



RUNNYMEDE ROYALS PICKLEBALL CLUB



Runnymede Royals Pickleball Club (RRPC)



Majorca Pickleball Holiday, October 2019

RRPC was founded in early 2015 and has grown to be the largest pickleball club in England with over 140 members and 5 venues for play. Paul Telling and Alan Speller, two of the founders of the Club, explain to pbE some of the history of the Club and the lessons which they have learned.

Where did it all begin?

Paul Telling explains: “ I first heard about pickleball from an American friend of mine, a senior executive at the USTA in 2014. Intrigued by the sound of the game I purchased some paddles and balls and had them sent to the UK. As it happens, I had organised a cricket tour to Majorca and decided to trial this game with the group on a chalked up tennis court. We all took an immediate liking to this new game and determined that we would continue to play when we returned to the UK”

Initially a small group of half a dozen friends played on an informal but regular basis at Lightwater Leisure Centre. As more and more people saw the game being played and wanted to try it, the group realised that they needed to formalise the Club with a Constitution and Committee. And so it was that Runnymede Royals Pickleball Club was born. The name paid homage to the original tennis and squash private members club called The Runnymede Club which Paul had owned and where many of the early pickleball players had been members.

The Committee consisted of Paul Telling as Secretary, Alan Speller as Captain, Ian Atkinson as Treasurer and Derek Jackson as a Committee Member. In the early days the Club didn't consider buying bespoke nets and used modified badminton nets and second hand paddles. Says Alan: "Looking back I am shocked to recall that initially we were not even using the full court and only realised this when we were about to play our first match against Abingdon. We quickly corrected this".



Alan Speller and Paul Telling

And so the Club progressed in this way for the next year with lots and lots of taster sessions for interested players and lots of new members.

Significant events

Two events then occurred in late 2015 / early 2016. Firstly, Paul and Alan participated in a tournament in Madrid where proper pickleball nets were being sold off afterwards. These were the first 2 nets the Club purchased. Secondly, the Committee learned of an opportunity to potentially secure funding from SC Johnson, a local company. The £2200 of funding provided a fillip for the Club enabling it to invest in more nets and equipment.

Exponential growth

"Growth at this point was exponential" observes Alan.

The goal was to build a Club which catered for all levels of players.

" We recognised clearly that some people just want to play socially or recreationally and that playing a couple of times a week gave them an opportunity to get some exercise and to chat to people who shared an interest," says Alan.

Other people do want to progress to playing in competition and tournaments and there came a point when the Club also needed to provide opportunities for stronger play and a session was then dedicated to that.

Most people identified the Club through word of mouth, advertisements in local free press or from seeing the sport being played from a viewing gallery at the leisure centre or from the website.

"We made good use of our local free press and the Where to Play section of the Pickleball Oxon site directed many new players to the Club" says Paul.

Most of the sessions took place during the day as the majority of members in the early days did not work. Gradually sessions on a Saturday morning and on Monday evenings were introduced.

As membership grew and the bank balance swelled, more nets, paddles and balls were acquired and a ball machine was purchased for drilling purposes. Regular coaching and drilling sessions were set up alongside scheduled playing sessions. The Club had always run large taster sessions and had an active programme for introducing new individuals to the game which was largely managed by Derek Jackson.

Coaching

Coaching has played an important role for both Paul and Alan. Paul was an experienced tennis coach and, indeed, became one of the first people in the UK to be qualified as an IPTPA Level 2 coach.

“One of the most positive things about pickleball is that it is so easy to learn. There are so few barriers to playing and, once the rules are explained and with some guidance and encouragement, a complete beginner can enjoy a game and start having some fun” says Paul.



Coaching session

Alan ran regular drill sessions and Paul ran a 5 week coaching programme covering a broad spectrum of tactics.

Alan also introduced a candid camera session where players were videoed and could see themselves on playback and receive feedback on their play, shotmaking, positioning and tactics.

The Club piggy-backed on a programme of US Pros who were in Europe for a tournament and 4 of them came to deliver a coaching programme at the Lightwater Leisure Centre. This was a very well attended and well received experience for over 40 members and guests from other clubs.

International tournaments

The Club strongly encouraged members to participate in international tournaments and has been well represented by members at the Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Finnish, English and Thai Open tournaments in the last 4 years. A good haul of medals has also been won.

Club events

The Club organised a variety of interclub friendlies as well as a trip to The Villages in Florida in 2018 and a pickleball holiday in Majorca for 30 people in 2019. In 2019 a team from the Club also visited Nepal and played a match against an Indian team - pickleball at the top of the world!

Social events were also peppered throughout the calendar and provided opportunities to get together off court.

“Getting together regularly for social events gives a certain fabric to the Club and consolidates the sense of camaraderie,” says Paul.

Charity donations

One of the things Paul highlights is that the Club has supported a nominated charity each year and has been able to donate of total of £4500 to these charities between 2016 and 2019.

Mentoring

The Club and its coaches have been instrumental in fostering and encouraging other clubs: Beaconsfield PC, South London Area Pickleball (SLAP), Farnham Picklers, Fleet Aces, The Bourne Club and WASSPS, and is very open to sharing any information to assist and support other clubs.

Guidelines for setting up and developing a new Club

1. Resist separating players into categories of play too soon as it is important to create a sense of all belonging to one Club. However, recognise that once players begin entering tournaments, they will want to enjoy stronger games and have more competitive play.
2. Invest in a couple of nets and some inexpensive paddles from the beginning.
3. Ensure all levels of play are catered for – purely recreational play as well stronger play sessions for more advanced players.
4. Offer coaching opportunities for those who want it.
5. Create an atmosphere which is welcoming and sociable where people feel they belong. Organising half a dozen social events during the year including a quiz, BBQ, Xmas tournament and annual dinner all bring a certain sense of being part of a Club.
6. The £12.50 membership fee has proved no barrier to joining and a £4.00 session fee is also seen as very good value. Pitch all the sessions at the same fee even if the facility costs vary.
7. Continually look for new facilities and new opportunities to play. Whilst the local leisure centre may well seem the most obvious place to play, schools are often willing to rent their courts in the evening and at weekends and can be a good alternative.
8. Identify outdoor tennis courts which can be marked up for pickleball. RRPC had identified 2 sets of tennis courts in Camberley and in Windlesham where the parish councils were persuaded to paint pickleball lines on the courts. Pickleball was intended as an outdoor game and in this year of lockdown, when indoor facilities have been largely closed, the al fresco courts have come into their own. It is also likely that many people, having experienced and acquired an appetite for outdoor play, will want to continue playing outdoors.



Outdoor play

9. Establish an active Committee along with volunteers willing to take on session management, setting up nets and all of the many other activities required to ensure the smooth and efficient running of a Club. As well as the Committee itself RRPC have been incredibly fortunate to have a huge number of volunteers and helpers who give very generously of their time.
10. Once a Club gets to a certain size, a system for registering participants at each session is needed. An electronic booking system is an ideal tool to allow an overview of the numbers attending each session, to prevent overbooking and to give notice if additional courts need to be booked. This greatly streamlined the planning for RRPC sessions and has also been adopted by other Clubs including SLAP.

The Next Chapter



Paul decided to step down from the role of Chairman at the end of 2018 and became the first honorary life member of the Club.

The Club Committee now comprises Steve Harris (Chairman), Alan Speller (Captain), Jean Sheard (Secretary), Andrew Newman (Treasurer), Mick Rust (Sessions Manager) and (Committee Members) Joyce Davies and Terry Inskip.

The Club continues to grow and reached over 140 members in 2020. Before the first lockdown it was running sessions across 5 venues on 6 days of the week.

The Club would be very happy to help anyone trying to get pickleball off the ground in their area by phone, email or by visiting. Contact: alan.speller@runnymederoys.org.uk

There is also help and guidance available from Pickleball England where Clubs and individuals can join free of charge. www.pickleballengland.org



Grand Opening of Outdoor Courts at Windlesham Club