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**WHAT'S YOUR WORKOUT?**

# A Tennis Purist Who Became a Pickleball Pro

Why a cardiologist who'd played the traditional racket sport for decades switched to the low-impact alternative with the goofy name



Ken Curry, a cardiologist in Kennewick, Wash., swapped his tennis racket for a pickleball paddle. He plays four days a week at the Yakima Tennis Club. **PHOTO:** RYAN HENRIKSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

*By Jen Murphy*

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If you're a hard-core tennis lover, it's hard to take a sport called pickleball seriously. There's the funny name. You serve underhand and hit something that looks like a Wiffle ball. Ken Curry snubbed the game for years. "I thought it was a geezer sport," he says.

Dr. Curry, a cardiologist in Kennewick, Wash., has tennis bona fides. He played on the Colorado State University-Pueblo team, and after graduation he postponed medical school to pursue a tennis career that lasted 1½ years. In his prime, he held a world ranking and in 1978 he reached the Australian Open, though he didn't make it out of the qualifying rounds.

Dr. Curry's brother, Dan Curry, who also played college tennis, finally convinced him in 2012 to try pickleball, a sport that combines elements of tennis, badminton and Ping-Pong. "My brother was always raving about it and nagging me to pick up a paddle," he says. "After one game, I was hooked."



Dr. Curry, right, practices pickleball drills with Grant Harris, left. PHOTO: RYAN HENRIKSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Pickleball is one of the fastest-growing sports in America, with more than 3 million participants, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. The association's 2017 pickleball participant report showed that nearly 43% of core players are 65 or older. Dr. Curry, 64, had his hip replaced in 2013, and says that after decades of hitting overhead smashes and lunging to the net, a hard tennis match leaves him aching.

A smaller court and slower balls make pickleball a low-impact alternative. "I haven't picked up a tennis racket in two years and don't miss it," Dr. Curry says.

Dr. Curry plays both singles and doubles but prefers playing with a partner. "I enjoy the strategy and teamwork," he says. He competes in six to eight tournaments a year and has played in the USA Pickleball national championships four times. He and his brother finished third in the men's doubles 50+ category in 2014. The following year, Dr. Curry won gold in the singles 60+ category. He plans to compete in the championships again this year after taking time off for family commitments.

The family pickleball obsession seems to be contagious. Dr. Curry's adult son, Parker, is a pickleball pro in Colorado Springs, Colo. One of his two grown daughters dabbles in the sport

and his Australian son-in-law, Nick Cooper, won gold at the 2018 Australian pickleball nationals. Even his wife, Patty Curry, who swore she'd never get on the court with him again, has taken to the game. "I turned her off tennis after putting her through years of drills, but she appreciates the pickleball workouts and is climbing up the ranks."



Dr. Curry, right, competes in up to eight pickleball tournaments a year. He says the sport is a low-impact alternative to tennis.  
PHOTO: RYAN HENRIKSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## The Workout

Dr. Curry plays pickleball three to four times a week, for two to three hours. He does drills for 75% of the workout, then plays games for the duration. The sport is played with wooden paddles and a plastic, perforated ball on a short, square court. The net is hung at 34 inches, compared with 36 inches for tennis, and there is a 7-foot no-volley zone on each side of the net. Players score when the other side can't return a shot. The first side to reach 11 points with a two-point lead wins.

"The small court makes the game quicker than tennis," Dr. Curry says. "There are so many more possibilities in terms of what you can do with the ball. Because the ball bounce is shorter, there's a lot of lunging, which requires a strong core."

He spends a lot of time perfecting the dink, a higher, softer shot hit from the no-volley zone that stays low going over the net and drops quickly in the opposing no-volley zone. "It's the most important shot," he says. "You can't hit the ball through people. You have to learn patience and hit soft and then rush the net. It's like a game of cat and mouse." On the court, he says his goal is to hit soft to his opponent's feet up to 90% of the time, whether it's with a forward dink, or a cross-court or backhand dink.

He incorporates yoga poses into his five-day-a-week stretching routine.

## The Diet

Each morning, Dr. Curry makes a smoothie of spinach, chia seeds, frozen fruit, fruit juice and protein powder. He drinks half, along with a bowl of granola, for breakfast and freezes the rest for the evening. He has lunch at the hospital cafeteria, usually chicken and a side vegetable. After a brief stint going paleo, he says he rarely eats dairy, wheat or sugar. Dinner is often fish and a salad. His favorite splurge is his wife's chocolate chip cookies and the cookies from New York City bakery Levain.

## The Gear & Cost

Dr. Curry plays on the Selkirk Sport team and gets discounts on products from the paddle manufacturer. He plays with a Selkirk Amped Invikta midweight paddle (\$150). He wears Asics sneakers and likes Thorlos socks (\$16) for their double thickness. "When you're drilling balls nonstop for 90 minutes, you need good cushioning," he says. He plays outdoors on the free courts at Lawrence Scott Park and indoors at Tri-City Court Club, both in Kennewick. His membership at the club is \$85 a month.

What's your workout? Tell us at [workout@wsj.com](mailto:workout@wsj.com)



Pickleball is played with a paddle and perforated ball. The sound of the two connecting can be distracting to tennis players on nearby courts. PHOTO: RYAN HENRIKSEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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## A TRUCE BETWEEN PICKLEBALL AND TENNIS

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When pickleball first came on the scene in the late 1960s, it was met with disdain by many tennis purists. Many found the sound of the ball hitting the paddle annoying and didn't want to share court time. They got irked when pickleballers lowered the net or taped the tennis court to adjust the lines of play. And many considered the game child's play. "The first hesitation is always the name," admits Tony Giannoni, a mental performance consultant in Orlando, Fla., who works with tennis players. "Why would a serious sport have this peculiar name?"

It's taken some time, but attitudes are slowly changing. Even tennis greats like Andy Roddick and Andre Agassi have given the game a go. Mr. Giannoni says when he first observed pickleball, the game didn't look very athletic. When he tried it, he was surprised by how intense the sport could be, but also by how it improved his tennis game. "It's helped me be more patient on the tennis court," he says. "You use your volley a lot more than you use your groundstroke in pickleball, and I now have a stronger volley in my tennis game."

Justin Maloof, executive director of the U.S. Pickleball Association, believes the noise complaint is what originally drove a wedge between tennis and pickleball players. He says new partnerships, like a blended pickleball line program initiative with the U.S. Tennis Association, can benefit both sports. In February, the Professional Tennis Registry and the Professional Pickleball Registry in Hilton Head Island, S.C., organizations that educate and certify coaches, will even debut a new program called Pick Ten that will teach both pickleball and tennis in 10 sessions.

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