



YOU HAVE TO USE THE WRIST STRAP WHEN YOU PLAY PADEL.

BACK TO COURT

BY CHARIS TORRANCE

PADEL, ONE OF THE FASTEST-GROWING SPORTS IN THE WORLD, OFFERS A FUN WAY TO MIX UP YOUR FITNESS ROUTINE.

WHO INVENTED IT?

The sport owes its existence to a Mexican entrepreneur named Enrique Corcuera, says Steven Cox, director of South Africa's first padel shop, called Padel SA, and board member of the South African Padel Association. In 1969, Corcuera wanted to build a tennis court at his holiday home but lacked the space. 'His solution? Build a smaller court that was enclosed. And padel was born.' A business associate of his took the concept

back with him to Spain, and that's where it really took off. Today, you cannot walk down a street in Spain without seeing people playing padel, Steven says. It then moved to Latin America before hitting the US in the '90s. Since then, the sport has taken hold in most of Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

PADEL IN SA

So how did padel find its way here? 'In 2019, athlete Ryk

Padel, a hybrid of tennis and squash, is having a major moment! Padel clubs have sprung up around the country in the past two years. We've just caught on to the trend, but it's been around for decades. We think this sport should be on your must-try list.

Neethling helped to initiate the game in South Africa when he was involved in setting up the first padel court in the country at Val de Vie Estate in Paarl,' Steven says, but it was mainly built for the residents of the estate. The first padel court open to the public came the following year when iJUMP Arena in Clearwater Crossing, Gauteng, built a padel court, and Cape Town's Action Padel opening came soon after. Covid-19 saw the growth of the sport pause, momentarily, but as soon as restrictions were lifted the sport just exploded. Today, Steven says, there are easily 80 to 90 padel courts in the country, with plenty waiting in the wings.

Africa Padel member Renate Potter is one of the sport's biggest fans. She started playing in March 2021. 'I had a baby just before lockdown, and post-partum weight plus lockdown confinement were not kind to my body.' After some gentle nagging from her husband, she decided to give this new craze a try. 'Coming from a tennis background, padel appealed to everything I loved about tennis, but with none of its cons.' She was quickly hooked.

Along with her padel partner Elizna Wilken, she went on to win the South African Padel Association's first-ever national championship, and was part of the South African invitational team that competed in the Africa Padel Cup in Egypt in March this year.

TENNIS V PADEL

'I like to think of padel like you would action netball or action soccer,' Renate says. So, action tennis, if you will. Padel is always played in doubles on an enclosed

court that is 25% smaller than your traditional tennis court. The balls are similar to tennis balls, but with a little less pressure, and the racket has no strings – it's solid, with holes. 'When you play, you can use the enclosing walls, which makes for a faster and much more fun game.'

Also, scoring is the same as in tennis: 15, 30, 40 and game. The match is won by the team that wins two out of three sets – to win a set, the team has to win at least six games.

WHY IT'S GREAT

It's not just the super-fit who have caught on to the perks of the sport. Here's why it's so popular:

1 EASY TO PLAY 'Even if you've never played squash or tennis, you can play padel,' Renate says. The rules are pretty simple and easy enough to grasp within the first 20 minutes.

2 AFFORDABLE EQUIPMENT (kind of) For the most part, you just need comfortable clothes (preferably pants with pockets to keep your spare ball handy) and shoes that have a decent grip. The racket may be a bit pricey, but you can rent one from your local club. In fact, Renate encourages people to rent first and try out different options to find the right fit.

3 IMPROVES COORDINATION AND MOVEMENT Padel helps with speed, endurance, strength and mobility – and, with regular practice, it can increase your hand-



BE READY FOR A VOLLEY WITH THE RACKET HEAD HELD UP.

eye coordination and reaction time. It's a superb way to work out.

4 A MOOD BOOSTER A lawyer by day, Renate can attest to the stress-relieving benefits of padel. Sports like padel also boost the production of serotonin in the body, which works as a mood stabiliser and promotes a healthy sleeping pattern.

5 A SOCIAL GAME Always played in doubles, padel is a good excuse to get together with friends. The padel community is welcoming and supportive, Renate says.

WHERE TO START

It's as easy as downloading an app! All the padel clubs around the world use Playtomic. It will show you the clubs in your area, and from there you can book a court and even pay through the app.

If you want to find people to play with, there are lots of WhatsApp and social groups that you can join. The clubs often host social days where the public is invited to come by and get to know the sport. ■

Renate's dos and don'ts of padel

- 1. DO DRINK LOTS OF WATER:** You're moving a lot and you're going to sweat, so it's important to keep hydrated.
- 2. DON'T THROW YOUR PADEL RACKET AGAINST THE GLASS.** You can damage your expensive racket – and the property.
- 3. DO BUY A DECENT PAIR OF SHOES.** Wearing shoes with a good grip is important, so invest in a pair of clay court tennis shoes.

- 4. DON'T REMOVE THE SAFETY STRAP CONNECTED TO YOUR PADEL FROM YOUR WRIST DURING PLAY.** As mentioned, you are going to sweat while playing, which makes it easy for your racket to slip from your hand, and without the wrist strap it can hit another player.
- 5. DO HAVE FUN!** Once you get started, you'll quickly get a feel for the sport, and before you know it you'll be playing like a champ.