



From the Picklehood

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By Jack Hodges

Open Play Means You Play With Everyone

It's an age old topic. Ifs and buts abound. Lately, more and more discussions across the pickleball spectrum relate to 'Open Play.'

The issues are obvious and have become an area of genuine concern here on our small island in the middle of the Pacific. Over the past couple of weeks, it has been pointed out by players from other Kaua'i island venues and mainland visitors as well, that we've kind of lost our way at some of our places to play.

Open Play (also referred to as Drop-In Play) isn't what it used to be. There are reasons and number one is the skill level of our players. Everyone has improved. A close second is the increase in the number of players in the past couple of years. Third would be the number of visitors who pack their paddles when traveling to Kaua'i. What hasn't changed is the size of our venues. No facility with more than four courts. No opportunities to create a challenge court or two for more elite play when we don't have the courts to do so. In a recent study, the average number of pickleball courts per venue in the U.S. was six.

But the final factor—and the reason for this month's commentary—is the 'paddle stacking' or 'whose next' philosophy when a court is vacated. With strict adherence to lining up paddles (or bodies) comes less consistency in quality of play. The next four up means a possible significant gap in skill levels of the four players. The solution? Similar skill level 'foursomes' are formed by a team 'captain,' based on who shows up on any particular day. Those foursomes stay together for the next couple of hours.



I end this column with my personal story of being introduced to pickleball. You'll see the relevance. In 2011, Stephanie and I were living in Dana Point, CA. I had just retired after 42 years of teaching and coaching and I needed something to do. I was hearing stories about a group of people playing a game called pickleball at an elementary school in Laguna Niguel. I drove down one morning to check things out. Two old tennis courts, adjacent to the school, were marked off with painter's tape. Six old, cracked surface courts. Five were active that morning. I introduced myself to a lady at the gate entrance and said I was interested in learning the game. She said "You're in luck. Those three men on court six are waiting for a friend. Join them until he comes. One of the three is my husband." She asked if I had any racket sport experience, and I said I coached and taught tennis for a good part of my adult life. "You'll fit right in," she said. I'll never forget that first game. These three men.....one was arguably the best senior pickleball player in the country. One was a former college tennis player and the third was a former professional baseball player. All in their 60's. All playing to stay active. All a gift to the game. I explained that I researched the game on-line and was somewhat familiar with the rules and scoring. I also pointed out my tennis background. I swear to you they looked at each other and rolled their eyes. I sensed I was going to get schooled. We played to 11. The game lasted about 45 minutes because we stopped AFTER EVERY POINT as they took the time to explain to me, in detail, rules, scoring, positioning, strategy and nuances. It was on-the-job training extraordinaire!! Grateful doesn't even begin to describe that first game and day. Their friend had arrived, so I was introduced to other players. I spent three wonderful hours playing with people I had never met. However, before I played that second game with another group, I excused myself for five minutes, grabbed my cell phone and called Stephanie. "I am hooked," I told her. Playing with people far more advanced than I was a gift. They treated me with kindness. They rolled their eyes at my tennis strokes, tolerated my rookie mistakes and invited me back. That day changed my life. I did get schooled, but in the best of ways. So here I am, asking all of us to pay it forward. Take the time, even if it is just a game or two each day, to play with newbies and those less skilled. Give them some workable pointers. Welcome them to the picklehood. You will appreciate their appreciation.

.....and remember, many of you pack your paddles when traveling. Your hope is that you fit in with a welcoming group of fellow pickleballers.

Happy September, 2023

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