

BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

The Pickleball Advantage

Follow trends and implement a new sport at your facility to become a better—and more profitable—manager.

BY TERRI GRAHAM AND CHRIS EVON



As a member of the racquet sports industry, chances are you know about pickleball and its growing popularity. The question many people have been asking is whether—and why—they should offer pickleball at their facilities.

As the organizers of the annual Minto US Open Pickleball Championships, we can tell you that the people who are implementing pickleball—and in turn, benefitting from it—are the ones who understand these trends:

- Baby-Boomers (age 50 and up) are driving the pickleball market. That age group accounts for 45 percent of all adults, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. They're taking up pickleball because injuries and joint pain have driven them out of sports like tennis,

racquetball and running. It's a fact: you already have a ready-made player base.

- That age group wants to stay active. Putting in pickleball courts, or lining your current facilities for pickleball play, means you can capitalize on that demand and reap the financial rewards. We have seen clubs and parks smartly offering pickleball at times when tennis courts aren't as busy—for example, during morning hours when lessons aren't taking place and leagues aren't running. Charging for pickleball court time means additional income.

- Baby-boomers spend more on consumer products and services than those under 50. This means they lead Millennials and Gen X (the age groups that get all the attention) in buying.

That translates into additional revenue for your pro shop, where new players will come looking for shoes, paddles, balls and apparel.

- Pickleball is a natural transition from higher-impact sports, primarily because it doesn't detract from them. We often hear people say, "I love tennis, but I can't play anymore, and I really missed it. I'm so thankful I found pickleball." They're not saying, "I found pickleball and I put down my tennis racquet for good." It's simple: would you rather keep or lose a player?

- Pickleball is a valuable recruitment tool for your facilities. Adding pickleball programs translates into added income. Lining existing courts is an inexpensive way to implement that.

A key to any business is listening to what people want and then delivering it. If you say, "We're not adding anything new," are you really doing your job?

The smartest communities, like Naples, Fla., in Collier County, are adding pickleball and realizing the benefits. It's the home of the Minto US Open Pickleball Championships, and the park district hosts lessons, league play and camps all year long, attracting players from all over the country.

Housing developers, including Minto, understand that pickleball courts are a sales advantage. Latitude Margaritaville in Daytona Beach is doing something similar and adding a pickleball complex in a pursuit of the active lifestyle market.

It's easy to say you're a purist and are only going to stick with so-called traditional sports, but the participation numbers don't lie, and neither do the sales. The sports industry is evolving—are you going to serve your public? ■

Terri Graham and Chris Evon are the founders of the Minto US Open Pickleball Championships, held each April in Naples, Fla. They previously spent a combined 38 years at Wilson Sporting Goods.

We welcome your opinions. Please email comments to info@tennisindustrymag.com.