



# PICKLEBALL FEVER

*Pickleball clubs and courts in and around Elmhurst draw newcomers and avid players alike*

By Kerrie Kennedy

**T**he hottest social club in the western suburbs has become the pickleball court, where women, couples and families meet up for some healthy competition, a solid cardio workout and a big dose of fun.

Just ask Clarendon Hills resident Jill Livingston, who with her business partner Dorothy Foster, recently opened Net Game in Westmont, an indoor pickleball facility with nine temperature-controlled courts, LED lighting and a pro shop. There's also a

full bar with a menu, which has turned out to be one of the keys to their success.

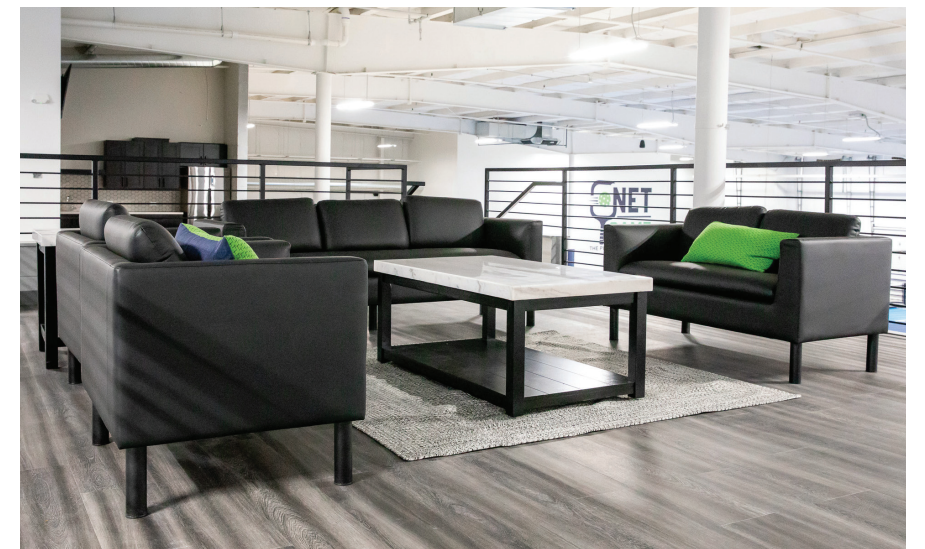
"We do a happy hour every Friday," Livingston said. "We really wanted to create a place where members can hang out and get to know each other. We've only been open since April, but it's been so fun to see the friendships that have formed as a result."

According to Livingston, the sport of pickleball lends itself to socializing.

"I'm competitive, but I also love to laugh and have fun, and that's a big part of pickleball," she said. "In fact, this is the one sport you can play with your family, and everyone—no matter what their ability—has fun, because it's less serious than other sports. We did a big family open play on the Fourth of July, and it was such a blast. You



Net Game, an indoor pickleball facility with nine temperature-controlled courts and LED lighting, opened in Westmont this past April. Elmhurst pickleball enthusiasts were among the first to join.



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A combination of tennis, badminton and ping-pong, pickleball was first played in 1965 in Bainbridge Island, Wash., by three fathers looking to give their bored children a new activity by using a hodgepodge of other sports as inspiration.

The COVID-19 pandemic gave the sport an unexpected boom, when people flocked to the paddle sport as a socially-distant way to be outdoors and stay active. Fast-forward to 2024, and pickleball has officially taken off across the country.

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racket sports at the Elmhurst Park District, pickleball can be learned in just a few lessons, and it's less taxing than its paddle-sport cousins.

"The court is smaller than in tennis, so there's less running," Clay said. "The ball is similar to a wiffle-ball, and the paddle is shorter, which makes it a bit easier. You can pick up a paddle at Target for as little as \$10."

While pickleball has a reputation as an older person's sport, the average age of pickleball players nationwide is just 38.1.

"More and more younger people are playing pickleball, especially tennis players," Clay said. "It's a different challenge. Tennis requires a lot of endurance, but with pickleball, the energy demand is more like short bursts of speed."

"I burn an insane amount of calories in pickleball," Livingston said. "I play paddle in the winter, and I barely burn calories. Pickleball is just a very good cardio workout. A big part of it is playing to the net and getting low, so you're basically doing squats all the time."

With a mission statement of "fostering a fun and vibrant community for pickleball players of all ages and skills," it's no surprise that Net Game has already become a popular destination for private events.

"You don't have to be a member to have a party here," Livingston said. "We do everything from tween and teen birthdays, to ladies' nights [and] corporate events."

According to Clay, the Elmhurst Park District accommodates players of all skills by offering different times for different ability levels.

"That way, players don't get frustrated by getting in over their head," he said. "But the pickleball community is very unique in that it's a nice, homegrown community of people willing to help."

While pickleball is a year-round sport, Livingston is expecting increased demand this fall.

"One of the other pickleball clubs told us to be prepared for the holidays, because it is insane," she said. "Which makes sense, because no one wants to sit around when the weather is cold, and this is something you can do. Pickleball is a great way to fight the winter blues."

In fact, Livingston said fitness is more of a bonus with pickleball.

"The real benefit is the social engagement," she said. "I had a woman recently come here to do some drills, who said she really didn't know anyone to play with. Afterwards, I saw her having a drink with some of the players she met. For me, that's what this is all about." ■

## WHERE TO PLAY PICKLEBALL

**Butterfield Park**  
385 E. Van Buren Street, Elmhurst  
*Two outdoor tennis courts with pickleball lines*

**Courts Plus**  
186 S. West Ave., Elmhurst  
*10 indoor courts with lines and nets*

**Crestview Park**  
245 E. Crestview Ave., Elmhurst  
*Six dedicated outdoor courts with windscreens*

**East End Park**  
463 E. Schiller Street, Elmhurst  
*Two outdoor tennis courts with pickleball lines*

**Eldridge Park**  
Spring Road and Harrison Street, Elmhurst  
*Two outdoor tennis courts with pickleball lines*

**Kies Recreation Center**  
155 E. St. Charles Road, Elmhurst  
*Three indoor courts with lines and nets on multi-purpose flooring*

**Net Game**  
145 Plaza Drive in Westmont  
*Nine indoor courts*