



## PLATFORM TENNIS

# A Platform for Growth

Despite pandemic challenges, platform tennis has been on the upswing for players, retailers and manufacturers.

**BY GEORGETTA L. MORQUE**

► Over the last several years, I've purchased my son's preferred platform tennis racquet—a popular Viking model—either online or in a store without any issues. This past winter, what used to be a quick charge and click, or browse and buy, became more of a scavenger hunt. The racquet was sold out at several online retailers, the Viking website and my go-to store for racquets, Sportech in Rye Brook, N.Y.

"The season was unbelievable. It was flabbergasting," says Mel Siegel, one of the Sportech owners. "We sold four times as many paddle racquets." ("Paddle" is the informal and insiders' name for the sport of platform tennis.)

Fortunately, Sportech notified customers via Facebook when new shipments arrived, so I was able to snag my purchase.

Siegel attributes the boom partly to people who had turned to tennis for safe outdoor activities and then moved to paddle in the cooler months. Since school team sports had been suspended, youngsters were also part of the mix. Siegel also observed a trend in families playing together.

"Instead of buying two racquets, they were buying four," he says. "It's not just mom and dad's game; the

kids are now involved."

Realizing that paddle would be off the charts, Sportech put in large orders six to nine months in advance and then reordered, using a network of vendors. Since supply chains, shipping and distribution centers were different, "The pandemic taught us to

be nimble," Siegel says.

Noah Seidenberg, founder of Xenon Paddle, an industry newcomer making a splash on the equipment scene, observed a 30 percent to 40 percent increase in players this past season.

"Even if only half stick with it, that's significant," says Seidenberg, a Chicago-based financial advisor and competitive player who set out to create new and better products.

The timing couldn't have been better for Xenon, which experienced unexpected success, selling out all but two racquet models and quickly gaining market share in only its second full season. Xenon's innovations include a longer-lasting ball and a racquet with a patent-pending handle that heats up with a rechargeable battery. Next season, Xenon will introduce a youth racquet specially designed for kids.

In Colorado, like many areas of the country, every club was incredibly busy this past season, according to Ian Hintz, a Denver-based pro and regional president of the American Platform Tennis Association (APTA) Western Region, which includes 15 states.



PHOTO COURTESY NOAH SEIDENBERG

With school team sports suspended due to the Covid pandemic, young players have contributed to a surge in platform tennis participation.

“There’s been a boom in racquet sports in general during the pandemic, but paddle definitely benefited since it’s played outdoors,” says Hintz.

At the Meadow Creek Tennis & Fitness Club, a public facility in Denver, courts were booked all day, every day. Tennis pros were transitioned to help with the increased demand for organized play. Hintz found that about half of the players had never played the sport, and half were transplants from other areas of the country where platform tennis was popular.

“The retention rate for paddle is extremely high,” notes Hintz. “Once they start playing, they stay.”

Greg Morgan, director of racquet sports at Beacon Hill Club in Summit, N.J., thought a record was broken a

year ago when 220 players entered the annual APTA Junior Nationals. During the pandemic, that record was smashed, with 374 boys and girls competing in 10-, 12-, 15- and 18-and-under doubles brackets. (Doubles is the usual format for the sport.)

“At first, we weren’t sure whether to hold the event,” says Morgan, a tournament co-chair. Abiding by Covid-19 guidelines, the tournament took place, but differently. Typically, the event would be held at New Jersey clubs, but instead, youngsters from New York, Connecticut and Pennsylvania played in their respective states for the qualifiers, thanks to the enthusiastic support from clubs in these areas. Using 90 courts, the tournament was held in stages over two months.



“This changed how we looked at the event and allowed us to introduce it to other clubs,” says Morgan.

And the momentum continues. Spring and summer platform tennis leagues are in full swing at many clubs, extending the season for both new and seasoned players. ■

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