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## Pickleball reaches the big leagues with sports stars, brands investing

What's currently being called the fastest-growing sport in the United States? (Hint: It's not e-sports.) As of 2022, that honor goes to pickleball.

The paddle-based game isn't new, yet as recently as a few years ago many people had never heard of it. Pickleball players participate in tournaments across the country. The Professional Pickleball Association (PPA) launched in 2018 and similar organizations, including the Association of Pickleball Professionals (APP), followed.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped propel the sport into the spotlight as an easy and fun way get outdoors and safely socialize. Pickleball quickly became so popular that investors started taking notice. The sport hit the big time with the establishment of Major League Pickleball (MLP) in 2021. Now, sports luminaries are pouring money into MLP teams, and brands are lining up to sponsor players and events.

Invented in 1965 by a trio of dads for their kids, pickleball is a mixture of tennis, badminton and ping pong. The sport is simple to learn and can be played by people with a range of fitness levels. During the pandemic, pickleball became even more attractive due to its social nature and the fact that it's played outdoors. The game most often features two players on each team, with teams often gathering to play round-robin style.

USA Pickleball, the national governing body for the sport, counted more than 53,000 members as of 2021. The number represents a 43% increase over 2020, its largest year-to-year growth so far, according to the organization.

The MLP's first season launched in November 2021 with eight co-ed teams and a four-day championship event in Dripping Springs, Texas. The 32 players were drafted from a pool of top professional pickleball players in the world. Team BLQK took home the first championship title. The team is sponsored by BLQK Coffee, a coffee company owned by



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former St. Louis Rams running back Justin Watson. In June, 12 teams participated in the MLP's 2022 championship event in Austin, Texas, where BLQK again prevailed. CBS Sports Network broadcast the finals live nationwide, and the MLP streamed earlier matches on its website.

Investors, including some of the biggest names in sports, are taking notice of the new league. Tampa Bay Buccaneers quarterback Tom Brady just bought into an MLP expansion team for the 2023 season, when the number of teams in the league will increase to 16. Brady is part of an ownership group that includes tennis champion Kim Clijsters.

A group of NBA players, including Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James, Golden State Warriors' Draymond Green and Cleveland Cavaliers' Kevin Love, bought their own expansion team in September. Retired NFL star Drew Brees, a pickleball enthusiast himself, over the summer joined the group that owns the MLP team called Mad Drops Pickleball Club.

Naturally, brands are getting in on the

action as well, both at the MLP and local levels.

Sunglasses brand Knockaround entered into a multi-year deal to be the MLP's official sunglasses and maintain a large presence at MLP events through signage, hospitality opportunities and social media, the MLP has said. Brands of all sizes jumped at the chance to sponsor the MLP's inaugural season, from Anheuser-Busch's Michelob Ultra, the league's official beer, to Richard's Rainwater, the league's official water and sparkling water provider.

Sponsoring individual MLP players is another avenue for brands. Skechers signed MLP stars Tyson McGuffin and Catherine Parenteau as brand ambassadors, while table tennis brand JOOLA supports top-ranked MLP player Ben Johns. Other brands are focusing on outreach at the local level. Nike, for example, is the title sponsor for a series of adult pickleball clinics around the country run by U.S. Sports Camps. Skechers sponsors the Minto U.S. Open Pickleball Championships in Naples, Florida. Equipment makers are also jumping on board. Tennis and badminton equipment brand Babolat, for example, launched a line of pickleball paddles.

All this investment could pay off. MLP founder Steve Kuhn, a former hedge fund executive, has big plans for pickleball. Kuhn told Sport History Weekly that he envisions 40 million people playing pickleball by 2030. He also envisions pickleball becoming a National Collegiate Athletic Association-sanctioned sport in the next few years. Kuhn is even eyeing pickleball as an Olympic sport one day.

Considering pickleball's booming popularity and support from some of the biggest names and brands in sports, Kuhn's dreams could well become reality. It remains to be seen, however, what happens when pickleball, which started out and has grown as a fun pastime, truly tries to go global.