

The rise of pickleball: Oglethorpe County embraces sport

By Molly Linder and Olivia Shapiro on Wednesday, March 22, 2023



Crawford's Karen Patman prepares to hit the ball as her partner Elaine McGarity, of Winterville, watches during a match at the Oglethorpe County Rec Center. They are two of a regular group of 16 players who play the fast-growing sport. (Photo/Molly Linder)

The pickleball league meets at 9 a.m. Monday and Thursday, and on Tuesday after line dancing class at the Oglethorpe County Rec Department. It is free to join.

Watch the pickleball team teach a reporter how to play the sport:



Wanda Ashworth grew tired of driving nearly 45 minutes to play pickleball in Banks County. So she reached out to Michael White with the Oglethorpe County Recreation Department.

“I approached him first and said, he was in his truck one day, and I went to the window, and I said, ‘Can we have pickleball courts?’ ” she said. “A couple of months later, I was asked to write a letter to the Board of Commissioners, just asking for courts when they started the gym, and we got two.”

Ashford was one of the original four pickleball players in Oglethorpe County three years ago. The group has grown to 16 players, which is typical of what’s happening around the U.S.

Pickleball was invented in the 1960s, but is exploding in popularity, according to [USA Pickleball](#). The spread of the sport is largely attributed to popularity among community centers, PE classes, retirement communities and YMCA facilities.

The fast-paced sport combines elements of tennis, badminton and pingpong. It has become a popular choice for individuals in Oglethorpe County looking for a fun and engaging workout.

“It's great for people that are retired; it's great for everybody. It's not strenuous, you know, and it's fun,” said Karen Patman, who has played for two years at the rec department.

Before bringing pickleball to Oglethorpe County, Ashworth, who lives in Comer, created a team and started playing with her friend in Banks County.

“I had a friend that played at the Y (YMCA) in Athens, and then she lived in Banks County, and she just decided that she didn't want to drive that far,” Ashworth said.

Once there was a pickleball court in Banks County, Ashworth said her friend invited her, and “she and I were the first two that actually started in Banks County, and then it grew.”

Both Ashworth and Patman said the sport is special to them because it is a way to get out and be active.

“I'm a grandmother and a great grandmother,” Ashworth said. “So I don't get to play as much as I want to, but just to improve my skills (is my goal).”