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Soccer meets racquetball — a sport is born

By [Stuart Eskenazi](#)

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James Naismith started with two peach baskets, a stepladder and 18 young men inside a YMCA gymnasium in Springfield, Mass. John Birks is starting with a ball covered in black felt, a patent pending and his pal Leo at a health club in Ballard.

What the heck. New sports have to start somewhere.

Birks' creation, International Court Soccer, is a fast-paced, ultra-competitive game for two that borrows from the rules of racquetball and adapts the skills of soccer. Players use a regulation racquetball court and an 18-panel, custom-made ball the size of a volleyball. Seventeen years after copyrighting the rules, Birks is finally ready to take his game public.

He has ordered the manufacture of 320 court-soccer balls from Baden, a Federal Way sporting-goods company, and has persuaded his gym, Olympic Athletic Club in Ballard, to host the game's international kickoff, perhaps as early as next month.

"I'm not doing this to get rich," said Birks, 50, of Ballard, a cardiac technologist at the University of Washington Medical Center and a part-time clinical specialist for a medical device company. "I'm doing it because it's enjoyable. At the same time, if I get recognized as the inventor of a great sport, that would be wonderful."

These things take time. Naismith invented basketball in 1891, but the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield did not open until 1968. Unlike Naismith, Birks is not only his sport's inventor but also its investor — sole and soul.

A dreamer, Birks shuts his eyes and imagines the world's 10 best soccer players competing for the International Court Soccer championship in a Plexiglas-enclosed court at Key Arena. Live TV coverage beamed around the globe.

The genesis of court soccer, however, was more humble. On an ordinary day in the mid-1980s, Birks and a buddy waited for a basketball court to come open at the Portland YMCA, and they decided to warm up by kicking around a volleyball in a vacant racquetball court.

"We were both competitive people, so we started to compete," Birks said. "The rules just kind of developed as we went along."

Birks received a copyright on the rules in 1986, but few knew about his invention. He played with select friends, wanting to keep the game private to protect his rights to it. After moving to Seattle, he put the game on the back burner until recently, when he started playing at Olympic with a friend from work, Leo Rioja.

Birks applied for the game's patent and the International Court Soccer's trademark last spring. His game is played like this:

The ball is bounced once in the server's box and kicked off the front wall. It must land between the back line of the server's box and the back wall, though the opponent may opt to play the serve without letting the ball bounce first

Once the opposing player initiates play, that player has a maximum of three touches to return the ball to the front wall without it hitting the floor first. A player may use the back wall and side walls, and for touches may use any part of the body other than the arms and hands.

Points may be scored only by the server, and the first player to reach 10 wins.

Many of the same strategies of racquetball apply to court soccer, such as hitting the ball low off the front wall and playing the ball toward the back wall when the opponent is caught near the front wall. As in racquetball, rallies can grow quite intense.

But the question remains: Does International Court Soccer have legs?

"I think it's a very good idea," said Bo Bohannon, a Baden sales representative. "Soccer's popularity is certainly growing in this country, especially among youth."

Birks is launching court soccer in an era when TV sports networks are marketing innovative "extreme sports" to satisfy a high-testosterone young male demographic, dude. Birks said he has convened his own youth advisory committee — his two teenage nephews in Connecticut who played the game last summer and got hooked.

"They've gotten other kids jacked up to play it, too," he said.

The sport is best for those who already possess moderate soccer skills, since it requires players to control the ball without it hitting the floor. Birks, however, said the game also is an excellent training tool to improve soccer skills.

A former racquetball player and soccer coach, Birks said court soccer also is a challenging aerobic workout that demands more physical exertion than racquetball. The whiz-bang nature of the game suggests he is correct.

Another advantage to the game, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, is it is played indoors.

"It can be snowing outside, and we can come in here and play," Rioja said. "A lot of the injuries in soccer occur because of bad weather and field conditions."

Birks' pursuit of his dream is manifesting as a business plan. The game will debut soon at Olympic, where he, Rioja and another friend will run clinics introducing Seattleites to the sport.

"We're happy to be the host for bringing this sport to Seattle and giving John a place where he can feel like he has a home base," said Lindy Taylor, Olympic's general manager.

Later this month, Birks plans to attend a sporting-goods trade show in Las Vegas to introduce the sport to other people who count — manufacturers' sales reps.

While waiting for International Court Soccer to catch on, Birks hopes to earn a little income by selling the Baden balls and logo apparel to local gyms and players.

"My plan is to develop the game locally, and then, hopefully, the word will get out," he said. "I guess there is always the potential down the line that some big company will like the sport and come to me and want to buy me out."

Should that happen, maybe future generations one day will visit the Birks Memorial International Court Soccer Hall of Fame in Ballard. Wouldn't that be a kick?

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