

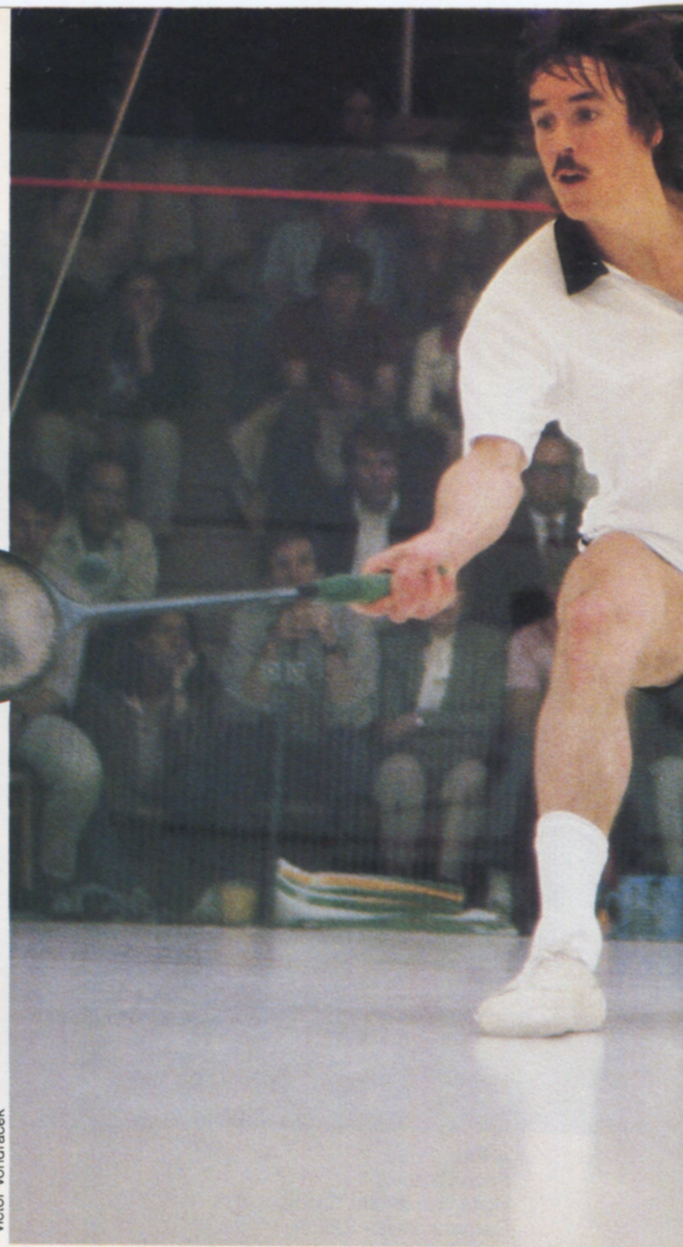
Winter Racquet Sports: Why All the Racket?

By JOHN SEDGWICK

There is nothing quite like stroking a sharp backhand down the line in tennis and seeing your opponent lunge for it hopelessly while, all around you, trees sway, clouds float, and the summer sun bathes everything in soft light. But winter racquet sports have their pleasures, too. Squash, for one, is quicker than tennis and, in its world of white, just as beguiling. Like a cat you can dart into the corner to reach the little green ball and drive it back cross-court off the front wall.

The newcomer, racquetball, is cheaper and easier, so you can get all your aggressions out in a hurry by smashing the pudgy ball against the wall, right from the word go. Then, of course, there's artful badminton, where you can shoot the shuttlecock into orbit high over the net, frustrating your opponent's desire to smack it back on a line to your feet—or at your head. And don't forget table tennis, the least class-conscious of racquet sports, or even less well-known platform tennis. Here you can cover the tiny court as you never could in real tennis, and rocket the ball over the net and up onto the screen from where your opponent can slam it right back at you, harder than ever—a distressing but entirely legal move in this intriguing sport.

Such lively activity is available all across the United States this winter on outdoor boards, in clubhouses, gyms, barns, and even basements (for table tennis, at least). There's no need to mope while you wait for summer to bring back your blessed outdoor tennis, or to pay high prices for indoor tennis in your desperation to hear the sweet sound of a ball on your



Victor Vondracek

strings. These winter sports even have a few advantages over tennis. For one thing, even the worst hackers can have a good time right away. Since the games are played in such a small, enclosed place, an errant ball can never run very far. The strategies and techniques are generally so simple that the games require few, if any, lessons before you can start enjoying yourself. But best of all, if these games are played with any intensity at all, novices and experts receive a real workout in a hurry. Furthermore, court time comes cheap, at least compared to indoor tennis.

Squash: For The Fleet Of Foot... And Mind

Squash—or, to give its full name, squash racquets—is probably the most established indoor racquet sport, particularly in the Northeast. The first American game was played at a New Hampshire prep school, St. Paul's, in the 1880s, and the sport is still closely associated with the New England aristocracy. The squishy ball used in England gives the game its name, but most Americans favor a more lively ball. The pellet is so dead that a player has to give it a real wallop to get it anywhere. Yet he can, by holding up at the last moment, drop it deftly in the front court out of his exasperated opponent's reach. Although the ceiling itself is out of bounds, players can vary the pace a bit by sending up high lobs that nearly graze it. Indeed, with racquets little bigger than flyswatters, such a shot is very difficult to return at all—and impossible to clobber—which is why players generally serve



The lowdown on squash is keeping an eye on the ball.

up one of these moonballs to start each point.

In squash, each game is played to fifteen points, with players giving up their serve when they lose a point; an official match consists of the best three of five games. While beginners may feel it's hard enough to hit the ball back to the front wall each time, let alone think of placing it somewhere clever, more experienced players realize that a form of territorial imperative really governs the game: whoever controls the center of the court wins. One final note of caution: be careful that your racquet hits the ball and not your opponent (tempting as that may be). Playing with long racquets in a tight space can otherwise lead to serious injuries.

Racquetball: Why All The Racket?

Racquetball is a simplified version of squash. While a squash racquet is quite unwieldy, with its small head and long handle, a racquetball racquet, with its large head and short handle, is meant for making firm contact. The ball is almost twice as big as a squash ball and a lot bouncier, so don't worry about slices or chops, just hit it any way you can—anywhere. All four walls and the ceiling are in bounds, so long as the ball hits the front wall eventually (before touching the floor, that is).

The game is so new—only invented in the Forties, and not popular until ten years ago—that there is still some uncertainty as to whether a game runs to fifteen or twenty-one points. Twenty-one is now favored and two games out of three is thought to constitute a match. In many



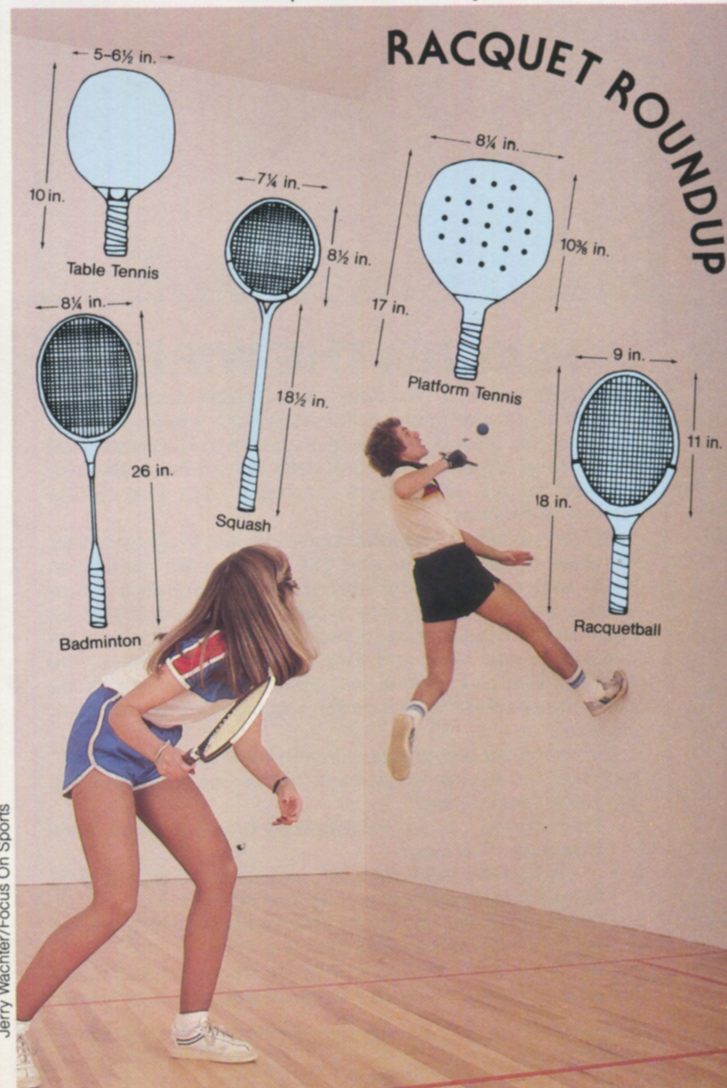
WORKING OUT

There really are no workouts quite like squash and racquetball. Combining a small playing area with lightning action, both of these sports bring into play muscles and reflexes that regular tennis players rarely have to use. This accounts for the fact that in terms of caloric loss and cardiovascular benefits, squash and racquetball rate higher than tennis (with squash nosing out racquetball). However, before you sell your tennis racket and rush out to the nearest squash court, keep in mind that in using these normally dormant muscles, players must be in good shape and must be especially limber to avoid the injuries that commonly plague racquetball and squash inveterates.

The most common trouble spots for squash and racquetball players are in the lower back portions of the legs and the lumbar region of the spine. A good exercise for the legs is the wall pushup: stand about four feet from the wall, your feet flat on the floor, then lean in on a diagonal that stretches all the way from the Achilles tendon past the back of the knee, and repeat the pushup motion. For the back, the yoga position called the plow is the best stretching exercise: lie supine and bring the legs back over your head and as close to the floor as possible.

Although eye injuries—being hit by a racquet or, more commonly, by the ball—are not that prevalent, when they do occur they can be particularly tragic, often causing instant blindness. This can be painlessly avoided by wearing shatterproof goggles that are sold in many tennis shops and most sporting goods stores.

Racquetball can make you climb the walls...



Jerry Wachter/Focus On Sports

ways, racquetball is best for the novice, since he or she can labor for minutes over a single point and get a lot of exercise quickly—without the tedious learning process that squash or tennis requires. This may account for the sudden appearance of hundreds of thousands of racquetball courts across the country in the early Seventies and for its wide acclaim back then as the nation's fastest-growing sport. With experience, however, many players find the game lacks soul—none of the enchanting contradictions, the blend of power and grace, that make a sport something more than just exercise. Experts can win points all too easily by blasting the ball off the front wall a few inches from the floor.

Bring Back Badminton!

On the other hand, hardly anybody plays badminton any more. And that's a pity, for few sports have had so charming a genesis. The game was first played in Europe in 1873 by some British Army officers at a garden party at Badminton, the duke of Beaufort's country house in Gloucestershire, England. Forced inside by bad weather, the officers decided to try out a

wonderful game they'd seen played in India: sticking some feathers into a champagne cork, they let loose with tennis racquets in the banquet hall, using the dinner table as a net.

It must have been quite a party, for the craze swept England and bustled over to America around 1900. Sadly enough, the sport is now widely regarded as nothing but a mildly diverting backyard game akin to whiffle ball. Real badminton, however, is played indoors—and not just because that's the way the British Army did it. Inside, safe from the wind, the game's natural delicacy can come into play—the sneaky drop shots, the murderous high lobs, the killing smashes. It's all incredibly exhausting, and exhilarating, too, with the little bird, as the shuttlecock is called, reaching speeds of 110 miles per hour, and with shots and countershots going back and forth several times a second. Badminton doubles, particularly mixed doubles, is also an exciting game, the woman usually playing the net, the man playing behind to retrieve the deep lobs and fire them back.

The conflict is supposed to be waged with a shuttlecock made of cork and goose feathers, but those are rare, expensive



...or make you take a dive.

PLAYING THE WIRES

Platform tennis, an exciting, often frenetic sport, offers a perfect way to stay in shape throughout the winter. Because the game is played on a wire-enclosed and miniaturized tennis court (thirty feet by sixty feet), the action tends to be fast and furious, and players can easily keep warm in the coldest of climates.

Platform tennis is, however, more than just small-fry tennis. Because of the peculiar rule that allows a ball landing in court and subsequently hitting the surrounding fence without a second bounce to be legally returned, the game has managed to generate its own brand of strategy. Since a player can race back and flick the ball off the fence, the effectiveness of a slam is mitigated. So points tend to be long, often consisting of protracted cat-and-mouse rallies of slam and lob.

Pros consider playing the wires to be the most important technique to master in platform tennis, and offer the following tips for novices:

- Practice the lob and be prepared to use it much more than in regular tennis.
- In playing off the wires, be sure to bend your knees; keep your racquet low and its face open.
- Most important, be patient: there's always more time to return a ball off the wires than you think.

Once you master these techniques, there's no end to the fun and excitement you can have playing platform tennis.

(\$1.50 apiece), and so delicate that the feathers have to be "humidified" to the proper softness by standing them in a shallow pool of water overnight. It's common to go through as many as three of the tender birds in one fifteen-point game. (Best of three games constitutes a match.) Yet, at least to aficionados, the more consistent and durable plastic variety doesn't play quite right. The question of plastic versus goose feathers may soon be moot, however, if the number of players continues to dwindle much further. Fortunately, on the East and West coasts, most cities still continue to support a badminton club or two—and courts can also be found in many private gyms and YMCAs.

Ping-Pong—There's More Than Meets The Paddle

Table tennis, or Ping-Pong—the trademark of the first American manufacturer—is just about everywhere. A large room and a hundred bucks for equipment will give you your own court. Since there's hardly anyone in the country who hasn't played the game—or at least seen it played—it's best to use this space to clear up a few popular misconceptions. First, although most tables come with a line down the middle, the server is not obliged to hit the ball diagonally into the opposite court, as in tennis. Serve it anywhere. You are, however, required to serve the ball by holding it first in your open palm, tossing it into the air, and then striking it. Volleys—hitting the ball before it bounces—are not allowed. Finally, real Ping-Pong is a much more vigorous sport than it's generally considered to be. It's not a parlor game. To liven up the play,

give yourself plenty of space, at least ten feet from the end of the table, and feel free to really whack the ball. Swing the paddle as fully as you would a tennis racket and, if possible, come over the ball on both forehand and backhand to impart a heavy topspin to bring the ball down into the court. Regular tennis and table tennis have more in common than most people realize. After all, a young Bjorn Borg first honed his court skills on a Ping-Pong table.

Platform Tennis Or Tennis In A Cage

Platform tennis is a game that few people have even heard of, let alone played. It's not, to be fair, really an indoor game at all, since it's usually played outdoors on a wooden surface within a wire cage. The small court is easily cleared of any snow, though, and the game is so lively that, dressed in sweaters and long pants, players can volley right through the winter.

Basically, platform tennis—also known simply as paddle—is a miniature version of the real thing with a touch of squash thrown in. It's played on a court about a quarter of the size of



Charles St. John/Image Bank

Poolside Ping-Pong practice.

a tennis court, using tennis scoring, a heavy, spongy ball, and wooden paddles. It also has the rather surprising rule that balls can be played off the surrounding wire fence—so long as you get them before they hit the ground. This helps balance the equation between offense and defense, and also makes for a lot of mad scrambling. With the paddles, though, one doesn't need quite the touch required for tennis, so most people can quickly pick up the game. It's now played largely by tennis buffs eager for outdoor exercise in the winter—tennis star Stan Smith being perhaps the most notable example. With only a few thousand courts in the entire country, though, it's not so easy to find a place to play. Most courts are still in country clubs, although new ones are reportedly springing up on city rooftops and in suburban backyards all the time.

MORE RACQUET SPORTS...

All across the country, the popularity of indoor racquet sports is growing by leaps and bounds. These three lesser-known racquet sports offer their own brand of high-speed excitement.

HARD RACQUETS: This is the oldest and fastest of all walled racquet sports and originates from an eighteenth-century game played by penniless prisoners in London's debtor jails. Very similar to squash in its mechanics, the game is distinguished by the ball it uses, which is hard and lively and tends to rocket like a golf ball. This very difficult sport is played mostly in England, especially in its posher schools.

PADDLE TENNIS: Not to be confused with platform tennis, this game is a miniaturized version of tennis played on a proportionately smaller court. Using a punctured tennis ball and a perforated racquet, paddle tennis is played according to standard tennis rules (it is not legal to return shots off the wall, for example). This sport is played in city parks on both coasts, but it is especially popular along the beachfronts in Los Angeles.

PICKLE BALL: Combine a badminton racquet with a perforated sphere resembling a whiffle ball and you have a kind of giant Ping-Pong game called Pickle Ball. This weird sport, played on a badminton court, originated in 1965 in Seattle, Washington (where the amount of rainfall lends itself to such creative indoor sport thinking), and still has its greatest following there.

Stan Partovic/Photo Researchers