

THE HISTORY OF PADEL

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The history of padel is a bit mysterious due to the scarcity of documentation. Padel is a young sport if compared with the “older brothers” squash, badminton and especially tennis.

The first news of a game like padel came from a game with the racket played in the basement of the English ships, where bouncing on the walls was allowed due to the limited space available. Apparently this sport became very popular among travelers, confirming that this “formula” can be fun.

There are several versions about where and when paddle tennis was born.

Some state that the origins of Padel are from the USA where, in 1898, the American Reverend Frank Beal of Albion (Michigan) created the first version of Paddle tennis, reducing the size of a tennis court, replacing the ball for a foam rubber one and the racket for a wooden shovel, like the ones utilized to play on the beach. This game became very popular in Michigan and, when Reverend Beal moved to New York, paddle tennis began to spread also in that city, especially in the lower classes. Thus, Frank Beal was able to convince the municipal department of parks and recreation, to build several courts for this new sport. In 1922 the first Paddle Tennis tournament was played and one year later the United States Paddle Tennis Association, (USPTA) was created. In the following years, this sport spread into many American cities, becoming a part of the physical education programs in schools, due to its learning simplicity, while also becoming the basis for the development of tennis skills and abilities.

During the same years of the expansion of Paddle Tennis, in 1928, Freseddenn Blanchardy and James Cogswell made some modification to the sport, in order to be able to practice in the winter season, without going to covered clubs. They created a wooden platform above ground level from which the snow could easily be removed after a snowfall. Then they incorporated an enclosure on the runway with a fence to avoid balls to go out of bounds. Moreover, they introduced (different from Paddle tennis) the practice in couples and the possibility of playing the ball after a bounce on the fence. Tennis balls were replaced with rubber balls. This sport was called Platform Tennis.

Can we then consider Paddle tennis and Platform tennis ancestors of Padel? In regard to the courts, rules, equipment certainly yes. However, it seems that Padel was born in Mexico. This version, given by the Spanish Padel Federation, has been confirmed by the international federation.

The story is quite fascinating, especially considering how this sport may have been born from a limitation. In fact, reports tell that in the late 1960s, exactly in 1968, a Mexican millionaire passionate of racquet sports, Enrique Corcuera, in Acapulco, was used to playing a sport called the Basque Pelota. This sport, still played in some Spanish regions, consists of throwing the ball on a wall (“fronton”) with volleys or after a rebound. It is played by teams and obviously the aim is to avoid that the rival team will be able to throw the ball on the “fronton”. Apparently, the problem was

that the ball was continuously going to the neighbor’s house after the long rebounds on the wall. To avoid that, the unofficial story says that Mr Corcuera decided to build a symmetrical wall on the opposite side, closing the sides with a metallic net leaving two exits. The resulting court had a surface of 20 x 10 meters and was surrounded by walls and metal mesh with a minimum height of 3 m on the side and a maximum of 4 meters on the back. Therefore, after the ball crossed the defensive line and bounced off the second wall, the players were allowed to keep playing. This was the first revolution: keep playing after the wall rebound. Then, Mr Corcuera introduced the net (not present in the Basque Pelota) and the racquets that he was used to playing with during his “paddle tennis” games in US.

Subsequently, due to the Mexican extreme heat, it was decided to lower the height of the side wall and place a wire mesh on it, to improve the air circulation. The rules of that game were obviously similar to tennis, with the same scoring system, with the difference that, when the balls were bouncing on the walls, the playing was ongoing.

The game was called “Paddle Corcuera” and the rules of this newborn game were written by the wife of the inventor. Viviana Dellavedova, wife of Don Quique Corcuera, a former miss Argentina, handwrote a book of rules as a gift for the husband.

In 1974, the Spanish businessman Prince Alfonso de Hohenlohe traveled to Mexico to visit Corcuera, tried the sport, fell in love and, at his return in Spain, build the first



Image: Historical finals of Madrid Master 2006, Díaz-Belasteguin vs Reca-Nerone. Photo by Juan Martín Díaz. Creative Commons 3.0.

two courts in his Marbella Club Hotel and slightly modified rules and materials, for example introducing wire fence on the sides, instead of walls. Soon this sport spread in all Costa del Sol.

In the middle of the 1970s, during the dispute over a polo championship in Costa del Sol, the Argentinian players saw the game and decided to import the idea to Argentina; among them there was Julio Menditegui who build the first Argentinian courts in Mar de Plata. In a few years, Padel became the second most practiced sport in the country, with more than 4 million practitioners and 10,000 tracks.

As padel increased in popularity, businesspeople and sportsmen started to promote it, organizing the first tournaments that attracted more and more important sponsors. Also the press gave a lot of consideration to these events. In 1984, Club San Jorge was opened in San Isidro, and with 14 padel courts it became a center of reference for the best Argentine players. In 1987, the Asociación Platense de Paddle (APPTAS) was created. This is the first official institutional body related to padel founded in the world. In 1988, the Argentinian Padel Association (APA) was founded.

In Spain, the growth of Padel was probably more gradual than in Argentina,

and the consecration of Padel happened toward the end of the nineties, with a substantial growth in courts and players, extending also to the main Spanish cities. A great help with the expansion of Padel was given by Mr. Julio Alegría Artiach, owner of the shops "Smith & Smith," from a neighbourhood in Bilbao. Under the sponsorship of this company, the famous "Pro-Am" tournaments were organized during the 80s and 90s throughout Spain and South America. In these competitions, professional players teamed up with celebrities, artists, aristocrats, politicians and sportsmen, thus enormously increasing the popularity of Padel.

In 1987 the Spanish Padel Association was created with the aim of organizing and supporting the diffusion of the sport in the country and in 1991 the Padel International Federation was established in Madrid and Julio Alegría Artiach became its first president. The international federation was created by representatives from the Spanish, Argentinian and Uruguayan padel associations and had the aim of organizing international competitions and to set up international rules of padel.

In fact, at the beginning there were many differences in the game played in Spain and in Argentina, both for what concern the rules

and the court features. For example, in Spain, the so-called "serve and volley" was allowed, while in Argentina it was not. Moreover, in Spain the game was significantly slower due to the synthetic turf courts (in Argentina Padel was played on concrete courts, often painted). Spanish courts also included a 3-metre-perimeter wire fence, higher than the 1.30-1.40 fences of Argentina, with a "sharp corner," a sticking-out surface of up to 5 centimetres at the intersection between the fence and the wall.

In 1997, in Barcelona, a meeting was held to unify the rules and, during this occasion, the game was officially named Padel. The global padel was born, with serve and volleys, no sharp corners and the 3-meter wire fence. However, the surface was not uniformed and therefore the initially artificial and natural turf, synthetic materials, concrete, parquet, tiles, and even clay surfaces could be found.

Since then, yearly matches between Spain and Argentina were played, with the first one in Buenos Aires in January 1998 followed by the "return matches" in August 1998, when the Argentinian team travelled to Spain, playing in Bilbao, Madrid and Marbella. In the following years, Padel started to spread to other countries, such as Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, France, US and Italy.



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1989 saw a sort of revolution for Padel: glass walls were introduced in Argentina. This gave the possibility to both live spectators and television coverage to see the totality of the court. Moreover, courts could be transported and build everywhere. Glass walls were for the first time transported and introduced in Spain for the World Championship in 1992. Since then, many editions have been held, with Argentina leading the medal table. The last edition was held in Dubai, where the Argentina national team triumphed in male category and the final was seen by 1,6 million people, the most watched final in history. This was revenge for the previous final lost in Qatar the last year by Argentina against Spain. Among the women, Spain once again became the strongest national team by defeating the Albiceleste in the final, thus repeating last year success in Qatar.

Nowadays, the International Padel Federation counts 64 affiliated federation, 300000 federated players and more than 25 millions of active players. There are over 6 million players in Spain and more than 20,000 padel courts, making it the second most popular sport in Spain behind football. Argentina has over 2 million padel players and about 5000 padel courts. Padel is trending in other countries like Italy, Sweden, Holland, France and it's estimated around 15,000 new courts were built in Europe in 2021. While padel is not an Olympic sport there have been many calls for it to become one, as it continues to grow worldwide.

Qatar is a "padel country". Padel, which is a relatively new game in the Gulf peninsula, has become the fastest-growing sport in the country, with over 50,000 players involved. Qatar has also launched an academy to train junior athletes, with almost 100 future athletes participating. The number of private and public courts is high and about 10 Qatari athletes are currently ranked internationally. In 2021, the World Padel Championship was host in its capital city, Doha: this was defined as the best padel tournament ever organized. 75 countries have broadcast through different TV Channels and over 250,000,000 families had access to the event from all over the world. In addition, there were 6 million views on the International Padel Federation Official YouTube Channel. These numbers were unthinkable only a few years ago.

Why did Padel become a social phenomenon? One reason is that it is very easy to learn and even someone who never held a racket tends to grasp it within the first matches of play. Being technically less challenging and incorporating more ball contact, makes padel an ideal family sport. It brings positive feelings of wellness, especially when we commit ourselves to do it regularly. As a team sport, it improves self-control and concern for others. The small size of the court makes conversations with the teammate and the rivals an important factor of the game, thus developing related mental skills. Furthermore, playing padel probably gives more rewarded challenges than other more complicated ball games, thus

improving mood and social interactions. An important aspect is also that Padel is a cross generational sport, being less demanding than other racket sports such as tennis. In this way, Padel can help you grow your community of friends, especially since the game is always played in doubles. There are also several established platforms to enter games and tournaments.

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