

Research on the Current Development Status and Promotion Path of Pickleball in China

Qingyu Fan

Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, Hainan Province, 571126

Abstract: In recent years, pickleball, as an emerging hybrid sport, has rapidly gained popularity worldwide due to its unique charm and has begun entering the Chinese market. This paper aims to systematically analyze the current development status of pickleball in China, deeply analyze the main characteristics and core challenges it presents at this stage. The study believes that domestic pickleball is in a critical transition period from the 'germination introduction stage' to the 'initial growth stage', characterized by leading development in coastal developed cities, community-driven growth, and integrated online-offline promotion. However, its development is significantly constrained by low public awareness, a shortage of professional talents, insufficient venues and facilities, and a loose organizational system. Based on this, this paper proposes a series of targeted promotion paths from three levels: government, society, and market, in order to provide theoretical reference and practical for promoting the healthy and sustainable development of pickleball in China.

Keywords: Pickleball; Domestic Development; Current Situation Analysis; Mass Sports; Promotion Pathways

DOI:10.12417/3029-2344.25.09.007

1. Introduction

As the principal contradiction in Chinese society has evolved into the conflict between the people's ever-growing needs for a better life and unbalanced and inadequate development, the public's demand for diversified and high-quality sports activities has become increasingly urgent. Against this backdrop, pickleball—a racquet sport originating in the United States and blending the technical features of tennis, badminton, and table tennis—has quietly taken root in China. With its simple equipment, quick learning curve, moderate exercise intensity, and entertaining nature, it is regarded by industry insiders as a mass sports project with great development potential. Despite its popularity internationally, pickleball remains a "novelty" in China. Therefore, a comprehensive and objective assessment of its current development status domestically, an analysis of its internal and external constraints, and a forward-looking planning of its future development path are of significant practical importance for enriching China's national fitness program portfolio and meeting the diverse sports needs of the people.

2. A Multidimensional Perspective on the Current Development Status of Pickleball in China

Currently, the development of pickleball in China presents a complex picture characterized by 'spotty sprouting, linear connection, and initial formation of a surface', which can be observed from the following aspects:

2.1 Regional Distribution: Taking economically developed cities as the starting point, the radiating effect is beginning to show

The introduction and development of pickleball are highly related to the degree of regional openness and economic level. Currently, its activity centers are mainly concentrated in first-tier and new first-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Hangzhou, and Chengdu. These cities have a high level of internationalization, making it easy to accept emerging sports trends from abroad. They also have a large middle-class consumer group and an active social media environment, which provided fertile ground for the initial spread of pickleball. These core cities are gradually

2.2 Participating entities: Driven by 'interest communities', young white-collar workers and retired people form the main body

Unlike the 'top-down' promotion model of traditional sports, the development of pickleball in China has 'bottom-up' community characteristics. Early participants were mostly overseas returnees, foreign enterprise

employees, college students, and young white-collar workers pursuing fashion and health. They organized WeChat groups and QQ groups through social media and spontaneously organized offline activities. At the same time, due to its low impact on joints and strong tactical nature, pickleball has also attracted a group of retired middle-aged and elderly people seeking low-intensity, high-interest sports. These communities formed by shared interests are currently the most active organizational units of pickleball activities and constitute the basic foundation for the development of the sport.

2.3 Promotion Model: Integration of online and offline channels, with social media playing a key role

In terms of promotion, a closed-loop model of 'online content driving traffic and offline experience converting' has been formed. Online, platforms such as Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Bilibili have become the main for dissemination. Enthusiasts voluntarily share beginner tutorials, match highlights, and experience videos of pickleball. Through visualized and socialized content, this effectively lowers the public's cognitive threshold and stimulates interest in trying the sport. Offline, online traffic is converted into actual sports participation through community-organized activities, temporary venues opened by some badminton and tennis courts, and experience classes and small-scale matches conducted by a few professional pickleball clubs.

2.4 Events and Training: From Folk Exchanges to Initial Systematization

Although there is no national official top-tier competition yet, folk commercial competitions and regional invitationals have begun to emerge. For example, some sports culture companies have successfully held public pickleball open tournaments in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, attracting hundreds of participants and generating a positive social response. In terms of training, a professional training system for coaches and referees has just started. Led by organizations such as the China Pickleball Working Committee, (primary training classes) have begun to be held, aiming to reserve the first batch of local professional talents for the standardized development of the sport.

3. The main challenges and bottlenecks faced in current development

Under the booming surface, the further development of pickleball in China is still facing a series of deep-rooted challenges.

3.1 At the social cognition level: public awareness is extremely low, and the project image is vague

What is pickleball?" This remains the primary question that project promoters need to address. For the majority of Chinese people, pickleball is still a completely unfamiliar concept. Its name translation (similar to the well-known sports brand "Pikachu") also tends to cause confusion. The project's image has not been clearly established, making it difficult for the public to effectively distinguish it from existing sports such as badminton and table tennis, leading to insufficient initial motivation to try it.

3.2 Resource Security Aspect: Professional venues and facilities are scarce, and there is a severe shortage of professional talent

Where to play?" is the second practical challenge. Professional Pickball courts are extremely scarce, and most activities can only be temporarily marked out on badminton courts, which affects the exclusivity of the sports experience and standardization. More importantly, there is a severe shortage of high-quality coaches, referees, and organizational management talents. This leads to uneven teaching and training quality, makes it difficult to improve the level of event organization, and seriously constrains the professionalization and standardization process of the sport.

3.3 At the organizational management system level: official guidance is lacking, and market investment is cautious

At present, the General Administration of Sport of China has not yet clearly defined the responsible department for pickleball, and it also has no place in domestic large-scale comprehensive competition systems such as the National Games. The lack of an 'official identity' has led to the project's development lacking top-level design, policy

support, and stable funding input. At the same time, due to the unclear market prospects, commercial capital mostly holds a wait-and-see attitude, making it difficult to launch large-scale, systematic commercial development. This has formed a cycle where 'lack of investment leads to slow development, and slow development leads to even less investment'.

3.4 Cultural Integration Level: Insufficient localized innovation and weak mass foundation

For any foreign sport to take root in China, it must undergo localization transformation and innovation. Currently, pickleball's gameplay, rules, and equipment are entirely copied from international models, lacking effective innovation that integrates with China's traditional sports culture and public consumption habits. While its 'community-based' development model is efficient in the initial stage, it has also led to a relatively closed circle of participants, making it difficult to break through subcultural boundaries and form a broad and solid mass base.

4.Path suggestions for promoting the sustainable development of pickleball in China

To break through bottlenecks and enable pickleball to transition from a 'niche hobby' to 'mass participation', it is necessary to build a promotion system where multiple entities collaborate and exert efforts collectively.

4.1 Government and Association Level: Strengthen top-level design and improve public services

(1)Clarify the management entity and planning: It is recommended that the General Administration of Sport of China clarify the responsible association for pickleball, include it in the sequence of national fitness programs, and formulate medium- and long-term development plans to guide its orderly development.

(2)Integrating into the competition system and campus sports: Encourage the inclusion of pickleball as a display or competitive event in provincial and municipal comprehensive sports meetings, workers' sports meetings, and community sports meetings. At the same time, actively explore introducing it as an elective course or club activity in colleges and high schools to reach young audiences and lay the foundation for future development.

(3)Constructing public venue facilities: In newly built all-people fitness centers and sports parks, plan and construct multi-functional sports fields that are compatible with pickleball court markings, thereby increasing the supply of venues at low cost.

4.2 Social and Market Level: Stimulate market vitality and foster industrial ecosystem

(1)Cultivating Domestic Brands and Event IPs: Encourage domestic sports equipment manufacturers to research, develop, and produce cost-effective pickleball gear, breaking through the high-price barriers of imported products. Vigorously create 1-2 national influential self-owned brand event IPs to enhance the project's visibility through media exposure.

(2)Promoting the integrated development of 'Sports+' : Actively exploring business models such as 'Pickleball + Socializing', 'Pickleball + Tourism', and 'Pickleball + Training', aiming to position pickleball as a new urban healthy lifestyle and expand its commercial value and connotation.

(3)Building a professional talent system: Support industry associations, higher education institutions, and market entities to jointly establish training and certification systems for coaches and referees, providing standardized and professional core human resources for the project.

4.3 Cultural Communication Aspect: Deepen Local Integration and Tell China's Stories Well

(1)Innovate in content and form of communication: Encourage creators to produce more short videos, tutorials, and stories that integrate Chinese elements and are close to local life. Utilize KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) for precise marketing to shape a clear, fashionable, and approachable project image.

(2)Promote micro-innovations in rules and gameplay: On the basis of following international mainstream rules, encourage adaptive innovations in rules and gameplay for different age groups and application scenarios (such as families and communities), lower participation barriers, and enhance fun.

5.Conclusion

In summary, the development of pickleball in China is at a historical window of opportunity coexisting with challenges. It has demonstrated strong vitality driven by grassroots initiatives, supported by the digital economy, and meeting diverse health needs, representing a new trend in mass sports development in the new era. However, whether it can achieve large-scale and industrialized development in the future hinges on effectively breaking through multiple barriers at the cognitive, resource, organizational, and cultural levels. This requires timely guidance and regulation from government departments, acute insight and bold innovation from market entities, and sustained participation and wisdom contributions from a broad base of enthusiasts. Through multi-party collaboration to build a healthy project ecosystem, pickleball has the potential to carve out its own 'blue ocean' in China's vast sports market, contributing unique value to promoting the national strategy of building a fit China and constructing a healthy China.

References:

- [1] State Council.National Fitness Program(2021-2025)[Z].2021.
- [2] Zhong Yaping."Development Logic and Value Realization of Integrated Sports Projects:A Case Study of Pickleball"[J].Sports Science,2022,43(5):88-95.
- [3] Wang Xiaolu,Li Jian.Study on the Generation Mechanism and Governance Path of New Urban Sports Associations in China[J].Journal of Shanghai University of Sport,2021,45(3):45-52.
- [4] China Pickleball Working Committee. 《2022-2023 China Pickleball Industry Development White Paper》[R].2023.
- [5] Liu Zhen.Pickleball Basic Techniques and Tactics Guide[M].Beijing:People's Sports Press,2022.