

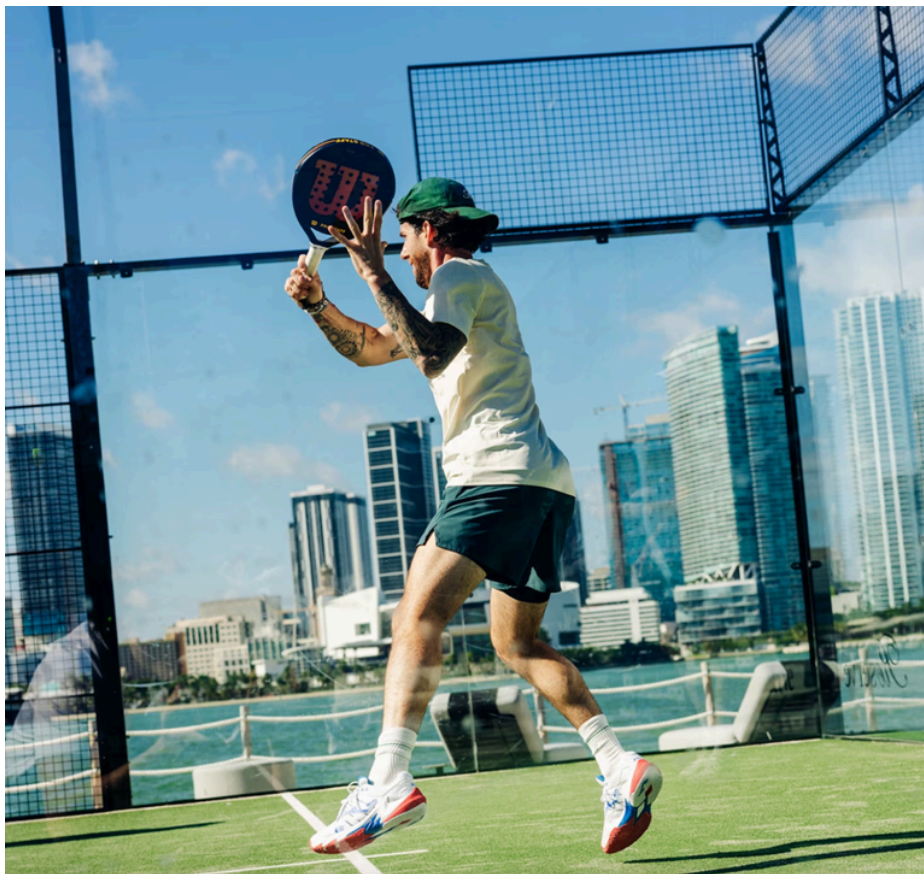
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# The Washington Post

Behind the push for padel, pickleball's posher,  
privileged cousin

*Deep-pocketed investors are hiring a flotilla of publicists, celebs  
and influencers to promote the sport in the U.S., where its  
popularity has soared in VIP circles*

By: Christopher Cameron  
Impressions: 46,882,332



Padel player and coach Willy Alcorta plays at Reserve in Miami Beach. (Alfonso Duran for The Washington Post)

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Half a lifetime ago, propagating good business meant 18 holes, bloody marys and Nassau wagers. Today, a game that can bond the executive class requires shirt-drenching hustle.

Marko Gojanovic, a former doubles tennis pro turned Miami-based real estate agent, has been sweating it out with those Brahmins of the boardroom for the last two years. Like his peers, he's hooked on the emerging sport of padel. Easy to pick up and "a totally fun workout," Gojanovic said, the game is more than a pastime: It's a networking superconductor for athletic, like-minded, like-moneyed masters of the universe.



Padel is considered social because it's played as a "doubles" sport, requiring four people per game, two to a team. Reserve padel club is located on an island on the MacArthur Causeway in Miami Beach with views of Biscayne Bay and Miami skyline. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)

"It's the new golf," said Gojanovic, who last year closed deals for Miami mansions asking \$32 million and \$22.8 million. "I've been able to do a good amount of business from the padel court and build good relationships."

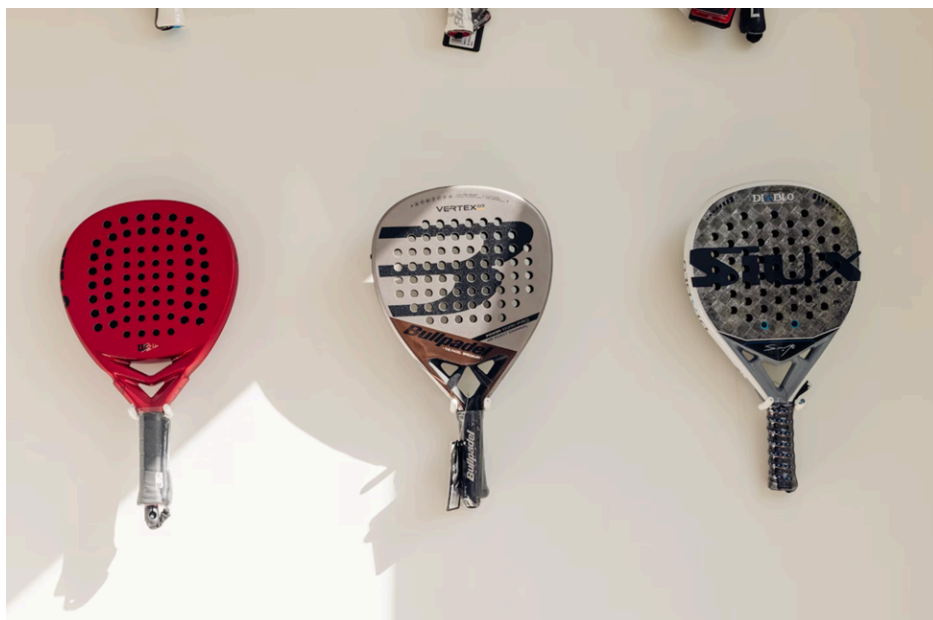
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Invented in Acapulco in 1969 by the Mexican industrialist Enrique Corcuera, padel (technically pronounced with a Spanish inflection, “PAH-del”; many Americans simply say “paddle”) is a game of doubles, played with a low-pressure tennis ball, a paddle, and a glass back wall and corners on a shrunken tennis court. A blend of racket games with elements of tennis, racquetball and squash, the sport is enjoying a meteoric rise in popularity in the United States, rivaled only by the overnight, mass-consciousness epiphany that was pickleball.

At the moment there are still fewer than 300 padel courts in the country, according to the U.S. Padel Association (USPA). But if you move in the right circles, in the right places, or at least follow the right accounts, padel is everywhere. Freshly organized tournaments sell out. Courts are rising at breakneck speed. Deep-pocketed investors are paying armies of publicists, celebrities and influencers to push the sport. Scores of pro athletes including Lionel Messi, David Beckham, Jimmy Butler, Novak Djokovic, Lando Norris and Max Verstappen are all publicly slapping the padel — acing the game into the feeds of their combined hundreds of millions of social media followers.

But if you haven’t played yourself, you’ll be forgiven. As with the 1980s and its squash-obsessed investment bankers, the popularity of padel has exploded within the VIP section: on Manhattan’s Billionaires’ Row, in Hudson Yards, on Miami Beach, on the grounds of private Hamptons estates, and in exclusive resorts from the Maldives to Monte Carlo. More than a game, padel in the United States is a social registry.



Padel rackets are made from a perforated composite material rather than strings. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)



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A padel ball is similar to a tennis ball, but with lower pressure and a slightly smaller size. (Alfonso Duran for The Washington Post)

Padel courts are pricey to install, making it the sport of choice in deep-pocketed enclaves in New York, Miami and California. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)



A beginner class at Reserve padel club in Miami Beach designed to introduce players to the basics of the sport. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)

"Everyone wants to play," said Gojanovic, who battles it out at the exclusive Reserve padel club at the Miami Seaplane Base. "It's very competitive. These successful guys



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have a lot of ego and they win at a lot of things in life. Padel is a newer sport so they are taking lessons. They want to win, and they don't mess around. There's some nice betting going on lately."

Wimbledon hero Andy Murray has even invested in the sport, as have a cadre of billionaires. If the money men behind the game get their way, tomorrow padel will be as extravagantly all-American as dinner at Delmonico's.

Mike Meldman — who founded and sold Casamigos tequila with George Clooney and Rande Gerber in an up-to-\$1 billion deal — is one of those deep-pocketed backers. He's the founder and chairman of Discovery Land Co., a developer of luxury residential golf communities around the world built for a cult of devoted buyers, including Tom Brady, Reese Witherspoon and Michael Jordan.

"It's competitive. It's addictive. Now, I would say that I'd rather play padel than golf because it's a real workout. When I play, I burn 1,500 calories in two hours," Meldman said.

Several years ago, Meldman helped introduce his affluent clientele to pickleball, stuffing courts into every one of his gated resorts. The trickle-down became a waterfall, and pickleball mania was born. Now, a converted padel devotee, he's running the same play across his portfolio.

"I don't think padel will grow the way pickleball did," said Meldman, who is installing two to four padel courts at each of his 20 developments. "Anyone can play pickleball, but padel is more complex. It's like some people say, 'Pickle is a game and padel is a sport.' You can play pickle from 5 to 95, but padel takes a lot more skill and athleticism."

Not only do padel courts take up more room, they are more expensive to install than those for pickleball, which can be played with just a net on a portion of any existing tennis court. Padel needs a specialized court that costs roughly \$50,000 to install. But it's precisely those barriers to entry that appeal to those with cash and calories to burn.

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The popularity of padel has exploded within the VIP section: on Manhattan's Billionaire's Row, in Hudson Yards, on Miami Beach (Reserve, pictured), on the grounds of private Hamptons estates and in exclusive resorts from the Maldives to Monte Carlo. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)

Popular in Spain and Argentina, padel has had a passionate following across Europe, the Middle East and Latin America for decades. There are an estimated 25 million players around the world; it's a well-heeled market that whets the appetites of financiers. In August, the Qatari government inked a deal to acquire the pro World Padel Tour via its sports investments fund. In 2021, the Swedish venture capital company Triton bought up more than 30 padel companies across Europe, including one founded by former Formula 1 driver Marcus Ericsson.

But with the exception of a few American padel players in cities such as Houston and Miami with predominant Hispanic communities, calling the sport obscure in the United States was almost an understatement. Until it wasn't. In a case of culture following capital — not unlike the invention of room service at the Waldorf Astoria or the sudden ubiquity of condo tower car elevators in Miami — homegrown capital is carving out the domestic padel market.

Padel vs. other racket sports

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SPORT	TOOLS	APPROACHABILITY	WHO PLAYS
Padel	Deflated tennis ball; paddles with holes.	You'll be playing after a single lesson but a tennis background helps.	Follow the money: New York, Miami, California and the choicest slices of the developed world.
Tennis	Familiar, fluorescent yellow balls; stringed racket.	A lifetime of lessons and soul searching.	People who enjoy humidity.
Squash	Small, rubber balls varying in speed; hit with a long, stringed racket.	Hard, fast, unforgiving. Invest in a dental plan.	English boarding school boys, Commonwealth countries and Anglophiles worldwide.
Racquetball	Its balls are bigger than squash's; its stringed racket shorter.	Even faster and bouncier than squash.	Born in the 1950s and booming in the 1980s, racquetball was your dad's favorite sport 25 lbs. ago.
Pickleball	Played with a big, slow wiffle ball and a flat, solid paddle.	Your grandparents might beat you.	Anyone with a pulse.

In 2022, Laguna Beach, Calif.-based EEP Capital became one of the United States' first padel investment funds. It's backed a bevy of padel ventures across the country, including Padel Haus, a padel club near the Williamsburg waterfront in Brooklyn. At the same time, a swath of projects from many of the nation's largest developers have zeroed in on the sport as a market mover.

Padel is a major piece of marketing for One Park Tower, the luxury condominium portion of a new \$4 billion community set on 184 acres in South Florida dubbed SoLé Mia. That larger project, which will feature a Reserve padel club, is a partnership between Jackie Soffer's Turnberry Associates (part of South Florida's billionaire Soffer family) and New York's behemoth builder LeFrak.

Also in South Florida, an investment group that includes Tiger Woods and Justin Timberlake is building Wellington Equestrian and Golf Club: a planned 600-acre private residential resort outside West Palm Beach with 12 prominently featured padel courts.



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"During covid, a lot more people were in Florida, and it's the most popular thing here among a group of very-high-net-worth folks," said Michael Stern, the CEO and founder of JDS Development Group. "But now that New York is alive again, it's taking off there, too."



The indoor padel court at the luxury 111 West 57th Street in Manhattan. "We have this insane 82-foot-long indoor swimming pool in the building and residents probably use the padel court 10 times more," developer Michael Stern said. (Adrian Gaut)

Stern recently added what might be the sport's poshest court to his daring, pencil-thin Manhattan tower, 111 West 57th Street, where an upper-floor unit sold last year for \$52 million, according to public records. He spent "a not exotically expensive" few hundred thousand dollars — before structural considerations — installing a court with a modern country-club look by lauded architect William Sofield on the eighth floor for the residents of that supertall building.

"We have this insane 82-foot-long indoor swimming pool in the building and residents probably use the padel court 10 times more," Stern said.

But perhaps no other person in the United States is more invested in the game than billionaire Wayne Boich, the undisputed pied piper of padel.

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Reserve was founded by businessman Wayne Boich, pictured, who got hooked on padel while visiting Europe. "I thought 'This is a lot of fun. It's a passion. It's health. It's wellness. This could be a fun business,'" Boich said. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)

Boich is behind Reserve Padel, a rapidly growing group of exclusive padel clubs on Miami Beach and in New York's Hudson Yards where membership is by invitation only. The cost varies depending on the club, but Boich declined to reveal its pricing. He also owns a construction company that installs courts around the country, including at Meldman's communities.

In February 2022, Boich put on the [Blockchain.com Miami Padel Open](#), the largest padel tournament in U.S. history. The six-day exhibition of pro padel sold out with approximately 12,000 spectators and attracted cameos from Jimmy Buffett, Vince Vaughn, Udonis Haslem, Ludacris and Wyclef Jean. The event raised more than \$2 million for various nonprofits, a testament to the deep pockets of attendees.

"We had to add another 400 seats," Boich said of the tournament. Boich discovered padel in 2013 while attending a wedding in Europe. Back home, he wanted to play but "no one knew anything about it."



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"There were like two courts," he said.

With a growing number of his tennis buddies hooked on the game, he decided to install a padel court rather than a tennis court while building his home in Miami — and later at his home in the Hamptons. As the group improved, members began traveling to Spain to meet with pros, and Boich started hosting exhibitions at his home in 2015.



For the sport of padel, players use perforated, hard-plastic paddles and a tennis-like ball. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)

Wayne Boich, left, and Willy Alcorta, right, play at the Reserve padel club on Miami Beach. (Alfonso Duran/For the Washington Post)

"We'd bring over eight to 10 of the best pros in the world, and hold a weekend event," he said. "They'd play against each other. They'd play with us. People started showing up just to watch and then I would get them on the court. I thought: 'This is a lot of fun. It's a passion. It's health. It's wellness. This could be a fun business.'"

His first move came in February, when he opened a 50,000-square-foot padel club at the Miami Seaplane Base. Calling itself "the future of padel," the sleek space is more lifestyle product than rec center; Soho House with sweat. Next came the opening of a



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Reserve club at Hudson Yards in June. To raise the visibility of the game, he's struck up partnerships with other stars of sport. He plays with Beckham and his Inter Miami CF players, and he's hosted the Alpine F1 team during the Miami Grand Prix. In 2024, Boich hopes to open a second New York outpost, as well as clubs in Austin, Las Vegas and Beverly Hills. Plans for multiple yearly televised tournaments are also in the works.



Mike May and Belen Salcedo, owners of iPadel Houston, volley on one of their padel courts in Houston, Tx. (Michael Starghill/For The Washington Post)

But for padel to grow in the United States, for it to become more than a networking fad for the super-rich, for it to ossify into the American sports psyche, it must democratize.

It's obvious, for instance, why polo will never have the following baseball, football or basketball enjoy — all easily accessible, televised sports with robust school programs. But more recently two sports, both with elitist reputations, broke through. Pro tennis and Formula 1 racing are now more popular than ever with a younger and more diverse fan base thanks in part to new Netflix documentary series and trailblazers like Venus and Serena Williams, who came from working-class backgrounds. That's precisely the kind of barrier breaking a game like padel needs, experts say.

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"You still see a lot of elites playing padel because Enrique and his jet-set crew took the game to Spain and introduced it to royalty and movie stars," said former tennis pro Mike May, a self-described dinosaur of the sport who was the first certified padel pro player in the United States, and the second president of the USPA. Now retired from Team USA after competing in 13 world championships, he's spent 30 years as a director and coach at the Houstonian Hotel, Club and Spa, which opened the country's first padel court in 1994. He also owns the club iPadel Houston with his wife, Belen Salcedo, a former U.S. No. 1 padel champion. "Where padel really bloomed was in Argentina, because they built courts everywhere so every taxi driver, construction worker and Joe Schmo could play," he said.

Today, despite the volley of new interest in padel, there are scant professional American-born padel players to root for. Even Boich acknowledges that for the United States to catch up with the rest of the world, padel will have to exit the country club.



Belen Salcedo and Mike May, owners of iPadel Houston, pose for a portrait near a sign at the facility.  
May was the first certified Padel Pro player in the U.S. (Michael Starghill/For The Washington Post)

"Padel has become mainstream very quickly in a few key cities with a few key people," he said.

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"But it doesn't just have to be clubs. We want to work with cities to build courts and bring it to the masses."

It's something May tried two decades ago, he said, diligently working to donate courts to the Houston municipality. But with little recognition of the sport, park conservancies declined his offers. Boiche said he has another way in.

"Getting kids involved is especially important," he said. "In Miami, we are next to the Children's Museum so we offer free clinics to the kids. They come in and see a guy bounce a ball off the glass, run out of the court and jump three feet at the net to smack out another guy's overhead. They're like: 'Wow, that's so cool. I want to play like that guy.'"

Here and now, and likely for the years to come, the proletarian potential of padel will be circumscribed by its members-only milieu. For the big investors, it's like hopping on one foot — a balancing act between taking the game to the streets and retaining more than a soupçon of snob appeal. It's called being "aspirational," and we hear that it works.

"Yeah, for sure, it tends to attract a more select or affluent crowd," said Mike Fabbri, a luxury real estate agent who plays for the social aspect of the game both at Hudson Yards and at his club in Connecticut. "The beauty of the game is that it can be done at your leisure. You stop by the clubhouse. You have drinks. You have a chat and then you go in for a match."

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