

LOCATION / LEASE / FIRST YEAR

Before you sign the lease.

A practical playbook for anyone opening or buying a pickleball club. Questions worth asking while you can still walk away.

WHERE ARE YOU? START HERE

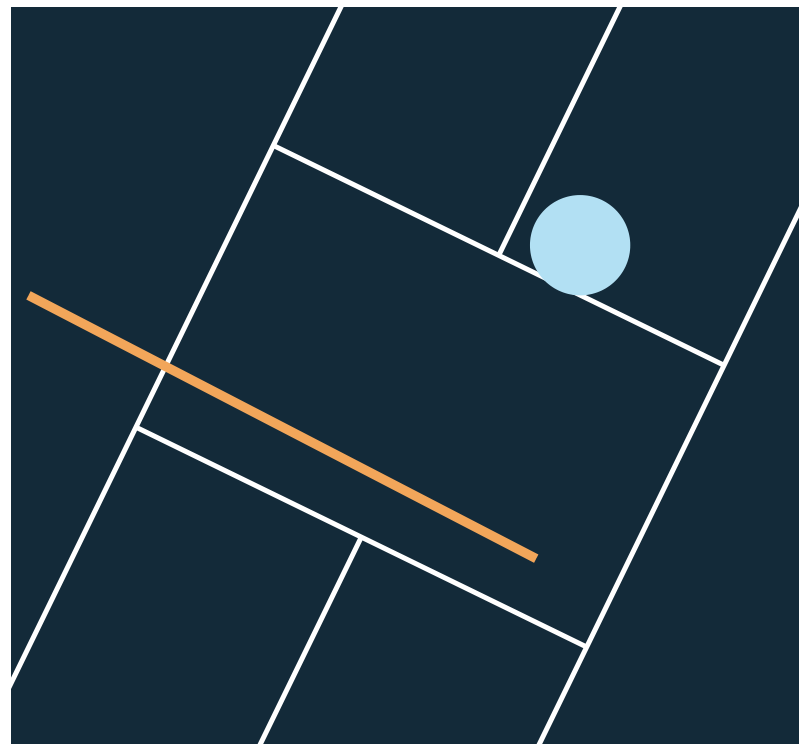
Thinking about opening a club	Playbook 03: Before you sign the lease
Open, and want more regulars	Playbook 01: Give players a reason to return
Need more new players	Playbook 04: Share your story
Thinking about what's next	Playbook 02: Beyond the numbers
Under pressure right now	Playbook 01: Section 10, then Playbook 04

EYES OPEN. HEART ALL IN.

Know your market.
Know your numbers.
Know yourself.

LISA & DUSTIN DEMERRITT

Lessons from building Pickles.



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START HERE

Go in with your eyes open.

For anyone thinking about opening, franchising, buying or investing in a club.

We were normal people who got there early, listened hard and kept getting back up. The best time to solve a club's biggest problems is before you sign. Rent, location and the hours you'll really give decide more than any program you'll ever run.

Most club closures in 2026 trace back to decisions made before opening day: the rent, the location, and owners who expected a hands-off business. The good news: you get to learn from everyone who went first, including the clubs that didn't make it.

We're not here to talk you out of it. We want you to win. **Choose your hard:** the work of checking now, or the harder work of fixing it later.



HOW TO USE THIS PLAYBOOK

STEP	WHAT TO DO	TIME
1	Be honest in section 01. It's the one most people skip.	15 min
2	Run the local math and rent math with real quotes, not hopes.	A weekend
3	Take the lease and franchise questions into every meeting.	Ongoing
4	Read the walk-away list before you sign anything.	10 min

This playbook shares what we learned. It isn't legal, financial, real estate or franchise advice. Have a lawyer who knows commercial leases read anything before you sign it.

01

OWNER OR INVESTOR?

Are you ready to be the owner?

Clubs rarely fail for lack of passion. Many struggle because someone expected a hands-off investment in a hands-on business.

AT PICKLES

In our first years, Lisa was behind the counter sixteen hours a day. Dustin was cleaning courts at 3 a.m. We don't say that for sympathy. We say it because that's what it took, and we'd do it again.

**BE HONEST****YES****NOT YET**

I'll be at the club most days in the first year.

I can cover six to twelve months of costs if the club can't.

I've worked a few real shifts at a club, including a Tuesday night.

I know who covers the desk when someone calls out.

I'm fine scrubbing a bathroom at 10 p.m.

The people closest to me are all in, too.

NOTES**WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE**

Mostly yes. Every "not yet" has a plan. If you want passive income, the honest answer may be a different investment, and that's a smart answer too.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Work three shifts at an existing club before you sign anything.

02

LOCAL MATH

Do the local math.

Demand isn't "pickleball is popular." It's how many players live within a short drive of your door, and who else is already serving them.

AT PICKLES

We sized our market with simple math: the people within driving distance, the share who play, and how many we'd need through the door each day. Simple math, done honestly, beats a fancy forecast.



YOUR MARKET

YOUR NUMBER

People within a 20-minute drive

Share who play pickleball (see below)

Estimated players nearby

Indoor clubs within 20 minutes, open or announced

Players you need each day to cover costs (section 03)

What you'll offer that nearby options don't (not just "nicer courts")

WHAT WE'RE SEEING NATIONALLY

24.3M

Americans played in 2025, roughly 1 in 14 people

7.5M

core players, 8+ times a year

13-24

the age group with the highest participation rate

Source: SFIA 2026 Pickleball Single Sport Report, June 2026. Local rates vary widely.

Don't chase the hottest market. Strong suburbs and secondary markets can mean lower costs and less competition (IAPPF, September 2026).

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

Your daily player target is a small share of the players nearby, not most of them.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Visit every club within 20 minutes. Play, watch, and count the empty courts.

03

RENT MATH

Rent decides almost everything.

Rent is the one cost you can't fix with hard work. Run this math with real quotes before you fall in love with a building.

$$\text{Monthly fixed costs} \div \text{price per court hour} = \text{court hours you must sell}$$

YOUR NUMBERS	MONTHLY
Rent	
Shared building costs (CAM, taxes, insurance)	
Payroll, including you if you need to be paid	
Utilities, software, loan payments, other fixed costs	
Total fixed costs	
Average price you'll earn per court hour	
Court hours to sell each month	
$\div \text{courts} \div 30 \text{ days} = \text{hours per court per day}$	

WHAT WE'RE SEEING NATIONALLY

\$30K-\$50K typical monthly rent for a 10-court club	~\$6,400 average monthly pickleball revenue per court	\$25K-\$30K monthly payroll at many clubs
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Source: Johns Design & Consulting industry data, reported in The Dink, "Pickleball Clubs Are Closing, Here's the Math Behind Why," October 2026.

Put together: a 10-court club at the national average earns about \$64,000 a month from pickleball. With \$40,000 in rent and \$25,000 in payroll, it's behind before the lights come on. That's why rent decides almost everything.

NOTES

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE You break even on realistic evening and weekend demand, so every daytime booking is upside, not survival.	ONE THING THIS WEEK Get two real rent quotes and run this page for both. Compare before you visit a third building.
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LEASE TERMS

Read the lease like you'll sell the club.

Your lease will outlast your opening excitement. It also decides what you can sell one day.

- ☐ How long is the term, and what renewal options do I have?
- ☐ How and when does rent increase?
- ☐ Will the landlord contribute to the build-out or give free rent while I build?
- ☐ What exactly does my personal guarantee cover, and does it ever end?
- ☐ Can I transfer the lease to a future buyer, and on what terms?
- ☐ Does the use clause cover pickleball, events, food, drinks and retail?
- ☐ Any limits on hours, noise, parking or signs?
- ☐ What shared costs (CAM) can rise, and is there a cap?
- ☐ What happens if I need to exit early?

NOTES

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

You can answer every question in writing, and a lawyer who knows commercial leases has read the whole thing.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Take this list to your next landlord meeting and write the answers down while you're in the room.

05

FRANCHISE OR INDEPENDENT

Choose your kind of hard.

Neither path is easy. A franchise trades some freedom for a playbook. Independence trades a playbook for freedom.

A FRANCHISE CAN GIVE YOU

- ☐ A tested brand and playbook
- ☐ Systems and software from day one
- ☐ Owners to learn from

THINK ABOUT

- ☐ Fees that come off the top
- ☐ Rules on pricing and programs
- ☐ What happens if the franchisor struggles

ASK ANY FRANCHISE BEFORE YOU SIGN

- ☐ How many locations have been open at least a year?
- ☐ How many have closed or changed hands?
- ☐ May I call five owners, including some who left?
- ☐ Who guarantees the lease, and what happens if the franchise changes hands?
- ☐ What do I own if the agreement ends?

NOTES

INDEPENDENCE CAN GIVE YOU

- ☐ Freedom to fit your community
- ☐ No ongoing fees
- ☐ Full ownership of your brand

THINK ABOUT

- ☐ Building every system yourself
- ☐ No one to call at 2 a.m.
- ☐ Harder to borrow without a track record

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

You chose with your eyes open, after talking to real owners, not just the sales team.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Call two current owners and one former owner of any franchise you're considering.

06

BUILD FOR PLAYERS

Build for players, not a brochure.

Players come back for good courts, easy booking and people who know their name, not for the fanciest lobby.

AT PICKLES

We kept it simple: six courts, pure pickleball, open to anyone, free to join. We spent where players noticed and saved where they didn't. Our biggest surprise: teaching brand-new players became a huge part of the business. Plan for beginners from day one.

**WORTH SPENDING ON**

- ☐ Court surface and lighting
- ☐ Sound control
- ☐ Clean, bright bathrooms
- ☐ A front desk with easy flow
- ☐ Booking software players like

WHERE YOU CAN WAIT

- ☐ Extra amenities until players ask for them
- ☐ Lots of retail inventory
- ☐ Extra staff before you know your busy hours
- ☐ Custom apps or software builds
- ☐ Big decor and signage upgrades

01 What will a first-timer notice in their first five minutes?

Spend there first.

NOTES**WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE**

Your budget goes to what players feel every visit, and you still have cash in the bank on opening day.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Cut one "nice to have" from your build-out list and move that money to your opening cushion.

07

YOUR FIRST YEAR

Your first year, one season at a time.

Year one is about learning fast. This is the simple rhythm we followed at Pickles.

SEASON	FOCUS	WHAT YOU'RE DOING	YOUR NOTES
Months 1-3	Invest	Open well. Welcome everyone. Build your first community.	
Months 4-6	Learn	Look at who comes back and why. Ask. Adjust programs and prices.	
Months 7-9	Lead	Launch what players asked for. Give your community a reason to bring friends (Playbook 04).	
Months 10-12	Lean in	Tighten costs, staffing and marketing. Double down on what works.	

AT PICKLES

Following this rhythm kept us from trying to do everything at once. Each season had one job.

NOTES

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

At each season's end you can name what you learned and what you changed because of it.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Put the four season start dates on your calendar now, with a one-hour review for each.

08

PLAN YOUR EXIT

Plan your exit on day one.

Not because you're leaving. Because a club that's ready to sell is a club that's easy to run.

AT PICKLES

When we sold, the work that mattered most was work we'd done along the way: written processes, clean records, and a story we'd been living for years.

- ☐ A lease you can transfer to a future buyer
- ☐ Accounts, website and social media in the business's name
- ☐ Business and personal money kept separate from day one
- ☐ A written process for anything you do more than twice
- ☐ Player permissions that let your list transfer
- ☐ A running file of player stories, photos and milestones
- ☐ A simple equipment list you update each year

Playbook 02, Beyond the Numbers, picks up from here.

NOTES

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

If someone asked to buy your club tomorrow, you'd be ready to talk in a week, not a year.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Open a business-only bank account and a folder called "Stay ready."

09

WHEN TO WALK AWAY

Walking away is a win too.

The best deal you ever make might be the one you didn't sign.

THINK TWICE IF...

- ☐ You only break even if every court is busy all day, every day
- ☐ The landlord won't negotiate anything at all
- ☐ Your personal guarantee could cost you your home
- ☐ Several clubs have opened or been announced nearby, and you can't say how you're different
- ☐ You can't name who will run the desk when you're not there
- ☐ You haven't talked to an owner whose club closed
- ☐ You're signing because you're tired of looking

A QUESTION WORTH SLEEPING ON

"If this goes slower than I hope, can I live with the downside for two years?" If the honest answer is no, change the deal or walk away.

NOTES

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE

You sign because the numbers and your gut both say yes, or you walk away proud of the homework.

ONE THING THIS WEEK

Share this list with someone who will tell you the truth, and ask them to push back.

10

KEEP GOING

We're rooting for you.



Opening a club is one of the hardest, most rewarding things you can do. You'll build a place where people find friends, get healthier and feel like they belong.

Go in with your eyes open and your heart all in. Choose your hard, and know we're rooting for you.

Be YOU. Play your way. See ya' on the courts.

Lisa & Dustin DeMeritt

THANK YOU

To David Johnson and the IAPPF, the International Association of Pickleball and Padel Facilities: much of the industry thinking in these pages grew out of conversations with David and his deep knowledge of the sport, the business and the people who run clubs. More for facility owners at iappf.org.

All four playbooks and our story: openplaybook.club

Sources: SFIA 2026 Pickleball Single Sport Report, June 2026. Johns Design & Consulting industry data, reported in The Dink, "Pickleball Clubs Are Closing, Here's the Math Behind Why," October 2026. IAPPF, September 2026.