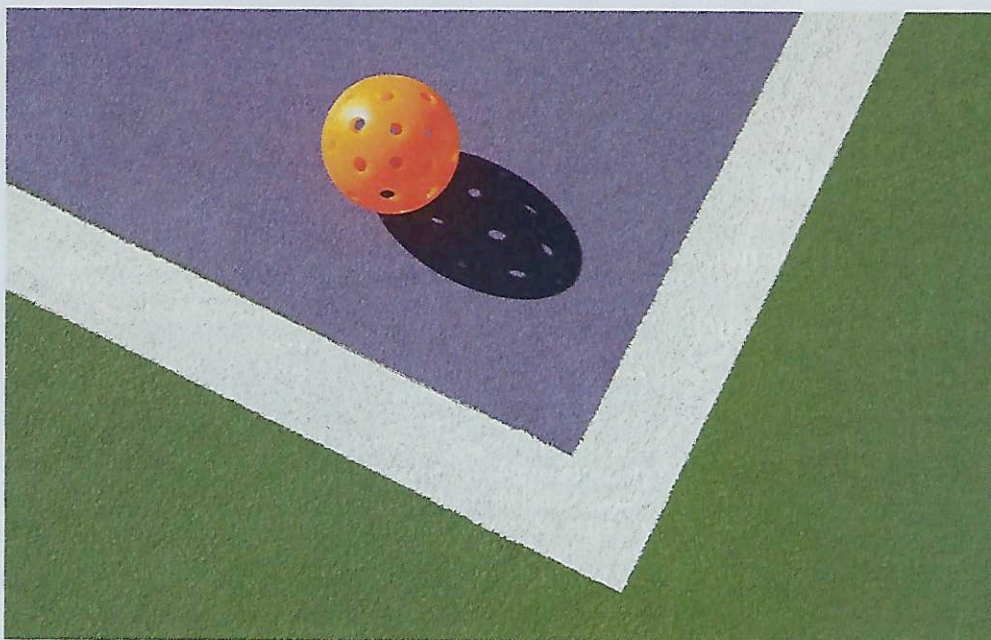


“People play for the first time and can’t wait to try again.”



Is Pickleball For You?

The little racket sport that's taking the golf world by storm

BY KEELY LEVINS

Golf instructor Hank Haney is a “fanatic” about it. “Seriously,” he says. “I’m so into it.” Former USGA executive director David Fay calls it “terrific,” adding, “I took one lesson and feel like I got it.” What are they so excited about? A simple racket sport, known as pickleball, that’s finding its way into golf clubs nationwide. ▶ “It’s a crazy phenomenon,” says Marcin Rozpedski, the 2016 pickleball national champion and sports director at the Lakes Country Club in Palm Desert, Calif. “It’s been out since the ’60s, but in the past two years, it’s grown so quickly.” ▶ If you’re not one of the reported 2.8 million pickleball players in the United States, here are the basics: Think of it as a miniature form of tennis, with a plastic ball (similar to a Wiffle ball) and underhand serves.

The court is 20 feet by 44 feet with a low net in the middle, and you can play singles or doubles. Doubles is more popular.

Games are usually played to 11. You have to win by two, and only the server can score. Often, you’ll play three games. In total, it’ll take about an hour to an hour and a half to play all three games.

Rozpedski has seen players at his club take to the sport quickly for several reasons. For one, it’s relatively cheap. Rackets cost about \$50, and if you can’t find a pickleball court, you can play on a tennis court and use chalk to draw in the correct lines.

“Once you get people to play, it’s inevitable that they’ll love it because it’s very social,” Rozpedski says. “It’s a small court, you get four people on that space, and you talk like you’re next to each other.”

Haney, Tiger Woods’ former instructor and a Golf Digest teaching professional, has been playing for two years. He has taken lessons and competed in tournaments, and he even built a court at his house. He plays three hours a day during the summer.

As for why golfers seem to enjoy pickleball so much, Haney has a few theories. The sports are similar in that they’re

both lifetime sports, and you can partner with a better player to have a chance at winning matches. But that’s where the similarities end.

“People play pickleball for the first time, and they think, *I did pretty good*. They can’t wait to try again. With golf, it’s harder,” Haney says. “Golfers probably aren’t looking for another steep-learning-curve sport. That’s part of pickleball’s appeal. It’s a lot more exercise than you think. Golfers like the exercise and the competition.”

Among tour pros who have caught the bug is Daniel Summerhays. When he built his house, he put in a half basketball court. Trying to see what else he could play there, he came across pickleball. He’d played once in high school and decided to give it a try. Pickleball quickly became his nongolf sport of choice.

“It’s very competitive and fast, so it stimulates your brain, but we won’t get hurt playing it,” Summerhays says.

Summerhays plays with friends and even competes in some amateur events. He also plays with his wife and kids, and he travels on tour with his paddles. He says Matt Kuchar, Phil Mickelson, Ricky Barnes and Patton Kizzire have picked up the sport, too.

“When I’m leaving a tour event, one of the first things I do, besides looking forward to spending time with my family, is to text my pickleball group asking where the game is the next morning,” Summerhays says.

If you’re looking to become part of the craze, Rozpedski suggests visiting the U.S. pickleball association’s website, usapa.org. There you’ll find places to play and guidance on how to start.

Pro tip: When you start playing, you might hear players refer to The Kitchen. This is the area seven feet from the net. In that area, you’re not allowed to volley the ball back to the other team. It’s technically called the non-volley zone, but drop “The Kitchen” in your first match, and you’ll sound like a pro.