

## The History of Platform Tennis



In 1928, two gentlemen from Scarsdale, New York brainstormed ideas for winter recreation close to home. As a result, James Cogswell and Fessenden Blanchard built a 48' x 20' wooden platform which would allow them to play deck tennis almost all of the time, along with badminton on calm days. This little construction project marked the birth of modern-day platform tennis.

In a search for appropriate equipment for the court, 1/4 the size of a tennis court, Cogswell discovered a boxed set of paddles and balls for sale at a sporting goods sport. The wooden paddles and spongy balls were sold to people who played paddle tennis — a sport invented in 1898, and perfected in 1921 by the Reverend Frank Beal as a recreational activity for underprivileged urban youth.

While the new equipment worked well, it wasn't long before the entrepreneurs grew tired of retrieving balls from snow banks; so they surrounded the deck with chicken wire fencing attached to a wooden frame. They began enjoying frequent games, adapting the rules of doubles tennis. Legend has it that during a particularly heated match, a hard-hit ball lodged in the wire mesh. Both an innovator and a natural competitor, Blanchard ran behind the fencing, smacked the ball as hard as he could and called the shot "good." After some discussion, the men agreed that the new off-the-wall rule was a good rule, adding dimension to the game and broadening the skill set necessary for the sport.

At the urging of some of its members, the Fox Meadow Tennis Club became the first club to install a platform tennis court in 1931. The core group successfully argued that, as a tennis facility, the club was shut down for half the year. By adding this new game, the facility was transformed into a year-round sports haven.

In 1934, the American Platform Tennis Association (APTA) was formed to standardize rules and promote the game. Charter members were Fox Meadow, the Field Club of Greenwich, and Manursing Island Club in Rye, New York. All three clubs still have thriving platform tennis programs.

During the 30s, the court was refined by enlarging the platform to 60' x 30', allowing space between deck planks for rain and ice to drain, mixing sand into the deck paint for added traction, and applying even tension to the wire screens. Its popularity grew, and by 1940, platform tennis was featured in Life magazine.

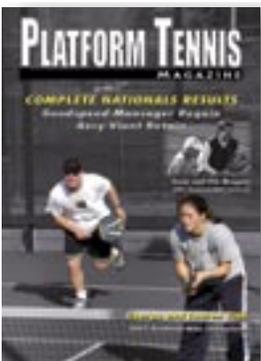
Growth of the sport was steady for the next few decades, with courts being erected at country clubs and in backyards throughout the northeast. Sanctioned tournaments and annual championships provided well-to-do male and female athletes the opportunity to socialize in campy warming huts instead of black-tie ballrooms. For a certain breed, the experience was unparalleled and a true love affair with the sport developed.

By 1970, the all-aluminum court was perfected, enabling a more consistent, high level of play. By 1978, there were an estimated 400,000 players. In 1979, Howard Cosell provided NBC's coverage of the National Championship in Forest Hills, NY. Platform tennis, like tennis and racquetball, saw a significant decline in the 80s, followed by a gradual resurgence in the 90s.

Today, there are an estimated 4,000 courts in the United States, with heavy concentrations in the northeast and midwest. There are over 8,000 APTA members, 17 regional leagues, dozens of certified pros, over 180 sanctioned tournaments, and 24 annual national championship events.

While traditionally a wealthy, suburban sport played at exclusive country clubs, platform tennis is spreading to municipalities, athletic clubs, resorts, and residential developments. Snowbirds are taking the sport south with them to warmer climates. People who play as guests at clubs are realizing that it provides good fun on a winter's night — especially if a court is accompanied by a warming hut for after-the-game social interaction. These people are introducing the sport to new audiences in their own communities.

Celebrity tennis players are turning up on platform tennis courts and shining new light on the sport. Competition within the industry is offering court and equipment buyers more options. A dedicated magazine and a number of web sites are keeping players connected. At courts across the country, there is definite excitement in the air.



"Fox Meadow" by Robert Sticker