



SPREADING THE LOVE

By Alex Hamner & Tuomo Antikainen

Pickleball is taking Finland by storm—and the Finnish are loving it.

Pickleball's Foothold in Finland

The things you do for love! Ray Schiltz and his wife, Tina, lived in southern Wisconsin. But as they agreed prior to tying the knot, they moved to Tina's native Finland when Ray retired in 2013. They settled in Espoo, a southern town west of the capital Helsinki with a population of about 275,000.

But even traveling 4,400 miles across the Atlantic couldn't cure Ray's addiction to pickleball. When packing

for the big move, he made sure to take several paddles and balls, determined to continue playing the sport he'd grown to love in the three years he'd been playing.

The First Games in Finland

As luck would have it, one of Ray's relatives in Finland had a friend who played some badminton. Enter Tuomo Antikainen. Ray got Tuomo to try pickleball in January 2014 for the first pickleball games ever played in Finland, and soon they were hitting the ball three to four times a week, just the two of them. Tuomo googled pickleball in Finland, and got no hits. This just would not do!

But fear not. Badminton is huge in Finland, and is not only played in

schools and public indoor centers, but there are some 120 badminton clubs in the country, which has a population of 5.5 million—that's only half of Los Angeles County.

And as most pickleball enthusiasts know, badminton and pickleball use the same size court. As Ray and Tuomo would often see the same badminton players while they were playing pickleball, they naturally invited them to try our beloved sport. Soon, these people were converts who gave up badminton completely.

Pickleball Finland Takes Media by Storm

Tuomo had caught the bug, and wanted to make it bigger. There were already more players than paddles,

so he established Pickleball Finland and started promoting pickleball through a Facebook page, launched a website (pickleballfinland.fi) and—out of necessity—became a supplier of paddles and balls.

With his strong corporate communications background, Tuomo has no problem using Pickleball Finland's Facebook, Instagram and Twitter accounts for promotion, or reaching out to the media every chance he gets.

Pickleball Finland will arrange to showcase pickleball and invite the press to see how America's fastest growing sport is getting a foothold in Finland. "So far, more than 30 news articles on national television, radio, online and in major newspapers

This time, with support from ProLite Sports, it was much more international, with 110 players participating from nine countries, including famed top pros Gigi LeMaster, Cookie Drake, Brian Ashworth and Bill Ritchie.

In December 2017, the first Pickleball Finland Xmas Games were played in Espoo, and more international and national tournaments will follow. "It's great to see how local groups in Finland are emerging, and some are having their own local mini tournaments. This looks promising for the growth of pickleball. However, the core is the ordinary people who faithfully come to play several times each week, like

Olympic training centers and rehab centers—and the list is growing," says Tuomo. "Another breakthrough in getting pickleball to a wider audience has been municipalities. More schools are also getting interested. "The feedback from anyone who tries pickleball is just fantastic—seniors, teachers, students and sports instructors—they all love it."

"To support the growth, Pickleball Finland will send demo equipment to anyone who wants to organize a local event. "Seeing people's spontaneous reactions and to get them off the couch and onto the courts is the best reward for the hours I've spent in promotion. It simply feels good," Tuomo says.



110 athletes from nine countries participated in Finland's 2nd International Pickleball Tournament.



Tuomo Antikainen (red) and Ray Schiltz (yellow) meet the local players in Southwest Finland.

around the country have reached more than 1.9 million people," Tuomo says.

In 2015, 10 minutes after the broadcast of its first spot on national television, Pickleball Finland received a call from a venue looking for paddles. Today, several Olympic Training Centers in the country offer pickleball!

Global Tournaments Attracting Players

In November 2015, Pickleball Finland held the first pickleball tournament in Finland, hosting some 40 players, including Ray and two other Americans from Ukraine. Naturally those players and many others had clamored for another tournament, which then took place in June 2017.

in Espoo at our home venues," says Tuomo.

Pickleball's Footprint Growing in Finland

In the U.S., pickleball has been around for more than 50 years and often needs no introduction. However, in the new territories, the growth starts from scratch. "In Finland, it's taken us four years, hundreds of volunteer hours and countless demos around the country, and it's slowly starting to pay off," says Tuomo, the country's first Pickleball Ambassador and founder of Pickleball Finland.

"Our website includes a Places to Play list in more than 40 towns. Pickleball is already played by several hundred people in leisure centers, sports halls,

Next stop: Finland?

When thinking of pickleball destinations in Europe, you might first think Spain, UK or Holland, but few know Finland is among the first European countries to start pickleball. So when you're planning your next holiday overseas, pack your paddles and head to Finland! Pickleball Finland welcomes all international guests to play. And don't just go for pickleball. Finland has so much to offer for those who like the country's pristine nature, 250,000 lakes, 3.2 million saunas or perhaps the real Finnish Santa, Tuomo Antikainen.

And, by the way, Santa likes pickleball, too! •