

The best-kept pickleball secret in Long Beach

Lighthouse resort hosts indoor leagues, clinics and tournaments

By **NIKKI DAVIDSON**
COAST WEEKEND

On Thursday evenings, dozens of people lace up their shoes, grab their gym bag and make their way to a resort in a heavily-wooded spot on the Long Beach Peninsula.

The rural facility remains under the radar, yet attracts more people than it can handle on a single night. As of late, its name is slightly deceiving. Although it's labeled the Lighthouse Oceanfront Resort's Tennis Center, it's become the epicenter of a surging pickleball movement on the North Coast.

"This is my strong league tonight, there are people from all over the place," said Roman Sada, director of racket sports, as players of all ages filed into the facility to warm up.

Sada takes his position at the resort very seriously. The long-time coach has fully immersed himself in the tennis world since he started playing when he was 5 years old in Prague. He worked his way up to the Czech national junior team and toured professionally.

When he came to Washington as a tennis coach four years ago, he decided to include pickleball lessons in his agenda, a choice that has now taken over his usual gig of tennis pro.

"When I started I had maybe six or eight pickle ballers here," Sada said. "Years later, I have 20 to 30 on a regular basis. It's just skyrocketed here."

The trend is not unique to the North Coast. Pickleball is the fastest growing sport in the nation. According to a report this year from the Sports and Fitness Industry Association, from 2019 to 2020 there was a 21.3% rise in pickleball participants.

Pickleball can be described as a hybrid of tennis, badminton and ping-pong. Players use paddles that look much like something from a ping-pong match but are bigger and made out of different materials. The ball is plastic, and similar to a whiffle ball. The game is played on a badminton-sized court with a slightly modified tennis net.

Sada believes it's obvious why pickleball is taking off. He's noticed the sport is much easier to learn than tennis and requires less physical endurance.

"Usually you have fun when you know something," said Sada. "If you don't know



Nikki Davidson

Roman Sada, director of racket sports at Lighthouse Oceanfront Resort, speaks to a group of pickleball players before they begin their Thursday night league games.

it, or are not very good at it, you don't feel comfortable and you don't play. That's why tennis is so hard because you've got to run a lot, it takes a lot of conditioning and eye coordination. You've really got to be on top of the game."

Witnessing this new sport eclipse his true passion has been bittersweet for the coach, who admits he's "sad that tennis is dying," but he's ready to embrace the demand for pickleball. He has started hosting tournaments, clinics, leagues and open play hours at the Lighthouse Oceanfront Resort.

According to Sada, tournaments fill up quickly.

"I have to cut it at 120 people, unfortunately," he said, filling the tournament according to the amount of court space available. "I have a lot of people on the waiting list."

The resort's indoor facility has six pickleball courts, which are open for public use from noon to 2 p.m. daily for a fee of \$5. The evening leagues are also popular, with demand so high that not just anyone can get in. Sada approves members and matches them based on their skills.

"I try to keep it at the highest level of competition because it's good when people play their own level," Sada said.

The facility has been a game-changer for players like Steve Mcphil. He quietly created a pickleball court on his property up the road 17 years ago and is happy to have more direction from a professional coach like Sada.

"We played without any knowledge of the pickleball world, we were just locked away in my barn playing, we played every Tuesday night for the last 15 years," he said. "I was playing the wrong way for 15 years. So the last couple of years I've been unlearning and relearning here, figuring it out."

While the courts have filled up fast at the resort, Sada hopes to see more younger players in the mix. The coach has a staunch anti-video game philosophy and is dedicated to getting people off of the couch and into the game.

In the past, he's received local grants to create sponsored programs allowing kids to play for free, but he says it's been more difficult to get funding because of the pandemic. "My dream is to have a junior program

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on a regular basis," said Sada. "Maybe Tuesdays and Thursdays with a bunch of kids. It's a tough community here moneywise. It's hard, but I'm trying to do it for free or charge minimum money, like \$5 an hour or something like that."

While it's hard to see participation in tennis decline, Sada said there are quite a few things he enjoys about the pickleball crowd.

"No fights, no problems," he said. "I gotta say, pickleballers are really nice people. Tennis players are a little bit more snobby I would say, more ego. Pickle ballers are really nice."

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