

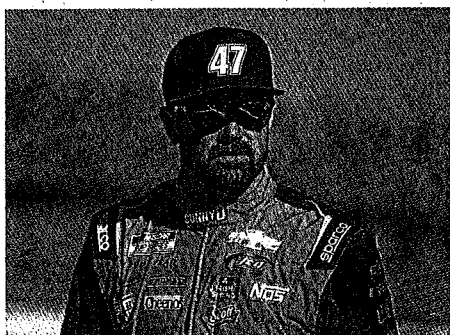
# The Wall Street Journal

## Dec. 3-4, 2022

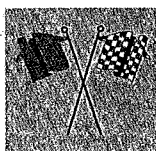
### Section C5



MATTHEW SENHAM/CON



By LIBERTINA BRANDT AND KATHERINE CLARKE.



Luxury real-estate markets across the country are propelled by the biggest local industries, whether it's high finance in New York, big oil in Texas, Walmart in Bentonville, Ark., or Hollywood in L.A. On North Carolina's Lake Norman, there's no disputing the driver: It's Nascar.

The Lake Norman area, located roughly 20 miles north of Charlotte, N.C., has long been home to some of Nascar's most successful drivers, thanks to its proximity to the Charlotte Motor Speedway and the headquarters of some of the sport's best known drivers.

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## Pickleball Is Pitting Neighbor Against Neighbor

Local homeowners associations are serving up bans on the sport, despite its growing popularity, amid complaints of noise

By E.B. SOLOMONT

IT WAS FUN AND GAMES at first. But when pickleballers took over the tennis court at River Canyon Estates in Bend, Ore., for hours on end, bringing boom boxes, hurling profanities and letting dogs run loose—not to mention the constant pok-pok-pok of balls hitting paddles—the neighbors said enough is enough.

Fearing a lawsuit, the board of the homeowners association enlisted a professional mediator. It commissioned a sound study and considered ways to reduce pickleball noise—to no avail. In February, the board banned pickleball from the community's tennis court.

"We had to make a really tough decision," said David Finkel, a former HOA president at River Canyon. "But the bottom line is, you can't believe the noise pickleball makes. The people who are pickleball advocates just choose to be-



The construction of new pickleball courts at Village Walk in Naples, Fla., sparked a lawsuit against the HOA.

lieve it's not that friggin' noisy."

A mashup of tennis, ping pong and badminton, pickleball is one of the fastest-growing sports in the U.S., with legions of fans and a growing list of celebrity backers, including NFL quarterback Tom Brady and basketball superstar LeBron James. It has also become a lightning rod for controversy within some residential communities, where exuberant

### TEAM SPIRIT

**39%**

Rise in number of U.S. players from 2019 to 2021

shouting, competition for court time and the telltale sound of players whacking Wiffle-like balls with paddles has pit neighbors against each other, leading to name-calling and yelling, even lawsuits.

Pickleball dates to the 1960s, but its popularity skyrocketed during Covid as more people

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ZAK BENNETT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

## MANSION | SPORTS HOMES

## Pickleball's Rival Teams

Continued from page M1  
discovered the easy-to-learn sport, which is often played outdoors. There were about 4.8 million players in the U.S. in 2021, up 39% from 2019, according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. Residential communities



rushed to build courts or to retrofit tennis courts to accommodate the influx of players. (Four pickleball courts can fit on a single tennis court by adding lines and nets.)

"Tennis was the rage, now it's pickleball," said Robert Ducharme, an attorney in New Hampshire who advises condominium and HOA boards. He said more communities are adding pickleball to keep residents engaged.

Pickleball evangelists say the sport is a fun way for players of all ages to exercise safely, socialize and get their competitive juices flowing. Some call it addictive, and pickleball rivalries have been known to escalate on and off the court.

At Cinco Ranch, a master-planned community in Katy, Texas, where homes cost \$350,000 to more than \$1 million, tennis and pickleball players have faced off over court time and etiquette. Things came to a head recently over plans to paint pickleball lines on an existing tennis court.

A group of tennis players argued in a petition that pickleball causes overcrowding, especially during tournament-style games, leading to excessive wear-and-tear on the courts. "Families [playing tennis] don't like to play beside these large groups," while competitive players "cannot focus with pickle balls coming on and off their court constantly," the petition said.

Lilah Poltz, 41, a pickleball player at Cinco Ranch who advocated for the court re-striping, said it has all become "quite political." At a recent HOA board meeting, Ms. Poltz, who works in marketing, said about 10 people came to oppose pickleball, including one woman who kept referring to pickleball players as "pests."

"It's been awkward. And it's been uncomfortable because these are your neighbors. You want to get along," Ms. Poltz said.

There are about 10,600 registered pickleball venues in the U.S., including more than 1,000 new venues added in 2021 and more than 900 added in 2020, according to USA Pickleball, the sport's governing body. Many residential communities are leaning into the



Village Walk added three pickleball courts this year, creating a controversy among residents of the community.



Meredith Carr sued over expenses tied to the courts.

## Pickleball's Popularity

| YEAR | NUMBER OF PLAYERS                |
|------|----------------------------------|
| 2016 | 2,815,000                        |
| 2017 | 3,132,000                        |
| 2018 | 3,301,000                        |
| 2019 | 3,460,000                        |
| 2020 | 4,199,000                        |
| 2021 | 4,819,000<br>(+39.3% since 2019) |

Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association



Diane Green-Kelly said it was important to add courts.

sport, and courts are seen as a valuable asset.

The portion of for-sale listings that mention pickleball rose 86% in October 2022 from October 2021, according to Zillow.

At River Canyon Estates, where homes sold for nearly \$400,000 to about \$1.4 million over the past two years, the tipping point in the pickleball brouhaha came last year, when a group of pickleball players proposed re-striping a single tennis court to create four pickleball courts.

Adrian Bennett III, who sold a townhouse facing the court last year for \$599,000, said large groups of pickleball players converged on the once-sleepy court, some bringing thermoses he suspected weren't filled with water.

"Things got pretty much out of control," said Mr. Bennett, 81, who added that he didn't sell his home because of the noise, although he certainly wasn't a fan of it. "It was rather obnoxious to have them playing there."

A study commissioned by the HOA found the sound level from

the pickleball court topped 65 decibels at several nearby homes. By comparison, a normal conversation is about 60 decibels and a hairdryer is roughly 90 decibels. Tennis hits are typically about 14 decibels lower than pickleball and

**The portion of for-sale listings that mention pickleball rose 86% in October 2022 from October 2021, according to Zillow.**

make a lower-pitch sound, said Bob Unetich, a referee who has a consulting business focused on noise mitigation. Pickleball's higher-pitch sound is more annoying to the human ear, he added.

Part of the problem was that several homes were within 65 feet of the court, said Terry Smith, another former HOA president who lives a few houses down from the

court and said he could hear pickleball "quite easily" upstairs in his home. To be effective, a sound barrier around the court would have to be 16 to 20 feet high, he said. Even then, he added, the board could be sued—and would likely lose.

In Naples, Fla., earlier this year, residents sued the homeowners association at Village Walk, an 850-home community where prices range from \$535,000 to about \$900,000, over expenses tied to three new pickleball courts. In the suit, plaintiff Meredith Carr alleged the HOA spent more than \$100,000 in restricted reserve funds for new recreational facilities—including the courts—without residents' approval.

Ms. Carr is part of a group of mostly anonymous residents called VW Stop Spending, which opposed an HOA fee increase last year and has published blog posts critical of the HOA board's leadership. "It's not that I'm against pickleball by any means, it's the principle," said Ms. Carr, 53, who owns a two-bedroom villa at Vil-

lage Walk. "The president thinks she's above the law."

Diane Green-Kelly, the HOA board president, rebutted the characterization. The HOA fee increase was in line with inflation, she said, and that money went toward operating expenses. (Money for the courts, she added, came from another fund.) Also, the board held several town hall meetings about pickleball. Based on resident feedback, it conducted a sound study and installed Acoustiblok panels to minimize noise. Ms. Green-Kelly said the courts have been full, and she hasn't received any noise complaints.

"I can't tell you it just rolls off my back. They're very personal about it," Ms. Green-Kelly, a trial lawyer by trade, said of the criticism. "We've had to just learn to try to ignore it." She said the courts are valuable to the community as a whole. Without them, she added, "we might be dying on the vine because we weren't keeping up with what people wanted."

Pelican Preserve in Fort Myers,

## MANSION | SPORTS HOMES



Price: \$407,000 in 2019

Susan and Romeo DeMarco, at their home in Pelican Preserve, were concerned about the location of new pickleball courts.

Fla., walked the same fine line last year as it tried to meet pickleball demand while satisfying residents concerned about the noise. The 2,500-home community had six pickleball courts that were constantly packed, said Frank Robers, president of the HOA board. A proposed location of six additional courts, however, was rejected by homeowners.

Romeo and Susan DeMarco, who paid \$407,000 for their four-bedroom home in 2019, were among those objecting. Their house, which is adjacent to a nature preserve, is about 400 feet from the proposed courts. "We kind of thought of it as a dripping faucet," said Mr. DeMarco, 75, of pickleball's constant noise.

After several impassioned discussions, he said, the board ultimately identified another location. Mr. Robers said the HOA spent about \$100,000 to relocate a softball field and build the new pickleball courts in its place. "At the end of the day, honestly, we decided for the good of the community and these residents," he

said. "It was worth doing."

Roy Seaverson, 65, a retired dentist who lives at Sun City Grand in Surprise, Ariz., said he and his wife, Julie Seaverson, 64, did their research before buying a

\$735,000 house close to their community's pickleball courts in 2014. He said they walked around the neighborhood to gauge the sound level, which they deemed a nonissue. Mr. Seaverson, who

plays pickleball five or six times a week, said the house is on a golf course, and although the couple was drawn to the home for its views, the proximity to pickleball is a bonus.

"We definitely talk about how we feel fortunate being close enough that you can walk down and you're right there," he said.

Troy Konz, 62, president of Sun City Grand's pickleball club, said the sport is a top draw for the 9,800-home community, which has 11 tennis courts and 22 pickleball courts that are packed from about 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. The pickleball club has nearly 1,800 members, up from around 900 in 2016, said Mr. Konz, a former high-school athlete who called pickleball easy to play, great exercise and incredibly social.

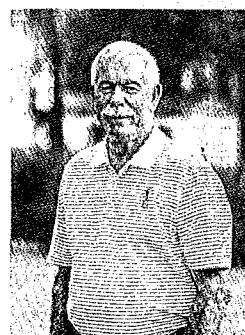
Mr. Konz said Sun City Grand has refined its noise-mitigation efforts over the years, including regular sound studies and wind screens. It allows only certain paddles to be used on its courts. And he admitted that for years, the community's pickleball and

tennis clubs clashed over court time. Only recently did they make peace with each other, he said.

"We got together and said, enough is enough, why are we fighting?" Mr. Konz said. They also have united over a common enemy: a faction of homeowners who would like to see the tennis court converted for basketball.



Pelican Preserve put in six new pickleball courts far from residences to avoid noise complaints.



HOA Board President Frank Robers negotiated the court location.