



Pickleball Island founder and “mayor” Ken Knight, center, enlisted the help of Jason Santerre, left, and David Miller, right, to help expand and run the pickleball center on Grand Island. Knight’s brother, John, did much of the renovation work. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Pickleball fans can find an expanded oasis on Grand Island

By [Scott Scanlon](#) | Published September 7, 2018 | Updated September 7, 2018

Roughly 100,000 boxes of paper records once stood up to 20 feet high in a sprawling warehouse on Grand Island. Then Ken Knight found pickleball. He started playing the racket sport with friends in July 2017, after managers of the Buffalo Launch Club on Grand Island put pickleball courts atop the club's outdoor tennis courts. "We didn't have a clue about what pickleball was," Knight said. "We thought it was a joke. Then we fell in love with the game and in two or three months, the leaves started to turn, and we wondered, 'Where are we going to play in the wintertime?'"

Out went the records storage business. In came Pickleball Island, which opened last October with three courts on 5,000 square feet in the 25,000-square-foot metal fabricated building. It became so popular that Knight and two new partners will open an expanded seven-court, 16,500-square-foot operation this weekend at 401 Lang Blvd., on Grand Island. They will mark the expansion with a grand opening from 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sept. 14 that will include free open play, food trucks, music, prizes and special prices on gear. For more information, visit pickleballisland.com.



Knight, 66, holds the title of founder and “mayor” of Pickleball Island. He and other fans consider their favorite pastime “the easiest game to learn and the hardest to master.” That’s why he reached out to two like-minded partners to help run what he believes is the only indoor setting in the state dedicated solely to pickleball.

Dave Miller, 65, is director of operations. The retired postmaster, who last ran the North Tonawanda Post Office, and his wife, Janis, were among the first patrons last fall. “Once you play, it’s addicting,” Miller said.

Jason Santerre, 45, is technical director of the enterprise, focused mostly on lessons and establishing league play. He works as a full-time computer software specialist, but is also a top pickleball player and advocate in the region. He started playing about eight years ago and was the first to lead public pickleball games in the region, at his church in West Seneca. He owns the buffalopickleball.com website and runs the annual Buffalo Pickleball and New York State Pickleball Classic tournaments. He will work closely with Bob Gamble, a recently retired D’Youville College professor of education and longtime school tennis coach, and now the new Pickleball Island director of training.



Rick Kanutson hits a return during a match at Pickleball Island earlier this week as the expanded indoor pickleball center prepares to open this weekend. A grand opening will be held Sept. 14. (Mark Mulville/Buffalo News)

Santerre said there are roughly 200 pickleball courts in nearly 60 locations across the region, both indoors and outdoors. He and his partners credit the speed, strategy and sportsmanship in the game. “If tennis and ping pong got together and had a baby, it would be pickleball,” Knight said.

The game was invented in 1965 on Bainbridge Island, Wash., when a congressman and his friends, in a fit of boredom wanted to play badminton but couldn’t find rackets. The closest they could come were a few wooden paddles and a Wiffle ball that was a favorite toy of the family cocker spaniel, named Pickles.

A pickleball court is 44 feet long and 20 feet wide. A wooden paddle and Wiffle ball can range in total price from \$20 to \$200. Like tennis, the object is to win points by serving, keeping the ball in play and racking up points. Doubles is the most popular form of the game, though singles and recreational 2-on-1 also can be played.

The youngest Pickleball Island players have been 9 and 10; the oldest, an 82-year-old who plays three times a week.

"I like playing ping pong and volleyball, so when I found out it was like that, it sounded like a sport for me," said Dylan Novak, 12, a seventh-grader who lives on Grand Island. He discovered the game a few months ago through a friend of his older brother, Joey, 15. "I like the new courts," Dylan said. "My favorite part is meeting new people and making new friends."

Island residents Doug and Kim Bailey also are regulars. He works full-time as an industrial materials business development and plays once a week, while his wife, a retired administrative assistant for a pharmaceutical company, considers the three times a week she plays as her major source of exercise. "It's a great sport and it's a great workout," Kim Bailey said. "There's so many wonderful, fun people. We're happy about the expansion. There's going to be so much more opportunity to play, more people to meet." Her husband said he likes to play indoors without the extra lines common on most courts, which also are used for tennis or other sports.

Pickleball Island shares the warehouse with Defensor Inc., a small-arms, scenario-based training academy Knight co-owns. Patrons there use air-fired guns that create quite a pop when they go off – something pickleball regulars have grown used to.

Costs start at \$5 for open play nights and run up to \$40 an hour to rent a court. Leagues, open play and lessons are among offerings. New players are encouraged to borrow some of the 30 demo paddles, available in the "Pickle Lounge," to play in their first few games to decide which type of paddle works best for them. Shirts, hoodies, pickle juice (good for cramps) and pickle lip balm also are available.

Knight also has been known to leave out a few pickle slices for those waiting their turn on a court. "We're having fun," he said.