

# PickleballSOUTH AFRICA

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## MEMEL: BIRTHPLACE OF PICKLEBALL IN AFRICA

**T**he first dedicated pickleball court in Africa isn't in Morocco or Egypt or Kenya. It wasn't built at a club in Johannesburg, or on the playgrounds of Capetown. It wasn't engineered or built by a professional company; it didn't use cement trucks, nor feel the thump of mechanized machinery. There's no lighting, no fencing. It didn't cost much.

No, the first dedicated pickleball court in Africa was built in the tiny village of Memel, by a team of locals as a project to keep them healthy and employed during those first scary days of the pandemic.

This column will enthusiastically describe everyday working folks, who—after pickling a couple of years on crumbling old courts in public areas—came together with hand tools to establish the first dedicated pickleball court in Africa,

a continent of a billion sports-crazy people.

Pickling began in 2018 using the faded lines and tattered net of an old tennis court. Those lines were spaced larger than a proper pickleball court, but we didn't mind the extra running, and played every morning. The kitchen was created with tape, which the African sun and winds blew away in short order. Games continued using the hint of adhesive residue left over after the tape had vanished.

Every morning, neighbors awoke to the sounds of joy. Plunks, whoops, banter, fun and competition. Quite frankly, they were puzzled.

In these articles, you will hear people occasionally identified by racial group. Elsewhere it is fashionable to never use such adjectives, rather to assume we are "all one." In South Africa, since Nelson Mandela was elected

president in 1994, everyone is "one." But in a country that suffered apartheid, stories won't have importance without mention of race.

Pickleball unites genders, reintroduces seniors to exercise and wellness, and connects all ages and all skill levels. In Memel, pickleball offers the miracle of bringing together blacks and whites, rich and poor.



Breakfast, pickleball, and sorting books.

White and black people have appeared barefoot, because they didn't have athletic footwear. Players have competed in spiked soccer cleats and Sunday-best dress shoes.

Importantly, elite black professionals visit us from the cities. They bring their sneakers; we provide paddles. They love it (as you would know). Spouses come to watch with their morning coffees. They join in and love it.

Americans came to visit and brought paddles, balls and nets (you could guess that). Memel Primary is the first school in Africa to include pickleball in its official curriculum.

It's not just play. Through Memel.Global we make sanitary pads so girls don't miss school each month, and give books because few homes have any and there were no libraries in the schools. Generosity, fun, and inclusivity merge on the pickleball courts of our rural village.

Know anyone wishing to help from America? Volunteer? Incorporate our work into an existing nonprofit? Establish a boutique travel enterprise?

See [vimeo.com/showcase/9841067](https://vimeo.com/showcase/9841067) (password: Vermont).

It's a new South Africa—they call it the Rainbow Nation. Bring some friends. •



Daily pickling.