space a little longer.

Those things do not need much explanation.

WHAT PICKLEBALL ACTUALLY CARRIES

The sport is usually described in terms of accessibility, and that is fair enough as far as it goes. It does not demand major infrastructure. It does not require expensive facilities. It can adapt to whatever flat surface is available.

All of that helps explain why pickleball can travel.

It does not explain why it does.

Most organised attempts to grow sport start with infrastructure, funding, and planning. This did not. It started with one person, one experience, and a decision to share it. That is a different kind of expansion. Less formal. Less visible. More real. It is also closer to how pickleball has actually moved through the world, passed from person to person, place to place, carried not by institutions first but by individuals who felt they had found something worth giving away.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Palm did not bring pickleball to Papua New Guinea because he wanted to prove how far the sport could reach.

He brought it because it had already proved something to him. It had helped him through treatment. It had given him movement, routine, and contact at a time when the world had narrowed. That matters, because people do not carry games into remote places out of abstract belief. They do it because the game has already become personal.

That is what gives this story weight beyond its setting. It challenges the easy, familiar version of how the sport grows. Not through slogans. Not through claims about untapped markets. Not even, at first, through formal development plans.

Sometimes it grows because one person found value in it, held onto that value, and then chose to pass it on.

MORE THAN A COURT

The court in Papua New Guinea matters, of course. A helicopter pad in a swamp, turned into a place to play, is memorable enough on its own. But the deeper point is not the court itself.

It is why it exists.

It is not a story about how far pickleball can reach. It is a story about why it keeps being taken there.



BRAZIL: AN ECOSYSTEM TAKING SHAPE

BY MARCELO ABELHEIRA

Pickleball in Brazil does not announce itself loudly.

It appears gradually. A new court here. A tournament there. A group of players that starts small and then grows. There is no single moment where the sport arrives fully formed. Instead, it builds—piece by piece—until something larger begins to take shape.

Across different cities, courts are appearing, events are forming, and a network is beginning to connect players, organisers, and brands into something more coherent. There is no single moment you can point to and say the sport has arrived. Instead, there is a steady accumulation of pieces, each one strengthening the next.

That sense of construction is what defines Brazil's position in the global game. It is not about sudden explosion. It is about alignment.

THE BUILDERS BEHIND THE MOVEMENT

At the centre of this development sits the PicklePlay Alliance, a circuit created with a clear purpose: to organise competition, raise standards, and create opportunities for players across the country. The project is led by a group that reflects different parts of the sport's development. Francisco "Chico" Silva brings experience as a coach, athlete, and educator. Caio Silva and Luiza Arouca, founders of Hyperlight Pickleball, represent the equipment and commercial side. Eduardo Correia, known as "Du," adds the perspective of a younger generation, combining competitive ambition with a focus on innovation and expansion.

Together, their aim is not simply to run tournaments. It is to build a structure that allows the sport to grow with direction. That intent shows in how the circuit operates. Rather than separating amateur and professional play, the model brings them closer together. Players at different levels share the same environment, creating a pathway that feels connected rather than fragmented. The result is a system where development is visible. New players see what is possible. Experienced players help raise the standard. The gap between entry and high performance begins to narrow.



BUILDING A COMPETITIVE STRUCTURE

The PicklePlay Alliance has also placed a clear emphasis on professionalism. Events are designed to move beyond informal competition. Prize money has increased. Organisation has improved. Coverage has expanded, with professional broadcasts, on-court reporting, and consistent social media presence bringing the experience to a wider audience. These details matter. In emerging sports, structure is often the difference between short-term enthusiasm and long-term growth. By investing in how events are presented and experienced, the circuit is helping to establish expectations around quality. That approach is reinforced by a growing network of partners. Facilities such as Arena Dink Ribeirão Preto provide venues capable of hosting larger events. Brands including Hyperlight, JOOLA, and others contribute to the development of equipment and competitive infrastructure. There is also institutional alignment. The partnership with the Brazilian Pickleball Confederation strengthens the link between grassroots activity and formal governance, helping ensure that expansion remains organised rather than chaotic. It is a different kind of growth to what is seen elsewhere. Less chaotic than some emerging markets, less constrained than others, but still firmly in progress.

MORE THAN JUST COMPETITION

While tournaments sit at the centre of the circuit, their impact extends further. Each event acts as a gathering point for the local community. Players, coaches, sponsors, and supporters come together in a setting that blends competition with connection. That balance has always been part of pickleball's appeal, and in Brazil it remains a defining feature. The circuit's influence can also be seen in the broader development of the sport. Training initiatives, referee certification programmes, and partnerships with established sports brands are beginning to create a deeper foundation. These are not headline moments. They are quieter steps, but they matter. They build credibility. They create consistency. They allow the sport to expand without losing coherence.

EARLY STAGE, CLEAR DIRECTION

Despite this progress, it is important to be clear about where Brazil stands. Pickleball is still in its early stages in the country. The number of courts continues to grow, and new players are discovering the sport, but the overall system is still developing. What stands out is not completeness, but direction. There is a shared understanding among organisers, players, and partners about what needs to happen next. The focus is on expanding competitions, improving standards, and extending the reach of the sport across a country with vast geographic scale. That clarity is valuable. It allows growth to happen with purpose rather than drift.

A SYSTEM IN MOTION

Brazil's pickleball story is not yet defined by scale or global success. It is defined by momentum. The pieces are there: organisers with vision, players with ambition, partners willing to invest, and a community beginning to take shape. What is emerging is not just activity, but structure. And that matters. Because in Brazil, the question is no longer whether pickleball can grow. It is how far this system can take it.



AROUND THE WORLD: APRIL IN REVIEW

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

Pickleball is no longer growing in one direction. It is being built differently, in different parts of the world, at the same time. In some regions, the focus is still on access and participation. In others, the sport is moving quickly toward structure, governance, and professional alignment. April offered one of the clearest snapshots yet of how those paths are beginning to diverge—and, in some cases, converge.

ASIA: FROM PARTICIPATION TO STRUCTURE

Across Asia, the emphasis is shifting toward organisation and long-term development. In Japan, the sport ended its split governance by merging two competing associations to form Pickleball Japan, launching on April 14 under Chairperson Rika Riordan. The move creates a clearer pathway for player development and international alignment.

China is scaling with intent, targeting 600 domestic events annually by 2026, up from just 80 in 2024. The focus is not on converting players from other racket sports, but on building a system rooted in early specialisation.

India is taking a similar long-term view. The Indian Pickleball Association has formalised a 45-event domestic calendar, opened a 150-player high-performance centre in Ahmedabad, and partnered with Athletiq to develop both elite players and equipment. The stated goal is clear: a pathway toward inclusion in the 2030 Commonwealth Games.

Across Southeast Asia, the challenge is less about ambition and more about access. Malaysia's CelcomDigi launched a RM1 million fund focused on community court availability rather than headline events. Singapore addressed urban constraints by mandating foam balls during peak hours at Mountbatten courts, a practical solution that could influence other dense cities. In Hong Kong, pickleball is being integrated directly into real estate developments, embedding courts within residential and commercial spaces.

Vietnam illustrates both progress and fragility. A new university degree focused on pickleball will launch in 2026, aimed at developing coaches, referees, and administrators. Yet a newly built 22-court complex in Hanoi was dismantled due to permit issues, a reminder that rapid growth still depends on regulatory alignment. The pace varies, but the intent is consistent: to move from participation to structure.

EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS: ORGANISING COMPETITION

In Europe and across the Americas, the priority is increasingly competitive structure. Spain's Pickle Pro Tour has introduced a new three-crowns system, while the European TOPSERIES continues to expand into cities such as Salamanca, Zagreb, and Hamburg. In the UK, the Premier Pickleball League has announced tryouts for Season 4, signalling continued domestic development. Amateur competition is also becoming more internationally aligned. DUPR's newly announced Nations Cup introduces country-versus-country play tied to domestic league qualification, giving amateur players a national identity within competition. At a regional level, federations are finding more practical ways to build international experience. The Pickleball Federation of the Americas has sanctioned a bi-national competition between Venezuela and Trinidad & Tobago, offering meaningful competition without the financial burden of global travel.

CUBA: WHERE THE GLOBAL GAME ACTUALLY STARTS

Pickleball's expansion is often tracked through numbers. Courts built. Events launched. Participation figures rising. That is not where it really begins. In Cuba, it starts with two children. Yanio Leiva and Baneza Leyva are eight and seven years old. They are not part of a national programme. There is no established pathway around them yet. No competitive structure to measure them against. What exists is simpler. A school. A court. A small programme taking shape. At Nguyen Van Troi School, pickleball is being introduced through an early-stage initiative, with coaching led by Carlos López and Carlos López Jr. The structure is basic, but consistent. Enough to create repetition. Enough to allow patterns to form. That is where development actually begins. The siblings have already drawn attention within that environment. Not for results, but for movement. Balance. Reaction speed. The kind of coordination that stands out before scoring ever matters. Those traits are not rare in isolation. What matters is where they are appearing. Cuba does not yet have the depth, infrastructure, or competition cycles seen elsewhere. There are no regular tournaments shaping players week to week. No established ranking system. No clear professional pathway. Which makes this stage more important, not less. Because before systems, before tours, before visibility, the sport has to exist in repeatable spaces. Schools. Small programmes. Environments where players can simply keep turning up. The Leyva siblings are part of that phase.

There is already longer-term thinking around them. Coaches have identified the potential for a future mixed doubles pairing, where familiarity and instinct may eventually translate into competitive advantage. But that remains distant. Right now, there is no need to project outcomes. Their development sits within the Latin Junior Pickleball initiative, which is focused on identifying early talent across emerging regions. In places like Cuba, where infrastructure is still forming, that work carries more weight than any short-term expansion metric. Because this is the part of the game that is easy to miss.

Not the finals. Not the rankings. Not the global tours. The starting point. A court that exists. A programme that holds. Two players who keep coming back. That is where the global game actually begins.

THE PRO CIRCUIT: INVESTMENT, CONTROL, AND PRESSURE

At the professional level, April brought movement across business, rules, and player demands.

Pickleball Inc. secured a \$225 million investment led by Apollo Sports Capital, consolidating the PPA Tour, Major League Pickleball, and a range of media, software, and retail assets under a single structure. Alongside that consolidation, the UPA-A introduced a new 71-page professional rulebook. The changes remove the drop serve at pro level and introduce a formal card system with point penalties for misconduct, marking a shift from informal interpretation to enforced regulation. Equipment has also become a point of tension. JOOLA has filed a patent infringement lawsuit against 11 rival paddle brands over its "Propulsion Core" technology, a case that could reshape parts of the equipment market if upheld. Yet while structure is tightening, pressure is building. World No. 1 Anna Leigh Waters withdrew from a recent singles draw citing exhaustion, following a run of eight tournaments in three months. The current calendar is beginning to test the limits of even the sport's most dominant players.

THE CONSTANT BENEATH THE CHANGE

For all the movement at the top of the sport, the foundation has not shifted. The US Open in Naples made that clear. Despite the absence of most PPA-contracted professionals, the event still hosted around 3,500 players across 65 courts. It is a reminder that while governance, investment, and professionalisation are shaping the future, pickleball is still driven from the ground up. The systems are evolving. The structures are tightening. But the sport does not grow because of them.

It grows because people keep choosing to play.



TOURNAMENTS

MLP AUSTRALIA 2026: A LEANER LEAGUE, A BIGGER STAGE

BY GORDON WATSON

The 2026 season of Major League Pickleball Australia is shaping as a pivotal chapter for the sport Down Under, one defined not by expansion, but by precision.

With a refined, high-performance format and a sharper regional focus, the league is signalling its intent: elevate the product, intensify the competition, and capture attention in a rapidly evolving global landscape.

After fielding 12 Premier teams in 2025, MLP Australia has made the bold call to contract to just eight franchises in 2026. It's a move that shifts the dial from quantity to quality, concentrating the nation's top talent into fewer, more competitive rosters.

The result is higher stakes, tighter matchups, and a competition built for both spectacle and substance.

Each of the eight teams will once again be anchored by a captain, tasked with assembling a four-player lineup through the draft on June 18.

Among the headline teams are the Sydney Smash (Mitchell Hargreaves), Gold Coast (Sarah Burr), Brisbane Breakers (Joey Wild), Melbourne Thunder (Zach Grabovic), Bondi Pickleball Club (Jason Taylor), Northern Crocs (Andie Dikosavljevic), and newcomers Pacific Flame (Sahra Dennehy) and the Coasters (Dani-Elle Townsend). It's a mix of proven leadership and fresh energy, exactly the balance the league is targeting.

The draft itself looms as a defining moment. With nominations closing in early June, the player pool is expected to feature a compelling mix of established stars and rising Australian talent.

In previous seasons, MLP Australia has drawn global names such as Wesley Gabrielsen, Kyle Yates, Liz Truluck, and Michelle Esquivel, players who brought international credibility and elevated the league's profile. Whether that level of global presence returns in 2026 remains one of the more intriguing questions heading into draft night.

Behind the scenes, the league's evolution may also reflect a broader strategic shift.

With pickleball booming across Asia, the long-anticipated emergence of an MLP Asia competition appears closer. A move toward geographically defined leagues would allow both regions to grow more sustainably while opening the door to future interleague matchups. If that is the direction, 2026 could mark the beginning of a more structured global ecosystem.

On court, the impact of a reduced competition will be immediate. Roster spots are scarce, and versatility will be key. Players who can perform across singles and doubles formats will carry real value, placing the spotlight on names like Selina Turulija, Harrison Brown, Nick Maleganeas, Sahil Dang, and Andrew Horridge, athletes capable of shaping matches in multiple disciplines.

As for early contenders, much will hinge on draft strategy, but a few narratives are already forming. Dani-Elle Townsend's Coasters loom as a fascinating prospect. With PPA Tour and MLP experience from her time with the Columbus Sliders, Townsend brings both pedigree and tactical insight. Her approach to building a balanced roster, whether prioritising a dominant partnership or overall depth, could define their season.

Meanwhile, the Brisbane Breakers, under Joey Wild, present as a serious threat. With strong recent form and growing international exposure, Wild has the tools to construct a team capable of going deep into the finals.

Ultimately, the 2026 season is less about contraction and more about clarity. With fewer teams, the margins tighten, the intensity rises, and every match carries greater consequence.

If 2025 was about growth, 2026 is about refinement, and MLP Australia may be entering its most compelling phase yet.



APRIL'S CRUCIBLE: PRESSURE, PARITY, AND THE STRAIN RESHAPING THE PPA

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

April 2026 made something clear.

The gap between the top of professional pickleball and the rest of the field is no longer theoretical. It is visible, and it is closing.

Across Sacramento, Hanoi, and Atlanta, the month exposed a sport under pressure. The race for the PPA Tour Finals tightened, international players broke through, and the physical demands of the schedule began to show. The established order still holds, but it is being tested more often, and more convincingly, than before.

THE OUTLINE TIGHTENS

As the tour moved through the Fasena Sacramento Open and the Veolia Atlanta Pickleball Championships, the focus shifted from title runs to survival.

With only two main-circuit stops remaining before the PPA Tour Finals in San Clemente, every match carried weight for players hovering around the outline. Advancement was no longer assumed. Draws became less about seeding and more about how many matches carried real risk. That pressure showed.

Ben Johns' early singles exit in Sacramento reflected a men's field that no longer allows comfortable progression. Players such as Jack Sock dictated terms in a different way, blending patience with sudden acceleration to reach both the singles and doubles semi-finals, including a win over top seed Chris Haworth.

The intensity of the week also spilled over. No. 3 seed Hunter Johnson was disqualified during his quarter-final after a thrown paddle struck a spectator, a rare moment where the stakes of the environment crossed into loss of control. Through that chaos, Federico Staksrud secured his 20th career PPA singles title. Eric Oncins and Tyra Black, the latter heavily strapped, came through a five-game mixed doubles final to claim gold. The results mattered, but the context around them mattered more.

THE GLOBAL GAME BITES BACK

While the domestic tour was tightening, the MB Hanoi Cup revealed something equally important. For years, international players were framed as developing. That framing no longer holds. For the first time on the PPA Tour Asia circuit, a men's singles final featured two players from the host nation. Truong Vinh Hien and Ly Hoang Nam closed out the draw, with Ly's earlier win over world No. 4 Christian Alshon underlining a simple point: international players are no longer just participating, they are competing and winning.

The moment, however, came with friction. A disputed match-point line call in Ly's run reignited concerns around officiating. While automated systems such as PlayReplay and Owl AI are being introduced in the United States, their absence in other regions continues to expose inconsistencies in how matches are decided.

There are also structural tensions beneath the surface. Ly Hoang Nam's later withdrawal from Kuala Lumpur highlighted the reality facing independent players. Without a PPA contract, previous results offer no protection, forcing global contenders into qualifying rounds regardless of form.

A NEW GENERATION ARRIVES

Back in the United States, Atlanta provided a different signal. Fifteen-year-old Tama Shimabukuro did not announce himself through chaos or unpredictability. He did it through control. Stepping inside the baseline, holding the middle, and resetting under pressure, Shimabukuro dismantled opponents including Jaume Martinez Vich, Federico Staksrud, and Hunter Johnson to reach his first PPA singles final.

He carried that form into doubles, partnering with Yuta Funemizu to defeat the No. 2 seeds Christian Alshon and Hayden Patriquin.

Chris Haworth ultimately stopped the run to claim his seventh singles title, but the result did not change the takeaway. Shimabukuro did not look like a prospect. He looked ready.

The Newport Beach Challenger reinforced that trend, producing first-time gold medallists across four of five events. The depth is no longer building quietly. It is starting to show.

DOMINANCE HAS A COST

For all the movement beneath them, the top of the sport still delivers when it matters.

Anna Leigh Waters claimed her 44th career Triple Crown in Atlanta, sweeping singles, women's doubles with Anna Bright, and mixed doubles with Ben Johns. Johns and Gabe Tardio continued their unbeaten run in men's doubles, extending a flawless 2026 campaign.

But the consistency is demanding something in return.

Eight tournaments in three months, across multiple continents, is no longer just a test of form. It is a test of endurance. Waters' withdrawal from a singles draw in Hanoi, citing exhaustion, was a rare concession, and a revealing one.

The schedule is no longer just demanding. It is becoming a constraint.

WHAT APRIL REVEALED

April did not overturn the hierarchy of professional pickleball. But it made the pressure on it impossible to ignore.

The field is deeper. The global game is catching up. The next generation is arriving sooner than expected. And the physical limits of the calendar are beginning to show.

The question is no longer whether the sport can grow.

It is whether the players at the top can sustain what that growth demands.

SPEED, SYSTEMS, AND A SACRAMENTO SWEEP: THE WEEK THAT REDEFINED THE APP TOUR

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT

April in Sacramento revealed something important about the APP Tour.

It is evolving quickly, experimenting with format and expanding its global reach. But when the matches matter most, the same names still control the outcome.

Across one week at Johnson Ranch Sports Club in Roseville, the tour tested a new broadcast format, reinforced its position in a divided professional landscape, and produced a dominant individual performance. Taken together, it offered a clear snapshot of where the APP sits in 2026.



THE 12-MINUTE FORMAT

Before the main draw began, the APP introduced something different. The Shriners Children's APP Pro Invitational was built around a compressed format. Matches were capped at 12 minutes. A five-second serve clock removed delays between points. A "Power Play Token" allowed teams to double the value of a single rally. The effect was immediate. There was no room to build into matches. Slow starts were punished. Momentum carried more weight than structure.

In men's doubles, Jack Munro and Richard Livornese Jr. came through despite a 1-3 record in the preliminary rounds. In a traditional format, that would have ended their week. Here, it did not matter. Once the knockout phase began, they found their level, including an 11-0 semi-final, before taking the title. The women's draw showed the other side of the format. Top seeds Sofia Sewing and Megan Fudge controlled it throughout, adapting quickly and removing the volatility from the equation.

The format is still experimental, but the intention is clear. The APP is not just running tournaments. It is testing how the sport is presented.

A DIVIDED LANDSCAPE

Away from the court, the tour made its position equally clear. The APP confirmed multi-year agreements with 28 professional players, building a roster that sits outside the PPA and MLP structure. The result is a two-system reality at the top of the sport. Quang Duong is the clearest example. After stepping away from the dominant US system following a contract dispute, he re-emerged in Sacramento as part of the APP's international pathway. Players such as Roos Van Reek underline the same trend. The tour is positioning itself as a home for global talent operating beyond the locked-in upper tier. It is not a direct challenge to the PPA model. It is a parallel one.

SEWING'S SWEEP

When the main draw began, the week narrowed to one central performance.

Sofia Sewing delivered the 15th Triple Crown in APP history.

Her singles final set the tone. Against Seone Mendez, she trailed 10-8 in the deciding game before closing it out 12-10. It was not dominant. It was controlled under pressure.

In women's doubles, she and Megan Fudge came through a tight three-game match against Van Reek and Vivian Glozman. In mixed, partnering Casey Diamond, she closed the week with an 11-8, 11-7 win over Fudge and Livornese Jr.

It was not just the volume of wins. It was the consistency across formats.

CONTROL AT THE TOP

For all the change around it, the outcome of the week pointed in a familiar direction.

The APP is expanding. New formats are being tested. International players are entering the system. But the podium remains concentrated.

Seven players appeared in multiple finals, accounting for more than half of the available spots across the Open and AARP Champions divisions. Names such as Fudge, Livornese Jr., Glozman, and Ammar Wazir—who claimed the men’s singles title—continue to dominate the latter stages of tournaments. The gap is not in participation. It is in conversion.

WHAT SACRAMENTO SHOWED

Sacramento did not redefine the APP Tour in one direction. It clarified two things at once. The sport is changing quickly. Formats are shifting. The player pool is expanding. The structure of the professional game is no longer singular. But at the same time, winning remains concentrated. The APP is opening its doors wider than ever. Breaking through them is still the hardest part.



GLOBAL TOURNAMENT ROUNDUP: RESULTS THAT ACTUALLY MATTER

BY CHRIS BEAUMONT, GORDON WATSON, ANDREA VISIBELLI

There is a risk, as pickleball expands, that results blur into noise. More tournaments. More circuits. More names.

April resisted that.

It did not feel scattered. It felt organised.

Across Australia, Europe, and emerging league systems, the same pattern kept appearing: control at the top, pressure building underneath, and structures beginning to hold.

TWEED HEADS: CONTROL, NOT CHAOS

The PPA Australia stop at Tweed Heads belonged to one player.

Selina Turulja left with a triple crown:

- Women's Singles 🏆
- Women's Doubles 🏆 (with Sarah Burr)
- Mixed Doubles 🏆 (with Joey Wild)

This was not a streak. It was managed. Points shortened when they needed to. Tempo shifted when pressure rose. The finals were not survival tests. They were controlled environments.

Around her:

- Brian Tran took men's singles with authority
- Hargreaves / Wild came through two three-game tests before closing the final in straight sets

The difference across the draws was not quality. It was timing.

Men's singles settled early. Women's singles stretched late. Doubles hinged on who had already absorbed pressure.

That tells you more than any scoreline.

RTA 2000 STOCKHOLM: THE GAP APPEARS

Stockholm did not show depth. It showed separation.

Domenika Turkovic delivered a triple crown:

- Women's Singles 🏆
- Women's Doubles 🏆
- Mixed Doubles 🏆

Alongside her:

- Ignasi De Rueda won men's singles
- Louis Laville / Mauro García took men's doubles
- Laville doubled up in mixed with Turkovic

The detail that matters is repetition.

The same names appear across brackets. The same players hold under different formats. That is not coincidence. That is hierarchy forming.

Circuits do not mature through volume first. They mature when a small group begins to win, repeatedly, in different conditions.

Stockholm showed the start of that.

WPC HUNGARY PANNON CUP: DEPTH MEETS DOMINANCE

If Stockholm hinted at hierarchy, Hungary confirmed it in front of a crowd.

The WPC Pannon Cup in Győr brought scale and clarity together:

- 235 players
- 21 countries
- 535 entries across five disciplines

At the centre of it was Bálint Bakó. He did not just win. He swept the event.

- Men's Singles 🏆 (def. Davide Vendrame)
- Men's Doubles 🏆 (with Krisztián Kaszoni)
- Mixed Doubles 🏆 (with Marina Alcaide)

A full triple crown, at home, across three different formats.

Around him, the structure held:

- Vendrame reached two finals, showing consistency at the top end
- Marina Alcaide took women's singles gold and added mixed gold alongside Bakó
- Mocchiola / De Pasquale delivered women's doubles gold for Italy

This is the key shift. Not just winners. Repeat finalists. Cross-bracket presence. International depth pushing into the same late stages.

That is what turns an event into a benchmark.

ITALIAN PICKLEBALL LEAGUE: BUILDING THE BASE PROPERLY

Italy is not trying to produce stars yet. It is building the system that will produce them. The Lazio regional finals tell the story:

- 52 teams
- Multi-tier structure (Serie A, B, C)
- Clear pathway to national finals in Rome

Winners included:

- Costantini / Tudone (Women's A)
- Joro / Avanzini (Men's A)
- Guerrini / Mercuri (Women's B)
- Bernabei / Elisei (Men's B)
- Nuccetelli / Locatelli (Serie C)

WHAT THIS ACTUALLY TELLS US

Put these together and the pattern becomes clearer:

- Australia → opportunity creating depth
- Stockholm → elite beginning to separate
- Hungary → elite performing under scale
- Italy → structure forming underneath everything

These are not separate stories.

They are stages of the same system, happening in different places at different speeds.

THE REAL SHIFT

For a long time, growth in pickleball meant participation.

That phase is ending.

Now it is measured differently:

- Who wins more than once
- Who survives different formats
- Which systems consistently produce those players

When those align, results stop being weekly updates.

They start forming a structure.

And once that structure is visible, the sport changes.



WELSH NATIONALS 2026: A NATION ON THE RISE

BY SCOTT MAYO

There is something fitting about Wrexham at the moment. A town riding momentum, fuelled by belief, with Wrexham A.F.C. climbing the leagues and daring to look further ahead than anyone might have expected a few years ago. Just outside the town, the Pontcysyllte Aqueduct stretches across the valley, a structure built on ambition and precision, carrying weight across what once seemed an impossible gap. It is hard not to draw comparisons with where pickleball in Wales currently finds itself.

The 2026 Welsh Nationals, held at the Wrexham Tennis & Padel Centre, felt like another step forward in that journey. Not perfect, not without its challenges, but undeniably moving in the right direction. Participation was up by around 30 percent, new faces arrived, younger players stepped onto the courts, and the depth across categories continues to improve.

Behind it all were Kath Knowles and Paul Byron, and while they may not be Ryan Reynolds and Rob McElhenney with Hollywood backing, their time, effort and commitment to the sport in Wales deserves just as much recognition. Alongside them, volunteers worked tirelessly, often unseen, preparing courts just hours before play began.

There may be no cameras following every move, but there is a shared purpose, and that continues to carry Welsh pickleball forward.

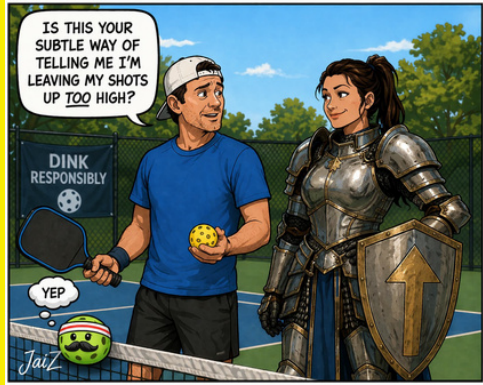
Friday's singles set the tone for the weekend, with a full schedule of matches across all categories that showcased just how far the game has come. From the first rallies, there was quality, competitiveness and a growing tactical awareness that made every court worth watching.

The standout moment came in the Men's 15+ 4.0+, where Ben Stucbury announced himself in style. The Pembrokeshire-based tennis coach combined composure with intensity, moving effortlessly across the court and showing exceptional touch at the net, with a drop shot that repeatedly caught opponents out. Between points, he remained calm and present, even sitting cross-legged to reset before going again.

PICKLEBALL MEMES

by John Zakour: The Lighter Side





Facing defending champion Scott Mayo in the final, Stucbury came from a game down to win 2-1 in a physically demanding contest that required as much resilience as it did skill. It was a performance that felt like an arrival, a reminder that new players are not just entering the sport but are ready to compete at the very top.

Alongside this, the Men's 50+ 4.0+ final between Jon Banks and Mark Johnson offered a different but equally compelling spectacle. If anything, it was just as physical, with both players covering the court relentlessly despite long days of competition behind them. Banks ultimately took gold, but both players demonstrated that experience does not replace intensity, it refines it, turning movement, decision-making and endurance into something impressive to watch.

Saturday carried that momentum into doubles, where partnerships and chemistry came to the forefront.

Banks and Johnson returned in the Men's 50+ 4.0+, this time on the same side of the net, combining their experience to take gold in a well-contested North versus South final against Paul Byron and Leigh Davies.

In the Women's 50+ 3.5+, Nicola Day and Susan Jones produced a composed and controlled performance to take gold against Michaela Braunerova and Susan Evans, managing the game with experience and clarity when it mattered most.

At the same time, the 15+ 3.5+ category offered a glimpse into the future, with Leah McDaniel and Kim McCall delivering a dominant display. Their sporting backgrounds and growing commitment to pickleball are clear, and their development is one to watch.



WP WORLD PICKLEBALL PODCAST

PICKLEBALL'S PREMIER PODCAST

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