

Court Sports' Renewed Promise

By John R. Birks

In the late '80s, when, pressured by clubs' need to allocate more space to aerobics and fitness, the number of racquetball courts in the U.S. began to fall, many court-sport enthusiasts began to wring their hands, *prematurely*, in despair.

Since then, however, court sports have demonstrated that they're hardly an endangered club species. Rather, their many positive attributes have earned them a permanent role as an important part of many facilities' programming—one that, given current market conditions, holds *fresh* promise.

The number of racquetball players has held steady, at about 5.6 million, since the '80s. Similarly, for the past several years, the percentage of IHRSA clubs offering racquetball (37%), Wallyball (26%), and squash (17%) has remained constant.

No, court sports aren't going away. In fact, they're still successfully *courting* club members. What special assets do these sports possess? The list, already long, continues to grow. They provide excellent balance, flexibility, cardio, strength, and core conditioning. They burn calories like crazy. They're both social and competitive in nature, fostering member interaction and, therefore, retention. They're *never* boring—a grievance frequently leveled at other types of exercise. They come in an increasing number of interesting, innovative forms. And each of them has an eager, committed constituency.

At the moment, clubs can choose from among:

- Racquetball: USA Racquetball, the national governing body, actively promotes collegiate and high school programs, and recently introduced an online member-management program to improve communication.

- Wallyball: This fast-paced sport, which can be played by four, six, or eight players at a time, helps maximize court usage. It has a base of more than 2 million registered players worldwide.

- Squash: Once regarded as the most "elite" of court sports, squash is now one with universal appeal, played on some 50,000 courts in 153 countries. It's governed and promoted, in the U.S., by the United States Squash Racquets Association.

- Handball: The US Handball Association, anxious to expand the game's impact, has announced its intention to raise \$5 million—half to be invested in communication, public-awareness, and player-development initiatives, and half to endow a fund to ensure handball's future.

- Squish: Invented in 1999 by CBI Contributing Editor Stephen Wallenfels, Squish combines elements of racquetball, squash, tennis, and, even, ping pong, and has already yielded leagues and tournaments.

- International Court Soccer: Combine the appeal of soccer, which has more than 20 million players in the U.S. and Canada, with the ambience of a racquetball or squash court, and you have International Court Soccer, a copyrighted game that I've been closely involved with.

- And then there's Tracketball, and Pickleball, and Wallyminton...

Today, club operators, when they consider the new upside of court sports, are wringing their hands with *anticipation*. ■

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Exercise Gains Ground in Fight Against Pounds

> For decades, many dieters have mistakenly believed that eating less was the most effective—in fact, *only* way—to shed unwanted pounds. Now, however, a new study produced by the Pennington Medical Research Center at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, documents that exercise is *equally* essential to successful weight loss.

The study, described in a recent issue of the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, tracked a group of 24 volunteers over a six-month period. Twelve of the subjects ate a calorie-restricted diet, while the other 12 dieted *and* exercised five times a week. Those who simply dieted ate 25% less than normal; those who dieted and exercised ate 12.5% less, and increased their exercise levels to burn an extra 12.5% in calories. Each group lost approximately the same amount of weight, fat mass, and visceral fat.

Another new study, conducted by the Duke University Medical Center, in Durham, North Carolina, indicates that a majority of Americans support changes in public policy to incentivize healthier lifestyles: Some 85% endorse tax breaks for companies that provide exercise space for their employees; 72% want the government to require insurers to cover obesity prevention and treatment programs; and 73% want it to provide incentives for companies that offer lower health insurance costs for employees with healthy lifestyles. ■