

NEWS

North Texas pickleball lovers see the sport as more than a trend during its national holiday

Pickleball professionals, hobbyists at major league tournament tout game as something that can be embraced by all.

By **Timia Cobb**, *Staff Writer*
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Nicholas Acevedo gestures after a play during the Major League Pickleball Tournament at Pickler Universe in Carrollton, Texas, Sunday, August 9, 2026.

Anja Schlein/The Dallas Morning News

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Jaida Penaloza dedicates an evening every week to get out on a pickleball court and play with a few friends. However, about five months ago she said this wasn't the case.

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“I’d never heard of pickleball before,” Penaloza said as she stood among a crowd of hundreds at the Major League Pickleball playoffs tournament held Sunday in Carrollton.

Penaloza, 22, recently jumped into the world of pickleball and is following the footsteps of younger Gen Z and Millennial crowds who have embraced the sport to make friends and stay active without having to spend much money.

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Pickleball courts have been a hot commodity throughout North Texas as a growing number of enthusiasts gravitate toward the game and push for more public courts. At popular pickleball spots like Cole Park and Campbell Green in Far North Dallas, people may wait up to an hour to play a quick match. Unlike tennis courts, pickleball is played with a different ball and requires a smaller court.

Penaloza said she first played pickleball while stationed at Dyess Air Force Base in Abilene. She said she was interested, but didn't know much about the sport.

"It was very easy to learn," Penaloza said. "It takes practice, with serving and stuff, but I would say once you get the hang of it, it's pretty easy."



Jaida Penaloza smiles as she plays a game during the Major League Pickleball Tournament at Pickler Universe in Carrollton, Texas, Sunday, August 9, 2026.
Anja Schlein/The Dallas Morning News

Penaloza and some friends attended the major league tournament Sunday at Pickler Universe, located at 2800 North Interstate 35 East in Carrollton. The pickleball facility hosted the weekend-long tournament on National Pickleball Day on Aug 8.

Joe Brayton said he co-opened Pickler Universe with his partners after retiring from his prior business Paragon Healthcare, Inc. in 2021. The Pickler Universe CEO said the Carrollton facility opened in 2025 to cater to the growing number of fans.

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"I think what really kicked it off was COVID," he said. "It was something they could play outside and still be distanced enough. Once people started playing with it, they realized it's addictive. The first

time you go out, you can have a good time and really enjoy it."

The indoor pickleball facility spans 111,325 square feet with 26 courts. Pickler Universe plans to open a second location this fall in D-FW, according to Brayton. Pickler Universe in Carrollton offers monthly memberships that range from $55 to $198 a month and $15 for visitor open play at the facility, according to its website. The center also hosts tournaments.

Finding community through Pickleball



Nicholas Acevedo hits the ball during the Major League Pickleball Tournament at Pickler Universe in Carrollton, Texas, Sunday, August 9, 2026.
Anja Schlein/The Dallas Morning News

The local support and enthusiasm for the game were undeniable Sunday as cheers from the crowd shook the Pickler Universe building as the Texas Ranchers worked to score a win.

Nicolas Acevedo, a professional pickleball player for the Texas Ranchers, moved with determination as sweat gleamed on his face. His team managed to defeat the Atlanta Bouncers during the playoff match.

The 26-year-old enthusiast said he started playing pickleball recreationally in 2022 with friends, then professionally after convincing from a friend. He is now set to appear in the quarterfinals with his team this coming weekend.

“I didn’t have any expectations,” he said. “I was just trying to do the best I can.”

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It’s easier now to find a court to play on but learning how to play pickleball and whether it’s the right game for you might be another story, said Chrishawn Spackman, a pro-pickleball coach and player.

“I would say go out and play a little bit first and just decide, ‘Hey, do I like this? Do I really enjoy it,’ ” Spackman said. “Go experiment, get a feel for it a little bit, and then maybe it’ll be worth that investment.”

Spackman, 58, said pickleball is a lovable game anyone can play once they learn the rules.

"It's the only game where your grandmother or grandfather can play with your grandkid, and be careful because they can beat them, too,” Spackman said. “I think that's a phenomenal thing."



The Major League Pickleball Tournament at Pickler Universe in Carrollton, Texas, Sunday, August 9, 2026.
Anja Schlein/The Dallas Morning News

Ali Layton sees pickleball as more than a trend, as she's been playing it most of her life. The 15-year-old started playing pickleball with her father when she was in seventh grade. She immediately fell in love with the sport.

Seeing her peers and friends come to enjoy the game has made Layton appreciate pickleball more. In her hometown of Paris, Layton said the town recently built more courts where kids can have a special place to hang out together.

"Every night it's just a lot of young teenage kids staying out of trouble and learning a new sport while keeping their exercise up," she said.

One of the things that makes pickleball appealing is the opportunity to meet new people without having to spend much money.

Lance VanHemel, 37, plays pickleball with friends at outdoor courts rather than playing at the various membership courts throughout North Texas.

“Obviously, all of the indoor facilities, they are at a cost,” VanHemel said. “But I still find time to play outside. It is also more social. If I go in my phone book and type in the word pickleball, I have like 80 contacts. And I've met every single one of them through pickleball.”



Lance VanHelmel walks his dog Buddy ‘The Pickleball Pup’ during the Major League Pickleball Tournament at Pickler Universe in Carrollton, Texas, Sunday, August 9, 2026.
Anja Schlein/The Dallas Morning News

Giving older and younger people and sometimes even pets the chance to socialize, pickleball is making a mark as an affordable third space activity that can be played as a hobby or

professionally.

“That’s the best part of pickleball, you’re enjoying it with your friends,” Penaloza said.

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Timia Cobb

BREAKING NEWS REPORTER

Timia Cobb is a breaking news reporter for the Dallas Morning News as of June 2025. She previously worked with Syracuse.com |The Post-Standard and as a fellow with the Texas Tribune. She has a master's degree in Magazine, News and Digital Journalism from Syracuse University and a bachelor's in journalism from Texas State University.

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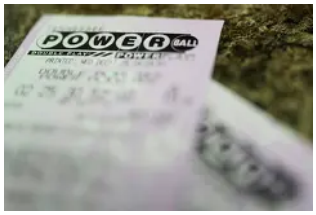

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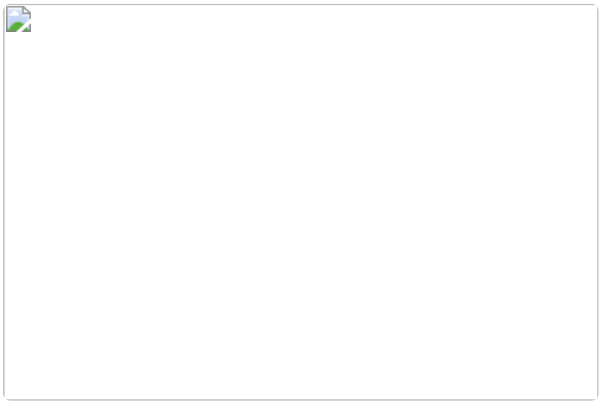

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