

A WHOLE NEW BALL GAME



Padel and pickleball are the new kids on court and as their star rises so too do high-fashion collaborations and enviable looks. Leo Bear discovers more

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here has long been an affiliation between tennis and fashion. A love affair, more like. Who could forget Serena Williams' black Nike 'catsuit' at the 2018 French Open? Or Zendaya's look on her recent press tour for *Challengers*, wearing tennis-ball-studded stilettos by Loewe. On the catwalk, Gucci's summer 2024 capsule collection put a cool spin on traditional tenniswear and we've seen similar from Louis Vuitton: its latest Core Values campaign, shot by Annie Leibovitz, features tennis legends Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer summiting a snowy mountain.

The preferred pastime of aristocracy, royalty and the international elite, tennis has reigned supreme for more than a century but change is in the air. Upstart racquet sports such as padel (popular in Europe) and pickleball (the fastest-growing sport in the US) are filling the diaries of the one per cent. Fun, fast-paced and addictive, the appeal is clear to see. Played as doubles, both are highly social and have a lower barrier to entry than tennis. Smaller than tennis courts, padel courts are enclosed by glass walls; pickleball courts are even smaller, with a lower net.

According to the International Padel Federation (IPF) based in Switzerland, the governing body of the sport, padel is now played in more than 131 countries with 71 national federations and a total of 25 million players. From Argentina to Albania, people are clamouring to hit balls off the glass. Andy Barr, Senior Vice President of Consumer Creation at FILA, says: "At FILA, we continue to see incredible market potential for both padel and pickleball. Pickleball is really starting to gain momentum, evident from the increasing number of courts in cities and from the community of players and social media influencers actively promoting it. We're enthusiastic about the global growth prospects for both sports."

Not all members of the tennis community agree. Some look down on padel and pickleball – too noisy and unsophisticated – but just as many have embraced it, including tennis pros Serena Williams and Sir Andy Murray.

More importantly, pickleball has captured the hearts of A-list celebrities, too. George and Amal Clooney love it, Leonardo DiCaprio won't start shooting until he's had his morning game and Taylor Swift was recently seen swinging a pickleball paddle as part of a promotional campaign for her single *Fortnight*. It's no exaggeration that, in Los Angeles, a pickleball court is a status symbol.



Previous page: Recess x India Hicks pickleball paddle. Left: the game of padel is one of the latest fitness obsessions. Right: Zendaya embraces court fashion with tennis-ball-studded stilettos by Loewe. Below right: Emma Watson is a pickleball fan

MEETING DEMAND

Embracing the trend, luxury hotels and resorts are converting tennis courts into padel and pickleball courts. Take, for example, The Boca Raton hotel in Florida. Its Racquet Club (est. 1926), which hosts some of the biggest names in tennis, is currently in the process of laying down 12 pickleball courts featuring state-of-the-art hydro-grid surfaces said to remain 20 per cent cooler than conventional hard courts. Other pickleball hotspots include Amanyara in Turks & Caicos, Necker Island in the British Virgin Islands and Beaverbrook in Surrey, England.

Why the sudden boom? “Both padel and pickleball really blew up during the pandemic because people needed something socially distant to do,” says pro-pickleball coach Matt Manasse, who counts Emma Watson, Jamie Foxx, Matthew McConaughey and Will Ferrell among his clients. “Pickleball, in particular, caught on in the US because it is so easy to set up, and the celebrity scene getting into it also helped to boost its popularity tremendously.”

Luxury designer brands have seen the potential, introducing capsule collections that are more stylish than traditional tenniscore. One of the first on the scene was contemporary New York fashion brand Alice + Olivia with a playful pickleball collection comprising florals, tropical prints, ruffles and pleats. “I wear K Swiss,” says Manasse, “but I’ve seen GFore, Lacoste, Vuori, Alo Yoga and Redvanly all bring out pickleball and court specific clothing recently. Staud also did a cool capsule collection in pickleball, which was fantastic, and I just attended a Guess event which showcased an awesome athletic/pickleball line.”

Sartorially, think Andre Agassi circa 1980. “Pickleball sportswear is edgier and more fun than traditional tenniswear,” says Thaddea Lock, the UK’s top female pickleball pro. “You’ll see people experimenting a lot more... There is no dress code.”





Lock cites pro-players, including Anna Leigh Waters (one of Forbes 30 under 30), Catherine Parenteau and Parris Todd as some of the best-dressed players on the female circuit, while Lock herself remains loyal to Skechers, her sponsor for the past 12 months. In 2023, the American footwear brand made headlines by partnering with Diane von Fürstenberg to create a collection merging fashion and function, and this year it is collaborating with avant-garde Spanish artist Ricardo Cavolo.

At the other end of the spectrum, Dunhill has embraced sport with its new Athluxury collection, crafted for comfort and performance both on and off the court. And Varley's new activewear has seamlessly bridged the gap between tennis and padel/pickleball. Launched earlier this year in Utah with a pickleball tournament, its Club line features contrast stripe trims that add the right amount of vim to the traditional preppy tennis look. The brand's founder Lara Mead says: "The Club collection is just the beginning for us. As padel and pickleball continues to grow and evolve, we plan to evolve with it, continuously creating new and innovative pieces."

Left: Dunhill's new activewear collection combines athletic design with technical innovation. Below: Brunello Cucinelli's padel backpack. Opposite: a look from Lacoste's Fall/Winter 2024/25 Paris show; Anya Hindmarch's pickleball tote



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A NEW DAWN

In terms of accessories, the sports are neck and neck. Brunello Cucinelli's padel backpack with cowhide trim is one of the most coveted items, but pickleball is creating more noise – and not just with tongue-in-cheek slogan T-shirts saying "Too hot in the Kitchen" or "I can't, I'm playing pickleball".

Cynthia Rowley released a limited-edition range of pickleball paddles just in time for them to be slipped into Anya Hindmarch's oak-green pickleball tote, which sold out almost immediately – a new version in navy has just been released. Meanwhile, on Harbour Island in the Bahamas, British designer and humanitarian India Hicks has announced a range of 'play + après' pickleball accessories with Fenix Sportier, a New York-based luxury leather brand. The collection features a range of elegant bags and visors in Hicks' trademark tropical toile print. Hicks says: "After designing my collection of pickleball paddles with Recess, it was crucial that other bits such as a visor and bag needed to follow." In terms of her devotion to pickleball, she says: "I resisted for a while... But once that paddle was in my hand, there was no turning back."

Fighting it out for domination, it's still not clear which new-generation racquet game will win out but one thing's for sure, it will be a gripping watch. **B**