

Statistics show 12 million people play the sport around the world



**DID YOU KNOW?**  
Novak Djokovic is a fan of padel tennis after trying it out during a visit to Sweden this summer

Above: Argentine Fernando Belasteguín is the current No.1 on the Padel Pro Tour



For more about padel tennis visit...  
[www.padelfederation.co.uk](http://www.padelfederation.co.uk)



Great Britain's John Leach and Matt Thomas after taking on the Swiss at the 2010 Padel World Championships



“MY BELIEF IS THAT PADEL MIGHT BE THE SAVIOUR OF MANY TENNIS CLUBS IN BRITAIN”

# PADEL POWER

Popular in Argentina and Spain, padel tennis is now growing its fan base in the UK with the aim of establishing itself as a major sport

WORDS: LEIGH WALSH

» **WHEN I FIRST** heard about the sport of padel I presumed it had something to do with water and a boat. But now, as I stand in the middle of Chelsea's Harbour Club with the only liquid in sight being the beady drips of sweat from the players, I know all about the exhilarating and addictive game that is said to be the fastest growing sport in the world.

After boasting about my tennis-playing past as I stepped onto the padel court, I was starting to feel slightly abashed when my first swing of the solid, stringless bat connected with more air than ball. But as I gradually adapted to the shorter instrument, which is roughly half the size of a tennis racket, I started to understand why this sport has exploded in popularity.

Padel, which originated in Mexico in the late 60s, is played on a court 20 metres in length, divided by a low-lying net and within four enclosed walls. The absorbing game incorporates elements of tennis, racketball and squash while also introducing its own unique twist to the racket sport genre. While the scoring and court layout resemble that of tennis, as does the ball, the walls around the playing area and the strokes give it a squash-like feel.

As I became more comfortable within unfamiliar sporting surroundings, my confidence grew and I started to understand why 12 million people around the world partake in this pastime. I negotiated the walls with caution, I figured out the tricky but effective underarm serve, I even indulged in some tactics, but most of all I was having fun.

“The simple truth of the success and popularity of padel is that it is so easy to play,” said Tony Lee, the UK Padel Federation (UKPF) president. “Anyone from age four to 84 can pick up a racket and go and enjoy a game from scratch.”

“The best way to promote padel is to get people on a padel court actually playing the game because there really is no substitute for the enjoyment in taking part.”

But unfortunately that's where the problem lies for the development of the sport in the UK. Getting people involved in padel is a difficult task when there are only four courts installed across the country – two in Huddersfield, one in Rye and one in Fulham.

“The biggest barrier without a doubt is getting Sport England to recognise it as a sport,” explained Peter Vann, the man who pioneered the Ellesse Padel Academy in Huddersfield. “There are already official bodies for padel in Spain, Italy, Switzerland and France, so Europe is picking up the pace. Now we need to as well.”

If padel tennis was to be recognised by Sport England it could potentially provide the UKPF with the financial boost needed to assemble more courts, and Lee believes this would help, not only padel, but tennis too.

“My personal belief is that padel might be the saviour of many failing tennis clubs in Britain,” said Lee. “Many clubs are suffering from the best young players being sent off to tennis academies, thereby starving clubs of the lifeblood of new young players and families. The traditional membership model is becoming less attractive as time goes by and people are choosing to spend their leisure time doing a variety of activities rather than committing to membership of a select few.”

In Argentina, where padel is the most participated sport, and in Spain, where it is the second most-played sport behind football, they work off a pay-to-play model. The Ellesse Padel Academy, undoubtedly the biggest success story for UK Padel to date, has replicated this playing prototype at its base at Huddersfield LT&SC.

“You don't have to be a member of our tennis club so anyone can come and play,” said Vann. “It's £12 for a court between four people so anybody, anywhere can play and that's the reason it has been so successful in Spain.”

They told me padel would be addictive and after being exposed to the action I tend to agree. But it is difficult to feed a habit with no facilities nearby to indulge the cravings, so if padel is going to succeed then there needs to be a supply of courts to meet the ever-increasing demand. If the courts aren't delivered, well then... I'm afraid any future paddling will indeed involve a boat and water. ■

Aspecial thank you to Great Britain player John Leach and padel coach Alejandro Fernandez for showing us the ropes.