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ON THE WINGS OF THE DRAGON



COVER STORY

BHUTAN MOUNTAIN COFFEE

A sip of sustainability



PICKLE

What The???

How can it be that a senior citizen, a former long-distance runner from the United States and the President of Bhutan's premier football club found common ground in a sport with the most oddball of names? Lasting friendships, good humor and chance encounters have a way of making just about any unlikely connection something dreams can be made of.

It all started one fine day in the winter of 2022 when three friends who hadn't seen each other since COVID sat together for a meal and

a cool brew at Namgay Artisanal Brewery in Paro, Bhutan. Perched above the expansive Woocho Sports Complex and the home of Paro FC, Bhutan's premier football club, the brew pub is a favorite spot. Catching up on life and sports between sips of red rice beer, the word pickleball was uttered. The response was good hearted laughter, raised brows and genuine curiosity. As fate would have it, one of the three friends was the Sports Manager for Paro Football Club (FC).

When the stars align opportunities emerge like green grass sprouts in

spring. Curiosity lit a spark. Tenzin Tashi was able to reach Paro FC coach Puspall Sharma and President Karma Jigme for a sit-down chat about this 'pickle whatever sport thing.' Within an hour of leaving the brewery the three friends were meeting the leadership of Paro FC to talk about pickleball, the fastest growing sport in the United States. Once jokes about the goofy name subsided, a few YouTube videos were pulled up to 'ohs and ah's'. The seed of something possible sprang forth. The next morning the trio of friends along with Coach 'Push' and Karma Jigme



met near the far southeast corner of Woochu Sports Arena.

Within an hour a plan was hatched, an unheard-of time frame for such a big idea, but that's how it went down. If the American, who happened to be the president of a US non-profit, could raise the funds to build a court, Woochu Sports Arena would be the home to not one, but three new pickleball courts.

Within six months the funds were raised and eleven guests from the United States committed to visit Bhutan at their own expense to introduce the game of pickleball. Two of the volunteer guests are international figures in the pickleball community including

Seymour Rifkin, founder and CEO of International Pickleball Teaching Professionals Association (IPTPA) and Helle Sparre, creator of Dynamite Doubles and former Tennis Pro who pivoted to pickleball in 2016.

Building three new pickleball courts in the middle of monsoon season posed challenges. The sport with the odd name comes with a footprint the size of a badminton court. The plan was for the three courts to fit neatly into the space at Woochu Sports Arena that would also double as a basketball court. Coach Push and Karma Jigme took on a monster-sized challenge to build three professional pickleball courts at Woochu Sports Arena in



three months. A choice was made to go with an asphalt base and multi-layer acrylic paint. A decision that was necessary, but a tremendous challenge considering monsoon rains were having their way in the Paro Valley. Arrival of guests from the US was imminent. It was yet another auspicious unfolding that within a week of their arrival the courts were finished.

On September 3, 2023, pickleball in Bhutan was launched at Woochu Sports Arena accompanied by the presence of Paro Lam Neten and monks from the Central Monastic Body. In the days after the launch, twenty-six Bhutanese coaches from Royal Thimpu College and Paro College of Education were trained as professional coaches. In addition to introducing a new sport to Bhutan, Coach Push and Karma Jigme see the game as an excellent cross-training sport for their Premiere League team players.

Within a week of the launch over 1,200 students from Dechencholing Higher Secondary School in Thimpu were introduced to the game by US volunteers. The school now has

a pickleball program and two new courts built with additional funds donated by the non-profit.

It is of no small consequence that pickleball courts in Bhutan have given the sport the distinction of being played at locations at the highest elevation in the world. This includes the 15th century Talakha Goemba monastery on the north end of the Thimpu Valley. At a little over 10,000 feet above sea level, over twenty monks were taught the game and provided with a net, paddles, and balls. Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law, perched on a mountain above the Paro Valley at a little over 9,000 feet above sea level, now has two brand new courts. In addition to this, two courts were built at Royal Thimpu College and as of June 2024, one new indoor court was finished at Ugyen Academy in Punakha, with four more courts

scheduled for completion by the end of August.

Monks at Talakha Goemba, Paga Goemba, Job Doh nunnery, and Chukha Dzongkhag have been introduced to pickleball. Guests from the US were delighted to teach pickleball to monks and nuns. The founder of the US non-profit is a volunteer with a work permit issued by Tashichhoedzong Monastic

School. From the beginning of the pickleball initiative in Bhutan she declared that involvement of monasteries was a key reason she initiated and continues to support the program. Her non-profit has also been instrumental in the development of baseball in Bhutan.

Guests from the US who introduced the game in 2023 and 2024 brought nets, paddles, balls and court shoes which they donated to monasteries and schools. Major US sports manufacturers including Selkirk Sports, Gearbox, and Onix Pickleball donated nets, balls and paddles. Funds were raised to pay a salary for a fulltime Bhutanese coach who was trained and certified by the volunteers. In the summer of 2024, pickleball in Bhutan's coach Nidup Dorji, along with a coaching colleague from Royal Thimpu College conducted two-week summer pickleball program for students at Woochu Sports

Arena and Dechencholing Higher Secondary School.

Pickleball is easy to play, but difficult to master. Most of the US guests who introduced pickleball to Bhutan are senior citizens, which is defined in the US as 65 and older. All of them are active pickleball players attributing their health and well-being to playing pickleball. One of the guests who came to Bhutan in the spring of 2024, an 82-year-old resident of Kahului, Hawaii is in the Guinness Book of World Records as the oldest female kite surfer in the world. She also plays pickleball every day. As of 2023, pickleball remains the fastest growing sport in the United States which has grown over 200% in the last three years. One of the reasons for its popularity is that it is accessible for people of all ages. Since the launch of pickleball in Bhutan the sport has developed a steadfast following.

As of fall, 2024 it is being played

within three districts. The focus for 2025 is to bring a certified US pickleball coaches to Bhutan for two months to further develop coaching skills among those who were trained in 2023.

In the meantime, Seymour Rifkin who taught and certified Bhutanese coaches through IPTPA continues to play a leading role in establishing pickleball as an Olympic Sport. That outcome may be a few years away, but the explosive growth of pickleball in the US and the rest of the world is undeniable. The pure joy of the game, the simple rules, the overwhelming enthusiasm of all who play make it a perfect sport for a country that keeps a finger on the pulse of Gross National Happiness.

Tax deductible donations for Pickleball in Bhutan programs can be made by contacting Bhutan Cultural Exchange: www.bhutanexchange.org connect@bhutanexchange.org All the funds are spent to provide equipment including nets, paddles and balls to continue growing the joy filled sport of pickleball in Bhutan.

To watch the launch of pickleball in Bhutan and the events portrayed in the story, check this link: <https://youtu.be/Qe3uq017MFY?si=UJ5fz1ji2V8D3qLY>

To watch monks playing pickleball for the first time in Chukha Dzongkhag: https://youtu.be/LOBuZ9fg_rA?si=dvVfMxqKJxeHb17f



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