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Golden: Pickleball is exploding nationwide, but it all starts at home

Cedric Golden, Austin American-Statesman

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They have gathered to play pickleball, but two hours at Corky Logue's courts reveal something deeper.

A kinship. A love of humanity and sport, all intertwined with a beautiful grouping of four courts and the delicious sound of paddles whacking what resembles a bouncing ball of Swiss cheese.



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Logue bought the Rollingwood property back in 1979. It had been the site of the city dump, a source of laughter from those who walk these grounds daily, paddles in hand.

Pickleball is the fastest growing sport in the United States, and anything this

wildly popular has to start on the local level.

And the locals are here. Logue's circle of friends is approaching 60 members. He dutifully provides a weekly schedule for his four courts, and no-show will surely hear from the leader. Logue didn't get to this point by being a half-stepper. The group ranges in age from early 20s to 87-year-old John Squires, a retired colonel and an inspiration to all.



Adam Sud, top left, and Michael Fenchel play pickleball against Rip Esselstyn, bottom left, and Steve Vandegrift at the home of friend Corky Logue in Rollingwood last month. More than 50 people formed a private pickleball club that plays daily at courts in Westlake, Rollingwood and elsewhere.

How it started

Courtland "Corky" Logue Jr. founded EZCorp in 1979 and turned it into one of the biggest chains in the country before the company went public 15 years later. The University of Texas ex left with \$30 million in stock and at one point in the 1970s and 1980s was running 12 companies simultaneously.

Now 75, the legendary entrepreneur and former mayor of Rollingwood is the piper of one of the coolest pickleball groupings in an area that's full of them.

Logue is the commissioner of this circle, the happy hour bartender and even the breakfast chef.

"We're longtime friends who enjoy each other's company," Logue said. "We love to play, whether it's just hitting it around or having tournaments. It's all good fun."

For the past 50-plus years, he was a passionate racquetball player at the local country clubs and fitness clubs, but after COVID-19 shut down the planet in 2020, he and his buddies were told they could only play singles, and if they

played, they must wear masks.

“We were seniors ranging in age from 50s to 80s,” Logue’s friend Jim Hinkel said. “So that wasn’t tenable.”

Hinkel had heard about pickleball, which was gaining traction nationwide. It was a combination of tennis, badminton and racquetball, without the walls, of course.

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Michael Fenchel plays pickleball at a house in Rollingwood on Thursday June 29, 2023. More than 50 people formed a private pickleball club that plays daily at locations in Westlake, Rollingwood and Bee Cave.

Logue had been having friends over for years to play tennis, but pickleball was fresh and new.

They started with some painter’s tape and bungee cords to create a makeshift pickleball court, but when great minds begin to think alike, wonderful creations can come about. They decided weeks later to redo the whole thing. The painting, repaving and new nets came at a cost of \$11,000, mere peanuts when viewed through the fun lens with which they’re seeing their priceless time together.

It’s Americana at its coolest level.

“There’s not a person here that isn’t a quality person,” said pickleball player Jimmy Treybig, 82. “The people here are not only cool, but they’re also capable and interesting.”

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On my visit a couple of weeks ago, I witnessed the burgeoning of the hottest new sport in our country. Young and old volleyed back and fourth. Some stood on the side, awaiting their turn in the practice rotation, while others shared laughs.



People play pickleball at a house in Rollingwood on Thursday June 29, 2023. More than 50 people formed a private pickleball club that plays daily at locations in Westlake, Rollingwood and Bee Cave.

David Farry, an Eanes resident, took one look at me and said, “You’re over there writing all this stuff down. Let’s see what you can do.”

He handed me a Prince paddle.

I couldn’t do much.

Having played tennis back in the Stone Age, I struggled at first because the perforated ball didn’t bounce as high, but the old strokes came back on occasion.

I couldn’t believe how much fun it was within five minutes of playing. The paddle is light, and the court is small enough for two novices to navigate doubles without too much exertion.

On a nearby court, 60-year-old retired Austin firefighter Rip Esselstyn — a former UT swimmer — and 68-year-old Steve Vandegrift — the former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank of San Antonio — are getting the better of their much younger opponents, but it’s no mismatch.

Adam Sud, one of the youngsters on the other side of the net, is holding his own amid the torrent of forehands coming his way. He has used the sport as part of a reemergence in life after undergoing some dark periods. The 41-year-old nutrition researcher and podcast host weighed more than 350 pounds 10 years ago and suffered from Type 2 diabetes and heart disease before

connecting with Esselstyn, who founded Plant Strong, a health food company.



Jimmy Treybig, left, chats with Eric Upton during a break in a pickleball game in Rollingwood last month. Relationships and community are keys to the appeal of the fast-growing sport.

Sud suffered from drug addictions and went to multiple rehabs before discovering a new purpose in his young life. Pickleball is a vital part of his daily regimen.

“I’m not trying to stay sober,” the 41-year-old Westlake High School graduate said. “I’m trying to continue to build a life that feels like an exciting place to wake up and be present.”

His friend Esselstyn was an avid pingpong player growing up. He moved to Texas from Cleveland in the early 1980s and became an All-American swimmer for the Longhorns. Named after Rip Van Winkle but not one to sleep on being active, he competed in triathlons for 10 years after college, and in the late 1980s, he switched to a plant-based diet, which, as it turns out, became a life changer.

He trademarked the term “plant strong” and wrote “The Engine 2 Diet,” which appeared on The New York Times 2009 bestseller list. The owner of Plant Strong travels the country informing others about the benefits of a plant-based diet. His next event is slated this summer in Sedona, Ariz. As usual, the plant diet will be a huge part of the proceedings, except this time he’s including a pickleball camp for adults with instruction on how to avoid those nagging injuries since so many are leaving the couch for the court.

Last year, Sud told him about Corky’s league.

“I was immediately intrigued,” he said. “Corky was nice enough to let me in to get a taste of the action. It’s been a year now, and I can’t get enough.”

Everything they say about the pickleball addiction is very true.”



Rip Esselstyn smiles after a pickleball game at a house in Rollingwood on Thursday June 29, 2023. More than 50 people formed a private pickleball club that plays daily at locations in Westlake, Rollingwood and Bee Cave.

New sport for Brees family

[Austin](#) attorney Chip Brees would agree. The father of the greatest football player Austin ever produced — with all due respect to Dick “Night Train” Lane — spent many Sunday afternoons watching quarterback Drew Brees shred NFL defenses over the past two decades. But he couldn’t help but chuckle when he brought up the pickleball games he’s played with his eldest son in suburban San Diego; his other son, Reid, in suburban Denver; and countless matches with his grandkids.

Tramel: [Big 12 football preseason predictions are a total crapshoot this year](#)

“It’s so much fun,” said Brees, 73. “Drew has a little court at his house in Delmar, and he’s really gotten into it. I’m over at Corky’s six days a week.”

Drew just joined the ownership group of Mad Dog Props, one of 12 coed teams in Major League Pickleball. He is also toying with the idea of returning to pro sports — as a pickleball player.

He announced in May that the first NOLA Pickleball Fest will take place in New Orleans’ Morial Convention Center on Aug. 10-13, with proceeds benefiting his long-standing Brees Foundation.

There are too many luminaries at Logue’s courts to mention all of them in one space. Whole Foods founder John Mackey wasn’t there for my visit but doesn’t

miss many opportunities to hit the ball around. Central Texas Goodwill board chair Margaret Moten is also a regular.

They arrive on time and adhere to Logue's schedule, even if they often start without the host present.



"It's been a year now, and I can't get enough. Everything they say about the pickleball addiction is very true," said Adam Sud, who has made the sport part of his daily regimen.

Logue suffers from glaucoma, and he performs a lot better under the lights, so he heads over to a friend's court to play before the sun comes up.

That friend, Balah Ghatate, is originally from India. Raised in New Delhi, he arrived in the States in 1989 and attended American University before enrolling at UT. While working for his wife's computer data analysis company eight years ago, he decided his sons needed a sport court at their Westlake home. The members of his racquetball group at the Hills at Lakeway enjoyed their matches, but COVID-19 brought an end to the fun.

In 2020, a friend named Glenn Reinus had visited California and come back with news of a growing new sport. It was called pickleball.

The next weekend, the racquetball buddies put \$7,500 in a hat and performed an extreme makeover, turning Balah's sport court into a full-time lighted pickleball court.

"We haven't picked up a racquetball racket since then," said Balah, 56. "Corky comes over every day for an early hit, and that's a great way to get things started."

Treybig, a venture capitalist who founded Tandem Computers, put away the racquetball stuff and built pickleball courts for his three sons. He plays six

days a week, and on those times when Mother Nature opens the skies to give us some much-needed rain, the Logue crew convenes at his place because his courts are covered.

At his age, Treybig understands the value of activity, but there is more to his longevity than playing pickleball six days a week.



Austin attorney Dan Byrne keeps his eyes on the ball at friend Corky Logue's house in Rollingwood last month. Byrne and his wife, 3rd Court of Appeals Chief Justice Darlene Byrne, are regulars in Logue's league.

“People ask me about how I’ve stayed healthy,” he said. I’ve played sport all my life, but that’s not the only thing that keeps you going. It’s the relationships.”

Relationships with people like Darlene Byrne, chief justice of Texas' 3rd Court of Appeals, and her attorney hubby, Dan. She was introduced to the sport in 2020 through Dan, who had been in the racquetball group for more than 30 years. On her first day on the court with Dan and Tom Klitch, the local owner of the Austin Pickle Ranch, Darlene, who had never picked up a racket of any kind, tore her labrum and had to undergo hip replacement surgery. After being cleared to play again, she couldn't wait to get back on the court.

“I told my surgeon I just want to be able to play pickleball, backpack and wear my high heels,” she said.

Overcoming tragedy

The Logue group is a self-made, self-contained lovefest, and amid all the whacks and smashes the members enjoy during the week, a familial buzz resonates. You hear the laughs, see the smiles and witness the pats on the back, but it's immediately evident that these folks genuinely enjoy being around one another.

In a group that's mostly older, health issues are going to crop up, and some beloved friends will inevitably transition.

Hinkel remembers that day in 2014 when his wife, Linda, returned home from her daily workout with her personal trainer.



Jim Hinkel reacts to a shot during a game last month. His friends from Corky Logue's group have been helping him through a season of grief.

"I threw up during my workout," she said.

This came 15 years after she had won a battle with melanoma. She was an athlete and a fighter who explored caves and hiked with her husband, whom she had met in Tennessee. She endured three open heart surgeries, a pacemaker insertion and several ablation procedures. The melanoma returned last August and spread to her brain.

Surgery and radiation proved successful, but Mother's Day brought horrible news. Already reeling from the loss of their 42-year-old son, Troy Pennington, Jim's stepson, in a motorcycle accident in Austin in March, the Hinkels faced another battle after Linda complained of severe lower back pain.

"I took her to the ER, where I witnessed a rapid decline in physical, cognitive and verbal skills over a four-week period," Hinkel said. "An MRI determined the melanoma had come back in her brain, but this time it was inoperable. She was a true warrior but couldn't win this battle."

The loss of his partner of more than four decades was, in a word, debilitating. This is when his pickleball group revealed itself as a family. Logue immediately invited him over with seven of their closest friends for dinner at the house. They toasted the end of Linda's pain and suffering, shared some laughs, wiped

away a few tears and looked to brighter days.

“We were helping him take care of her,” said Vandegrift, who has been tennis buddies with Logue for more than 10 years. “We would go over to the hospital and visit with them. We just wanted to try and help and support one another as a second family.”

As Hinkel grappled with his loss, the leader of the coolest social group in town sent a not-so-subtle message to his grieving friend.



Dan and Darlene Byrne play pickleball at a house in Rollingwood on Thursday June 29, 2023. More than 50 people formed a private pickleball club that plays daily at locations in Westlake, Rollingwood and Bee Cave.

Logue put Hinkel back on the schedule, though the new widower wasn't sure he was ready to don his signature goggles and return to the court.

“We had to get him back in there,” Logue said. “We had to get him out the house and back to what he loves doing.”

Hinkel was deeply moved by the gesture and the love that has come his way.

“I'm so glad he pushed me as his friendship, and that of our fabulous group of folks, has been helping me through this harsh grieving process,” he said. “I miss Linda and Troy so much. I don't know how I could deal with these painful losses without my pickleball family and the friendship I have with another dear group of hiking and biking friends.”

Hinkel is one of five USA Pickleball Ambassadors in the Austin area, and his goal is to promote and grow the game.

The wildfire of popularity has quickly spread throughout the area. Bouldin Acres offers pickleball, and members of Austin Sports & Social Club flock to the South Lamar location in droves. The Sun City Pickleball Association has

more than 1,500 members, and the Georgetown Pickleball Association is approaching 1,000.

“I’ve been in the tennis business since the 1980s, and I’ve never seen anything quite like this,” Georgetown tennis pro Pete Polkinghorn said. “It has exploded. I have friends who say I have gone over to the dark side. I just tell them I’ve taken up another sport and I’m having fun playing it.”

The Dreamland complex in Dripping Springs offers not only miniature golf but 16 pickleball courts that are open to the public.

Turning pro

Steve Kuhn, a former hedge fund manager and the owner of the 2-year-old, 64-acre entertainment complex, founded Major League Pickleball in 2021.

The league expanded to 16 teams, including Austin, Frisco, Los Angeles, New York, Seattle, Las Vegas, New Jersey and Milwaukee. Competition will take place in six cities, with \$2 million in prize money on the table.

Season 2 will commence Sept 21, with action streamed on MLP’s YouTube channel and the Tennis Channel. ESPN2 will broadcast the Premier League Super Finals on Dec. 12.

More exposure came in September when basketball legend LeBron James, his longtime business partner Maverick Carter and fellow NBA players Kevin Love and Draymond Green announced that they were buying a team. SC Holdings, a Virginia-based investment firm, is also part of the group.

In October, UT ex Kevin Durant announced that he was purchasing a team through his 35Ventures organization. The star power joining the league can only aid in the growth overall.

“Pickleball is the fastest-growing sport in the country, building communities in cities and towns all over the world,” Kuhn said in a statement. “This investment, and the platform that this group provides, will significantly help us with our goal to reach 40 million pickleball players by 2030.”

Leagues are popping up all over the place because the interest has reached a rabid level.

As the sport continues to explode within our borders and well beyond, community remains the binding agent at the root of this phenomenon — friends getting together through the shared love of sport and people.

That’s what it’s all about.

“The way to live a long time is to eat right, exercise daily and have social in

your life,” Logue said. “We have two of the three right here.”

Make it three of three.

I hear his 15-bean soup is tops.

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