

focus

FROM A DIY-STYLE BACKYARD GAME TO A WORD-OF-MOUTH PHENOMENON, PICKLEBALL IS RESHAPING HYDERABAD'S SPORTING SCENE ONE DINK AT A TIME.

Now the world's fastest-growing sport, it has the city fully hooked – with over 150 venues to play, restaurants and hospitals adding courts, and even Tollywood actors owning league teams. WOW! breaks down everything you need to know about pickleball

BY IPSHITA RAMAN

GAME, SET, PICKLEBALL

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Cleverly patched together by blending long-established and much-loved sports – tennis, table tennis, and badminton – pickleball is an experimental hybrid that is enjoying its current standing as a global phenomenon. Closer home, in Hyderabad, with Pickleball Leagues happening in packed stadiums, celebrities picking up teams, city corporates building pickleball courts in their office backyards and hip youngsters busy pickling on the weekends, the sport has reached a new level of mania in the city.

On its ascent to glory, the unique sport has remarkably found a way to connect people beyond borders. To find out why Hyderabadis are loving this sport, and the reason behind its rapid rise, WOW! talks to players, team owners and brings you little known facts about the game, and more.

PIONEERS OF PICKLEBALL

Devised by former United States Representative Joel Pritchard and his friends William Bell and Barney McCallum on Bainbridge Island, Washington, the 20th century invention is said to get its name from the rowing term, Pickle Boat. It is also said that the game was named after a family dog, Pickles. While others cite pickleball's connection to the enjoyment derived from putting the opponent in a pickle.

The easy-to-learn sport was first played after Pritchard and Bell returned from golf to their families who were bored. Unable to find a shuttlecock to get them to play a round of badminton, the two men (along with McCallum) decided to experiment with equipment at their disposal. Table tennis paddles, a wiffle ball, and a lowered net at their badminton court together marked the first foray into pickleball.





AIPA
PRESIDENT,
ARVIND
RAMESH
PRABHOO



AIPA TREASURER, NIKHIL
SADHANA ARUN MATHURE

PICKLEBALL'S LAUNCH IN INDIA

In the late 2000s, Sunil Valavalkar, Founder of the All India Pickleball Association (AIPA), introduced pickleball to India. Affectionately known as the Father of Indian Pickleball, Sunil first discovered the sport on an overseas trip. Instantly struck by its simplicity and its potential to unite players across generations, he brought it back home, organizing national-level demonstrations and tournaments. Soon, people started taking to it with passion.

AIPA's management tells WOW! that pickleball is currently being played in 24 states, with around four lakh players that include both amateurs and pros pan-India.

"What we are witnessing in India today is nothing short of a sporting revolution. Pickleball has grown from a niche activity

to a national movement, and the All India Pickleball Association has been at the heart of this transformation. From hosting our first Nationals to bringing the Bainbridge Pickleball World Cup to Indian soil, we have consistently pushed boundaries to elevate the sport. And now, with the launch of World Pickleball Season Two, we are giving Indian athletes an international platform like never before," reveals AIPA President, Arvind Ramesh Prabhoo while describing the growth of pickleball in India.

Elaborating on the financial logistics, AIPA Treasurer, Nikhil Sadhana Arun Mathure adds, "Our vision is to build a financially sustainable and scalable ecosystem where players can see pickleball as a viable career, not just a passion. With increasing prize money, international exposure, and structured development programs, we are laying the foundation for long-term prosperity – not only for the sport, but for every athlete who dreams of carving a future in pickleball."



AAMIR KHAN



VIRAT KOHLI

INCREASED VISIBILITY

Pickleball's increased visibility can also be attributed to prominent figures taking an instant liking to it. From Bill Gates and Leonardo DiCaprio to Aamir Khan and Virat Kohli – who have all partaken in friendly matches – their collective influence has placed the sport on a pedestal, adding to the mass hysteria.

"I've been a Pickler, as people obsessed with the game like me are known, for more than 50 years," American businessman and philanthropist Bill Gates revealed in a blog post on his website, crediting the sport for keeping him fit.



BILL GATES



LEONARDO DICAPRIO

With faith in the game's ability to go the distance and rival existing sporting leagues like the Indian Premier League (IPL), Pro Kabaddi League (PKL), and the Indian Super League (ISL), corporate giants and media personalities are also partaking in the worldwide mania by contributing to tournaments like the Hyderabad Pickleball League (HPL), Indian Pickleball League (IPBL), Global Sports Pickleball League (GSP), and the World Pickleball League (WPBL) set to take place this month.

HYDERABAD WEIGHS IN

The beloved sport has added Hyderabad to its growing tribe of enthusiasts; in large numbers. Taking to it with fiery fervor, the city's pickleball community stands strong through exciting events, professional coaching, and inclusive tournaments for all skill levels.

The Hyderabad Pickleball League (HPL) contributes to the rise of the sport in the city by helping build a pickleball community from the ground up. It offers a spectator experience that includes great food and hospitality, music, and opportunities to connect with like-minded sports aficionados.

Founder of the Hyderabad Pickleball Association, Akash M, sharing his insights into the rise of pickleball in the city tells us, "Hyderabad's pickleball community has exploded. We now have over 1,000 players actively on the courts and more than 150 courts across the city. The fact that we've hosted 20 tournaments in the past ten months alone speaks of the energy and competitive spirit here. It's not just about recreation anymore – we're building a serious sporting ecosystem." He further states, "Telangana dominated the IPA Pickleball Nationals 2025 with the largest contingent of 47 athletes and 20 medals – a clear signal of the state's fast-rising pickleball ecosystem."

The Teramor Titans' co-owner, Prateek Varma, sheds some light on pickleball's presence in the city at the HPL semi-finals, saying, "In Hyderabad, I have especially seen that the sport has caught on a little earlier than in a few other cities. I think that is why the craze here is greater in comparison."

The President of Hyderabad Royals (IPBL), Adithya Ramakrishnan explains why the game is increasingly popular. "Pickleball has grown from a niche sport into one of the most exciting athletic movements of our time. The energy in Hyderabad is remarkable, with events like the HPL drawing large, enthusiastic crowds. Our city winning the runners up medal at the inaugural IPBL showed the strength of local talent and the passion our players bring to the court."

He continues, "Global stars like Megan Fudge (who is part of the Hyderabad Royals team) and Quang Duong are choosing to play consecutive tournaments in India because of the momentum here and the high quality of events like the IPBL. Pickleball is fast, social and highly competitive, and I believe we are only at the beginning of this journey in India and around the world."



“Telangana dominated the IPA Pickleball Nationals 2025 with 47 athletes and 20 medals”

– Akash M, Founder, Hyderabad Pickleball Association

AKASH M (FOUNDER OF HPA)



Hyderabad Royals' player Ben Newell, sharing his experience and expressing gratitude, says, "I never thought I'd be travelling the world professionally. I've always wanted to inspire people, to put a smile on someone's face. Pickleball has been that platform for me, and I am very grateful." He adds, "Pickleball is a fascinating sport. Where else do you get to meet so many walks of life, in a friendly atmosphere, competing and pushing each other."



CELEBS AND THEIR PICKLEBALL TEAMS

- Actor Sushanth Anumolu – Team All Stars (HPL)
- Badminton player Saina Nehwal – Keerthi Warriors (HPL)
- Filmmaker and actor Tharun Bhascker – The Raptors (HPL)
- Actor Samantha Ruth Prabhu – Chennai Super Champs (WPBL)
- Actors Jacky Bhagnani and Rakul Preet Singh – Hyderabad Superstars (WPBL)

INTERVIEW

The All Stars team owner, actor **Sushanth Anumolu** shares his thoughts on the rise of the sport, its future, and his players

“PICKLEBALL IS HERE TO STAY”

WHY DO YOU THINK PICKLEBALL HAS BECOME SUCH A SENSATION?

It's a social and fun game, and people of all ages have been taking to it. I've seen youngsters play with intense athleticism, and parents playing with their children. It can even be a great 'date' activity. It's simple to start with, yet it can become competitive. You can choose the intensity at which you want to play, which in turn determines your playing group. That's what makes it so unique and popular.

“Two years ago, there were only a handful of courts in the city. Now there are so many in every locality, including many private ones, showing the growth and popularity of the sport”

– Sushanth Anumolu

DO YOU BELIEVE THAT PLAYING TENNIS HELPS MASTER PICKLEBALL?

If you've played tennis, I feel pickleball does come naturally to you. I've done so myself and the transition was quite easy. One still has to change their game a bit because of the kitchen area on the court and delicate dinks but tennis does help overall. I've also seen table tennis and badminton players transition easily. Having said that, people who have not played racket sports can excel as well and it is not a pre requisite to play pickleball.

YOUR THOUGHTS ON HPL BEING HYDERABAD'S FIRST FRANCHISE-BASED PICKLEBALL LEAGUE?

HPL is the first franchise-based pickleball league in Hyderabad and, honestly, an amazing benchmark and reference point for leagues across the country. The Centre Court team that runs the league has done an incredible job, scaling up every week and creating a fantastic experience for both players, spectators and the entire Pickleball League community. It is a player-focused league that aims to showcase Hyderabad's best talent and help them shine at the Nationals and even internationally.

TELL US ABOUT THE PLAYERS OF TEAM ALL STARS?

Team All Stars is a fun and cool team. Our captain, Sameer Varma, is ranked among the top 10 in Asia. He is the coach, mentor, and backbone of the team.

Vice-captain Veda Prapurna, a 20-year-old who has been playing tennis for over a decade, has taken the league by storm by causing upsets and surpassing everyone's initial expectations at the auction.

Then there is Karunesh, who had only just started playing pickleball before the league. Karunesh was acquired at a base price under the radar but has already made a solid name for himself. Akshath, Soli, Ravi, Banu, Namrata, Satvick, and Nikita are all solid players who complete this amazing team.

GIVE US AN INSIGHT INTO THE TRAINING PROCESS?

The All Stars were training three to four times a week throughout the tournament. It increased to daily training as the qualifiers and the final approached. Our captain conducted detailed drills with each player based on their strengths and weaknesses, and I've seen them flourish under his mentorship and captaincy. A couple of players had never played pickleball, but he believed in their potential and groomed them. They played on different courts as per requirement as each court is faster or slower depending on its layering.

WALK US THROUGH WHAT THE EXPERIENCE WAS LIKE AT THE MATCHES?

On the court, it has been a roller coaster. Sport usually is. We've had some very narrow losses and also many amazing wins. Each time a player was hurt or unavailable, someone else would step up.

For the players, it has been incredible to play in a packed stadium, experiencing both the nerves and the thrill. In the initial stages, a few friends and family came mostly to morally support us, but later, they genuinely wanted to come every Friday because it was so much fun. Meeting friends, watching amazing games, enjoying good food, it has been a full-on celebration with music, fireworks, light shows, dance performances, and to top it all off, a halftime show by Lucky Ali for the finals.

WHERE DO YOU SEE PICKLEBALL IN THE NEXT FEW YEARS?

Two years ago, there were only a handful of courts in the city. Now there are so many in every locality, including many private ones, showing the growth and popularity of the sport. It is already big, and the success of the first season of the Hyderabad Pickleball League has increased awareness and popularity. Adding to that, with leagues in other cities, and the national leagues coming up, the sky is the limit for this sport in Hyderabad and in India. I truly believe it is here to stay.





SAMANTHA RUTH PRABHU

HEALTH AND FITNESS PROS AND CONS

Like any other sport, pickleball too can have benefits and game-related injuries. WOW! finds out how playing this sport can add to your fitness levels and the aspects where you need to be careful.

HEALTH BENEFITS (AS APPROVED BY THE AIPA):

- Mood booster
- Lower risk of depression
- Regulates blood pressure
- Reduced risk of heart disease
- Improved social life
- Confidence enhancer
- Weight loss
- Improved balance

THE FLIP SIDE OF PICKLEBALL

With many people new to the sport and ill-prepared to meet its physical demands – leading to eye injuries, ligament tears, and ankle twists – Dr Rajat Chauhan, physician, author and race director of La Ultra, tells us, “People are picking up this sport because it’s easier to get started with, and that’s a problem. If your muscle balance isn’t right, your hand-eye coordination isn’t right, or you’re having a midlife crisis and hence you picked up this sport; you are sooner than later going to incur ankle, knee, ligament, back, and shoulder injuries. So, your basic foundation is very important.” To avoid eye injuries, he further stresses the importance of having the right gear.

Highlighting the importance of routine in a discussion on tech giant Apple’s website about the science behind the Apple Watch’s ability to track pickleball sessions, Dr Sumbul Desai, M.D., Apple’s Vice President of Health said, “Finding an activity that someone enjoys partaking in can help build a routine, whether that means picking up a paddle or a racket.”



DR RAJAT CHAUHAN

FIRST STEP TOWARDS MOVEMENT

Expressing concern after reading a study in *The Lancet Global Health Journal*, actor and owner of the WPBL team Chennai Super Champs, Samantha Ruth Prabhu, who attended a panel discussion at the World Pickleball League reflected, “I read this survey that said almost 45.4 percent of adult Indians did not fit the WHO (World Health Organization) standards of physical activity, and that stat is scary.” Addressing her co-panelists and the audience, she added, “I wish for India to start moving, and pickleball could be the way we all get moving.”

The blended sport that contributed to mental wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, is also known to improve lung function, control blood sugar levels, regulate blood pressure, and improve cardiovascular conditioning. It is also estimated that a game of pickleball can burn over 1,000 calories within a two-hour session.





PICKLEBALL VERSUS TENNIS

While the grassroots popularity for pickleball continues to grow at breakneck speed, turf wars surface as tennis courts are traded in for pickleball ones. In September 2025, *The New York Times* shared aerial photographs of tennis courts in the United States converted into pickleball courts with 26,000 outdoor ones built in the last seven years.

FUTURE: CAN BOTH SPORTS CO-EXIST?

The future of tennis and pickleball may be difficult to predict, but hope remains for the rivalry to simmer down over time, making room for them to co-exist in peace. Giving credence to this point, tennis player Novak Djokovic, who once likened tennis to an endangered sport due to the rise of pickleball, has since engaged in the game and even suggested a tri-racket tournament comprising of tennis, pickleball, and padel. "I think that the future of the clubs is definitely a hybrid between all these sports. It could be fun to do, like, a little racquet sport, a mixed racquet sport competition, you know. We can all try playing them and see how we do in different racquet sports," the sportsman said amending his previous statement and taking a holistic approach to the sport as he prepared to play in the Miami Open in early 2025.

OLYMPICS BOUND?

The question on everybody's mind right now: Will we see the fastest-growing sport on the planet at the Olympics soon? "I know for a fact that the IOC (International Olympic Committee) is very interested in pickleball," says Seymour Rifkin, President of the World Pickleball Federation. "The IOC, like any big international business, is interested in thriving and continuing to be the epitome event in sports."

While many are holding out hope for pickleball's inclusion in the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles, USA, others cite 2032 in Brisbane, Australia, as more practical. Recently pompickleball.com did a comprehensive analysis on the feasibility of pickleball becoming an Olympic sport. While conservative estimates suggest over 15 million global players, more than 70 participating countries, rapid annual growth rates in Asia and Europe, low-cost infrastructure, high accessibility, and strong entertainment value, it still lacks unified governance, IOC-level standardization, and a sufficient global presence across all continents.

