

# POP Tennis Program Thrives at Wilderness Country Club in Naples

As the host site of the U.S. Open Pickleball Championships, Naples has become a hotspot for Pickleball competition with many country club communities adopting the sport. Now, there is growing interest in an alternative short court game, POP Tennis, which was actually invented more than 100 years ago and has been thriving for the past several years under the veteran tennis pro at Wilderness Country Club.

Originally named Paddle Tennis, POP Tennis is a close complementary sport to regular tennis. It can be played indoor or outdoor, all year round, on all surfaces, and is easy to learn for beginners of all ages.

Using a low-pressure tennis ball and an underhand serve, POP follows tennis rules and scoring and is played on a shorter court with a “cushioned” paddle. Because it can be played on “soft” clay courts, many believe it reduces the risks of injury. And since POP is easy to set up and can be played on existing tennis courts, clubs do not have to incur the expense of adding more specialized facilities. Additionally, Pop Tennis does not generate the noise concerns from nearby residents.



POP Tennis was introduced at Wilderness Country Club three years ago by Tennis Director Gregory “Spike” Gonzales, who has been teaching tennis since 1964 and learned about POP by watching it in Venice, California in the 1980s. The sport has become very popular with members, with round-robins taking place at least four days a week, including an afternoon social each week on Thursdays.

“Our members still truly love tennis, but as you age it gets more physically challenging to play it,” Gonzales said. “The softer court and slower ball of POP Tennis makes the game easier on knees, ankles and shoulders and allows many players to continue to compete

well into their Golden Years. For clubs, it’s an easy sport to transition your existing courts back and forth between regular tennis and POP.”

Gonzales has been instrumental in many aspects of tennis growth nationally. He is considered a founder of the National Tennis Rating Program, bringing together the various national tennis organizations in the late 1970s to adopt the universal tennis player system that has become the cornerstone for national league play. He also consulted exten-



sively with the U.S. Tennis Association (USTA) in developing senior programs and in rolling out the USTA’s “Play

Tennis America” program to attract new players.

Gonzales has been inducted into the Eastern Professional Tennis Hall of Fame and Rochester Tennis Hall of Fame. In 2006, he joined Wilderness Country Club where he provides instruction to both adults and children. His programs and lessons are taught in a fashion to make learning and playing fun and fulfilling. Gonzales also actively teaches tennis to kids through Collier County Parks and Recreation. In 2012 and 2018, he was named Collier County “Tennis Pro of the Year” by the Florida of the USPTA Convention.

“Through his introduction of POP Tennis, Spike has been key in diversifying our club tennis program and making it even more enjoyable for members of all ages,” said Alan Raulerson, General Manager/Chief Operating Officer for Wilderness Country Club. “He is truly a pioneer of the sport in southwest Florida and has shared his knowledge and enthusiasm for the game with many other area club tennis pros.”

*To learn more about POP Tennis and how to get started, visit <https://www.wildernesscc.com/amenities/pop-tennis>*