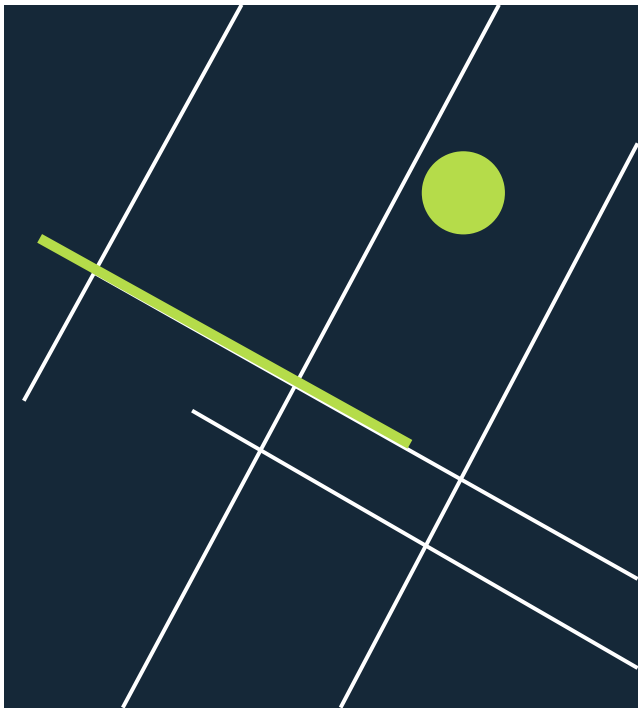
THE OPEN PLAYBOOK

Five things we learned owning a club.

What we'd tell any pickleball club owner over coffee. For independents and franchisees who want a club people love and a business that lasts.



LISA & DUSTIN DEMERITT

Lessons from building Pickles.

00 START HERE

Pickleball removes barriers. Don’t build them back.

A 70-year-old and a 15-year-old can play the same game on day one. Beginners win points in their first hour. People make friends before they make rivals. No other sport does that.

Then clubs build the barriers back. Booking takes ten minutes. Regulars close ranks. The schedule only makes sense to people who already know it.

We opened Pickles in March 2021, six courts, just pickleball, and sold it in 2024. We’d never owned a club. Everything here we learned behind the counter.



Five things we’d tell any owner over coffee, whether your players picked up a paddle last week or have played for years. Start with the one keeping you up at night.

01	**Community first**	You’re not selling court time.	p. 03
02	**Every player needs a next step**	A schedule isn’t a pathway.	p. 04
03	**Technology should serve players**	If it adds a step, it’s costing you.	p. 05
04	**Build a business that lasts**	A full court can still lose money.	p. 06
05	**Your best marketing**	Stories earn what ads rent.	p. 07
+	**If you’re a franchisee**	The brand is national. The club is local.	p. 08

Running a club is hard either way. Choose your hard.

01 COMMUNITY FIRST

You're not selling court time.

MOST OWNERS THINK	Fill the courts and community follows.
WHAT WE LEARNED	**It's the other way around.**

Nobody drives across town for court time. They come back because someone knew their name, they got a good game, and they left with a plan.

So the number that matters isn't how many new faces you see. It's how many people new to your club come back within two weeks. That includes the 4.0 who just moved to town, not only the beginner. If you don't know the number, it's probably lower than you think. People rarely tell you why they didn't come back. Usually:

- The game was the wrong level. Too fast for a beginner, too easy for a strong player.
- Nobody introduced them to anyone.
- The friend who brought them didn't come back.
- Booking again was a hassle.

Watch your regulars too. Established groups close ranks without meaning to, and a good player new to the club can sit for an hour with no way into a game. Welcoming can't depend on whoever's nicest that day. It's the club's job.

> AT PICKLES
>
> We greeted everyone who walked in and used names once we knew them. We studied the schedule so we knew who was coming for a lesson and with which coach. Those small moments did more than anything we spent on marketing.

TRY THIS

01 Find your number.
How many people new to the club last month came back within two weeks?

02 Call three who didn't.
Ask what would have made it easier. You'll hear the same answer twice.

03 Host your busiest open play.
One person, one job: everyone plays, at a level that fits.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE — Most new players are back within two weeks, and you know the number.

02 EVERY PLAYER NEEDS A NEXT STEP

A schedule isn't a pathway.

MOST OWNERS THINK	Fill the calendar and players will find their way.
WHAT WE LEARNED	**A schedule overwhelms people. "Here's your next step" works, at every level.**

Our biggest surprise: a huge part of our business was people who'd never held a paddle. If we opened again, we'd plan their second and third visit before day one.

But the path doesn't end at "ready to compete." That's where a lot of clubs lose their best players. A 3.5 needs a reason to get to 4.0. A 4.5 needs games worth the drive. Leagues, ladders, drills at their level, ratings they trust and events with something on the line.

The top of the path is giving back. Your strongest players can host open play, run a drill or partner a newer player in a social. Ask them. It ties them to your club in a way no discount can.

Memberships are part of the path. Make trying you easy and moving up worth it.

> AT PICKLES
>
> After every lesson or clinic, the coach walked the player to the desk, showed them the next step on our progression card and helped them sign up. Everyone was a member: free to join and pay as you play, a one-time lifetime level that made every visit cheaper, and a monthly level with open play. One team event started with ratings, then an eight-week qualifier, then a three-day tournament. It filled courts for months.

TRY THIS

01 Put your whole path on one card.
First lesson to tournament play, and what comes after. One next step for each level, and when it runs.

02 Give coaches one line.
"You did great. Here's what I'd do next, and why. Let's find when it runs."

03 Give every level a date.
A beginner event and a competitive one, eight to ten weeks out. Build clinics and drills backward from them.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE Every player, beginner or 4.5, can tell you what they're working toward.

03 TECHNOLOGY SHOULD SERVE PLAYERS

If it adds a step, it's costing you.

MOST OWNERS THINK	Better software makes a better club.
WHAT WE LEARNED	**Players don't care what you run. They care if it's easy and fair.**

Every tap between "I want to play" and "I'm booked" loses someone. Most owners never book their own club as a stranger, so they never feel it.

Strong players feel it at 6 p.m. If prime-time courts vanish in seconds, or open play rotates by who knows who, they'll find a club that feels fair. Clear rules for booking and for how open play rotates matter as much as the app.

Your software should hand you your numbers without an afternoon in spreadsheets: who's new, who's back, and who hasn't played in a month. And know who owns your player list and accounts before the day you need to.

> AT PICKLES
>
> No point-of-sale system was built for pickleball, so we ran ours on one made for tanning salons. It worked because the people at the desk made it work.

TRY THIS

01 Book your own club.
On your phone, as a nervous beginner. Count the taps. Fix the first thing that annoys you.

02 Find who's slipping.
Pull everyone who hasn't played in 30 days. Call the ones you'd miss most.

03 Write down the rules.
How prime time is booked and how open play rotates. Post them where players can see them.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE A stranger books in under a minute, and nobody thinks prime time is rigged.

04 BUILD A BUSINESS THAT LASTS

A full court can still lose money.

MOST OWNERS THINK	Busy courts mean a healthy business.
WHAT WE LEARNED	**Busy isn't profitable. Rent decides almost everything, and a club that depends on one person can't last or sell.**

Take what each program brings in, minus the coach, the balls and the court hours you could have sold. Some of your most popular sessions may be costing you. Keep, adjust or stop.

Prime time is where it gets hard. Evenings fill themselves, so every evening court is a choice between leagues, clinics, open play and rentals. Each earns differently and serves different players. Decide on purpose. Weekday daytime is where clubs win or lose the year.

Rent is the one cost hard work can't fix. Before any lease, divide the monthly rent by your courts. That's what every court has to earn each month before anyone gets paid. Franchisees, add your royalty and brand fund to that number.

Then there's you. If the club needs you every day, you own a job, and nobody buys a job. Same for the star coach whose players would follow them out the door.

> AT PICKLES
>
> Lisa worked the counter sixteen hours a day and Dustin cleaned courts at 3 a.m., until we turned what worked into simple, repeatable steps. We built daytime around retirees and never promised members fixed court times, so programs could follow demand. When we sold, our first presentation was all spreadsheets and undersold us. We rebuilt it around why Pickles mattered, including approved plans to add courts and a partner renting space in our building. Same club, same books. It sold fast, and for far more.

TRY THIS

01 Six numbers every Monday.
Court hours by time of day, new players, your two-week return, lessons with a booked next step, active players in 30 days, weeks of cash.

02 Hand off one weekly task.
They shadow you. They lead while you watch. You talk it over. They write it down.

03 Start a "What we own" folder.
Equipment, approved plans, partner agreements, and the lease with its renewal and transfer terms.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE — You know what every program earns, and the club runs a week without you.

What worked for us, not legal or financial advice. Have a lawyer who knows commercial leases read yours.

05 YOUR BEST MARKETING WALKS OUT YOUR DOOR

Stories earn what ads rent.

MOST OWNERS THINK	More ads, more players.
WHAT WE LEARNED	**Ads stop when you stop paying. Stories keep working.**

Every club has a cast: the first-timer now there four mornings a week, the comeback after a knee replacement, the league team that's played together since day one, the one who knows everybody. Their stories beat anything you could write.

Use one story everywhere. The desk tells it to nervous first-timers. It goes on a poster by the door and on your website, on social in their words, in the welcome email, and on a handwritten card to them with one for a friend.

Your strong players are connectors. Good players follow good games, and they bring their group with them. Treat them well and they'll fill your evenings for you.

Then take it outside your walls. The physical therapist, the senior center, the employer planning a team outing, the local reporter, even the club across town. When more people play, everyone wins.

> AT PICKLES
>
> Our real marketing department was the personalities inside our walls. Players saw themselves and their friends in every one. We told our story anywhere, from one person in the coffee line to a hundred at a town event. Joining was free, so "just come with me" was an easy ask, and word of mouth became our biggest engine.

TRY THIS

01 Start a Story Bank.
A photo, a quote and their permission, captured within a day. Firsts, comebacks, friendships, milestones.

02 Ask "What brought you in?"
Every new player, new to the game or not. Their answers are your marketing plan.

03 Show up in town.
Book one talk or pop-up in the next 30 days. Come back with names.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE More new players come from people talking than from anything you paid for.

+ IF YOU'RE A FRANCHISEE

The brand is national. The club is local.

EASY TO THINK	The franchisor runs the club. I run the location.
WHAT WE'D TELL YOU	**Almost everything in this playbook is still yours.**

We were independent, so we won't pretend to know life inside a system. But look back through these pages. Almost none of it depends on who picked the logo.

OFTEN SET BY THE BRAND

- Name, logo and look
- Booking software
- Pricing guidelines
- National marketing
- Approved vendors

STILL YOURS

- **The welcome, and every name you learn**
- **Who hosts open play, and how it rotates**
- **The next step after every lesson**
- **Your local stories and partners**
- **Your coaches, your culture, your daytime**

QUESTIONS WE'D ASK IF WE WERE YOU

01 Who owns our player data, and can we export it?

02 What can we change locally: programs, pricing, events, hours?

03 How is the brand fund spent, and what local marketing can we run ourselves?

04 What are the transfer rules if we sell, and what happens if the franchisor changes hands?

TRY THIS

01 Make the two lists.
What the brand sets and what's yours. Put your energy into the second.

02 Ask the four questions.
In writing, before you need the answers.

03 Call two owners.
One doing well in your system, and one who left. Ask what they'd do differently.

WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE — You know exactly what's yours, and you're great at all of it.

06 ONE QUESTION

Does this improve the player's experience?



Ask it before every decision: a new program, a price change, new software, a lease. If yes, keep going. If no, think again.

The clubs that win won't just build more courts. They'll build more relationships. We weren't experts. We listened, stayed honest and kept getting back up. Your club already has a story. Go tell it.

Be YOU. Play your way. See ya' on the courts.
Lisa & Dustin DeMeritt

WITH THANKS
To David Johnson and the IAPPF, the International Association of Pickleball and Padel Facilities: thank you for the clarity, the encouragement and the push to share what we learned with today's club owners. More for facility owners at iappf.org.