

# Move Over ... Everything? Here Comes Major League Pickleball.

Professional pickleball is expanding, and it has become a big enough deal that even LeBron James wanted a piece of a team.



By Victor Mather

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Pickleball has been booming as a recreational sport, to the point where you might be almost sick of hearing about it. But while your colleague, great-uncle and dental hygienist may be talking your ear off about their pickleball exploits, perhaps you haven't heard as much about the professional game that has been developing.

In recent news, the phrase "Major League Pickleball" was seen in the same paragraph as, amazingly, "LeBron James."

## Whoa there, Charlie. There's a Major League Pickleball?

Yes, just like baseball (1876), soccer (1996), fishing (2011) and cricket (planned for 2023), pickleball has its own "major league."

## Back up. Remind me what pickleball is, exactly?

It's a variant of tennis played on a smaller court with paddles and a light, perforated plastic ball that doesn't fly as fast. It is easier to learn than tennis, and with less court space to cover at a slower speed, it is especially appealing to those who might be overwhelmed by the physical challenges of tennis. But more athletic people play it, too, including some who have turned it into a professional career.

## And LeBron James is actually involved?

James is a part owner of an expansion team that will start next year in Major League Pickleball.

## How does this league work?

There are 12 teams with names like Lions, Jackrabbits, Chimeras and "the Bus." Each team is coed, with two men and two women.

Like the three-on-three basketball league Big3, there are no home teams. Instead, all teams arrive in one city for a tournament. For each team matchup, there is a men's and women's doubles match and two mixed-doubles matches, followed by a singles tiebreaker if necessary.

There are three events this year. The event in Austin was won by a team called BLQK and the tournament in Newport Beach, Calif., by the Ranchers. The final event will be held in Columbus, Ohio, on Oct. 14-16.

The league, now in its second season, is planning on six tournaments in 2023, in cities to be announced. Though there was no overall winning team this year, one is expected to be chosen next year. Total prize money of \$2.4 million is planned for next year, up from \$1 million.

The players for this season were selected in a draft, but the slates will be cleared for 2023 and the teams, including James's new team, will draft anew.

## Can I watch this?

CBSSN will cover the final of the Columbus event on Oct. 16.

## How does "ownership" work?

The founder of the league, Steve Kuhn, a billionaire former hedge fund manager, and the team owners all have equity in the league, which like Major League Soccer is a single entity. Next year, the league will expand to 16 teams and one of the new teams, yet to be named, will be owned, in part, by James as well as his fellow N.B.A. stars Draymond Green and Kevin Love. Drew Brees

from football and James Blake from tennis are already owners in the league.

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Anne Worcester, the league's strategic adviser, declined to say what percentage of his team James owned.

## Three or six is not a lot of events. Are there other places for pros to play?

There are two main pickleball tours that make 20 to 30 stops a year each. They work more like the golf or tennis tours with singles and doubles events, rather than Major League Pickleball's team format.

The Professional Pickleball Association has many of the top players, including Ben Johns, often called the world's best. It has also signed players to mostly exclusive contracts that preclude them from playing Major League Pickleball and on other tours. That's been a source of friction among the leagues.

So M.L.P. draws mainly from the Association of Pickleball Professionals Tour. The league "believes in player freedom," Worcester said.

The next P.P.A. event, in Las Vegas, will be broadcast on the Tennis Channel from Oct. 6-9. The next A.P.P. event is Oct. 6-9 in Opelika, Ala., and will be streamed on Facebook and YouTube channels.

## Is this thing really going to survive?

Most new sports leagues fail, and a league in a relatively new sport can be particularly risky.

When asked why Major League Pickleball will buck the trend, Worcester cited the "fervency of the grass roots game." Depending on who's counting, there are five million or more people in the United States playing today, and the sport grew 40 percent between 2019 and 2021.

"Those are future ticket buyers; those are consumers of products like apparel and balls," Worcester said. "Those are TV viewers for pro pickleball."