

Pickleball SOUTH AFRICA

By Steven Ablondi & Cindy Burns

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ORGANIC GROWTH! STEP BY STEP, DINK BY DINK.

One of our pickleball buddies passed me a message recently. A tennis pro noticed we have an “inclusive” group of players, and that we are building another pickleball court. He admired our “freedom” and asked if he could bring players from his town (described as still having “too much apartheid,” with rules that often block black players from accessing tennis courts) to learn the game. Perhaps pickleball might be the answer? A demonstration day was immediately organized to teach them.

Memel.Global built the first dedicated pickleball court in South Africa, on private land donated by Drakensberg Club residential cohousing community. Pickleball is growing in South Africa! But, let’s face it, pickleball won’t grow quickly in Africa without help from Americans. We’ve been working on that, and can use your help.

Two Vermont picklers have now pledged to raise money to build courts in a public area of Memel. Bill Kingston is the most successful high school tennis coach in the history of the sport, and Tracie Hotchner is an author and founder of the NY Cat and Dog Film Festivals in Manhattan. When Bill graduated from Princeton, he joined the third year of JFK’s American “Peace Corps,” and witnessed the community interest and excitement when he introduced basketball to Tunisia, seeing benefits from townfolk working together and supporting one another.

We are also building a practice area at Memel Primary School, the first school to include pickleball in the official curriculum. That attracted the attention of a recently opened private Christian school, which desires a pickleball facility as well. They are excited and have done their own fundraising for the project. We are honored to partner with them!

Pickleball will ultimately be an Olympic sport, and we want our tiny rural area to provide the “Jamaican bobsled team” when that day comes.

It wasn’t in our plan, but opportunities arise. Media coverage of our launch earlier this year informed millions of South Africans about pickleball. We’ve been asked to go to the city!



Memel pickleball: focus and determination.

Pule Setai, chief director of National Treasury and chairman of Drakensberg Club, says, “My portfolio is infrastructure. I think all day about spatial planning—where white people live and work, compared to black people; the effect of legacy wealth; possibilities for change based on investment. Such challenges are discussed with institutions like the European Union and World Bank. What Steven Ablondi and Memel.Global have accomplished is remarkable—introducing pickleball to South Africa on both ends of the wealth spectrum. Memel is the poorest town in a poor province, a place where innovations come late, if ever. Yet, that is where they introduced pickleball, and it is expanding. New York City lags in places to play pickleball, constrained by real estate prices. Steven, via Drakensberg Club, is introducing the sport in Sandton, the most affluent suburb in Johannesburg, and the richest square mile in Africa.”

The sky is the limit.

Plans are in place. •



Pule Setai, Chief Director, National Treasury of South Africa.