Pickleball League Rulebook and General Information

Updated 08/09/2026

Purpose and Scope of This Document

This Rulebook and Registration Information booklet is intended to give all participants a broad overview of how the league operates and explain most rules and procedures that govern the league. This document is not intended to cover every last detail, such as schedules and various other procedural and administrative items. Many additional details for the league will be disseminated via e-mail and on the Club website, so please check both frequently

Code of Conduct

Madison Sports and Social Club does not tolerate discrimination, racism, sexual harassment, unwelcome sexual advances, violence, threats, or any other type of behavior that may make any player or official feel uncomfortable or threaten his or her health and well-being. We expect all players to treat everyone with respect and abide by common standards of decency and good sportsmanship.

Team names and any conduct on premises must not be offensive toward any race, nationality, gender identity, sexual orientation, or any other group of individuals. Conduct on premises refers to anything spoken, written, displayed on apparel, or otherwise visible or audible to any other participant, whether before, during, or after a game. Team names must not contain profanity. Please use tact and common sense when choosing a team name. MSSC reserves the right to reject any team name someone may find offensive. You will be asked to supply a new name in the event your team name is deemed inappropriate.

Players will read and understand the rules. They are sent to all roster players prior to the season and are available on the MSSC website as well. Not reading rules is the single biggest cause of problems in our leagues. If players have a question about the application of any given rule, they can ask a Site Monitor for clarification.

All participants must refrain from threatening, taunting, name-calling, put-downs, intimidation, violence, and other inappropriate behavior toward teammates, opponents, and Site Monitors. Everyone makes mistakes, and we will not tolerate criticism or intimidation of anyone involved with our leagues due to differences in skill level or any other factor.

All players are encouraged to report offensive behavior to the Club President, Patrick Fosdick, via e-mail at patrick@madisonssc.com. All reports will be kept anonymous and taken seriously, and appropriate action will be taken if deemed necessary, including, but not limited to warnings, suspension, and removal of the offending individual(s) from league play.

Registration and General League Information

- Registration is only available on our website. The pickleball page of our site (https://www.madisonssc.com/sport/Pickleball) contains registration information as well as other details like league formats, etc.

- Team captains may choose to divide up the team registration fee amongst their players online by using TeamPayer. This service allows the captain to send an e-mail to each member of the team and indicate an amount for him or her to contribute towards the entire team fee. TeamPayer charges an additional fee on each transaction, whereas options like Venmo are free. Any outstanding balance may be charged to the captain's credit card after the second week of the season
- We will segment the league into separate divisions as best as we're able to ensure the best playing experience for everyone
- Teams must maintain complete and accurate rosters. All players, including subs, should be listed on a team's roster, and players who play in any number of games must complete the waiver, which is accomplished through accepting a spot on the team from a captain's e-mail invite. Teams in violation of waiver policies will be subject to forfeiting games at MSSC's discretion

Prizes

Prizes will not be awarded for at least the first few seasons of pickleball.

Shirts

MSSC will neither provide nor require league shirts for pickleball for at least the first season of play.

Rules and Regulations

1. General Rules

A. All games in the league shall be governed by the rules outlined herein
B. This is a co-ed recreational league, not a USA Pickleball tournament. All players are expected to show good sportsmanship and act appropriately toward team members and opponents at all times
C. Rules are subject to change and clarification by MSSC. Any rule changes or clarifications will be communicated to all registered participants via e-mail

2. Team Composition and Forfeits

A. MSSC Pickleball is structured as doubles play (2 vs. 2). Therefore, a standard team will consist of two players on the court for each team. However, **to help prevent forfeits, a team roster requires a minimum of three players.** No more than 4 players will be allowed on a roster without prior approval**.**
B. Teams are "all gender" and may consist of any combination of male, female, and non-binary players
C. If a player leaves a game for any reason and no substitute is available, the game may proceed with only the remaining player if the opponent agrees. The opponent may also take a forfeit win
D. If a team is not ready to play at the scheduled start time, a forfeit may be declared by the Site Monitor.

- Participants who fail to field a legal team may be charged a forfeit fee according to the procedures outlined on the Forfeit Fees page of the MSSC website (https://madisonssc.leaguelab.com/page/forfeitfees)

E. Teams may recruit subs from other teams onsite during the regular season or use their own subs from outside the league. Subs from other teams are not allowed in the playoffs (if there are playoffs for a particular format). Any roster rules may be disregarded if the opponent agrees.

3. Equipment

A. **Paddles will NOT be provided.** Players are expected to bring their own paddles for games. We may have an extra paddle or two onsite in case a player forgets their own paddle, but you should not consistently rely on MSSC paddles (nor do you want to, as they're $15 paddles).
B. We recommend teams bring their own balls. We don't guarantee that balls will be available for warmups. You may also need them in the event a site monitor has an emergency and can't make it. MSSC will generally have balls on site though.
C. Balls and paddles must both be approved by USA Pickleball
D. Players may wish to wear some form of eye protection (indoors or out). Balls are hard plastic and can travel at high rates of speed

4. The Court and General Game Play

A. Outdoor courts may be dual-striped pickleball/tennis courts. Indoor courts may contain lines for several other sports. It is up to all players to understand which lines correspond to pickleball play. A standard pickleball court is 20 feet in width by 44 feet in length.
B. A standard pickleball net is 36" above the playing surface at each sideline and 34" above the surface in the center of the court. MSSC may use tennis courts that are also striped for pickleball, in which case the net is likely at tennis height and may be up to 2" higher at either point. Many tennis nets have a hook to lower the center of the net to the appropriate height.
C. A fault is defined as "a rules violation that results in a dead ball and the loss of a rally." This is covered more in depth later in the rulebook.
D. Any ball that hits the line is considered in bounds. Exception: A serve landing on the non-volley zone line is considered a fault.
E. Teams must report to the court promptly at the start of their game time. This applies to all matches, but is most pertinent when teams are warming up away from the court and the designated match start time is approaching. Teams should watch for completion of the game before them and report to the court immediately upon completion.
F. MSSC currently doesn't impose time limits, but each individual game is allotted 15 minutes on the schedule. Teams should agree on an end point if a game is running way over time (see Pickleball Etiquette) at the end of this document
G. All matches will begin with a game of "rock, paper, scissors" between a player from either team. The winner may choose to serve or choose the side of the court on which their team will begin the game. The serve will alternate each game in formats where teams play multiple sets in a match
H. Teams should switch sides when the first team reaches six points if there are any factors that give one side of the court an advantage over the other. Examples include strong wind, sun in

the eyes of players on one side, irregular court design that leaves less space behind the baseline on one side, etc.

I. Teams may stop play if a ball from another game comes onto the court and poses a safety risk to players or otherwise interferes with game play. A ball that comes onto the court and does not interfere with play or pose a safety risk does not need to stop play (i.e. a ball rolls onto the court near the end line when players are up at the non-volley zone line). These situations are player discretion, as every occurrence is different.
J. Players may substitute in at the first service position after a side out. Substitutions are only allowed at other times for injuries or other extenuating circumstances.
K. If a ball hits a player or object other than the net, it is considered a dead ball and play stops.
L. Players not on the court – and any spectators – must remain a reasonable distance from the court boundaries and poles. The onsite monitor and/or actively playing teams are allowed to determine a reasonable distance and communicate this with spectators and players.

5. Non-Volley Zone

A. The non-volley zone is the court area within 7 feet of the net on both sides of the court and extending to each sideline. All lines that bound the zone are considered part of the zone. It is two-dimensional and doesn't extend above the playing surface. The non-volley zone is commonly referred to as "the kitchen."
B. Volleying is prohibited within the non-volley zone. A volley is hitting the ball out of the air before it bounces. This rule prevents players from executing smashes from a position within the zone.
    - A fault still occurs if a player's momentum carries them into the non-volley zone after the ball is hit back over the net
C. A player may legally be in the non-volley zone any time other than when volleying a ball.
D. An "Erne" is allowed. An Erne is a volley shot where a player jumps over or runs around the corner of the non-volley zone to hit the ball out of the air from out-of-bounds. You cannot touch the non-volley zone line or land inside the zone when volleying. If you run around the non-volley zone, your feet must be fully re-established out of bounds before you make contact with the ball.

6. Faults

A. A fault is any action that stops play because of a rule violation.
B. A fault by the receiving team results in a point for the serving team.
C. A fault by the serving team results in the server's loss of serve or side out.
D. Examples of faults include:
    - A serve that does not land within the confines of the receiving court
    - A ball that is hit into the net on the serve or any return
    - A ball that is volleyed before a bounce has occurred on each side
    - A ball that is hit out of bounds. Only the portion of the ball that touches the ground is considered for determining whether a ball is in or out
    - A ball that is volleyed from the non-volley zone (lines are part of the zone)
    - A ball that bounces twice before being struck by the receiver

- A player, player's clothing, or any part of a player's paddle that touches the net or the net post when the ball is in play
- A violation of a service rule
- A ball in play that strikes a player or anything the player is wearing or carrying
- A ball in play that strikes any permanent object (i.e. net post) before bouncing on the court
- A ball that is caught or carried on a paddle

7. Officials

A. All matches will be self-officiated, and teams will be responsible for recording their own scores.
B. Guidelines for making calls:
    a. Players are expected to call any type of fault, such as an out-of-bounds serve or touching the non-volley zone as soon as it happens.
    b. Players make line calls on their own side of the court by verbally shouting "out" or "fault". They can also raise an index finger in the air to signal a ball out of play. The ball is dead and play shall stop. Pickleball is a fast game, and a ball can be ruled out even if a player hits it. Any "out" call must be made before the opponent contacts the ball.
    c. If there is any doubt or disagreement on a line call, the ball should be ruled in.
    d. A point can be replayed if there is strong disagreement or an extenuating circumstance.

8. Game Play and Scoring

A. The number of games played per night may vary depending on the format (and team attendance). Most leagues will employ some form of pool play where teams will play games against several different opponents in the same night.
B. The league uses traditional side-out scoring, meaning that points are scored only by the serving team.
C. The score contains three numbers and is announced by the server before every serve. The first number is the serving team's score, the second number is the receiving team's score, and the third number is whether the server is the first or second person to serve in the rotation. Example: A score of 5-2-2 means the serving team has five points, the receiving team has two points, and the person announcing the score is the second server
D. Games are played to 11 points under normal circumstances, and a team must win by two points. There is a hard cap at 13 to keep games on schedule. See "Pickleball Etiquette" later in this document for situations where a game is running over allotted time. Each game is allotted 15 minutes (not a certain number of points)

9. Serving

A. Players must announce the score before serving to their opponent. A serve must occur within ten seconds of the score call.
B. Serves must be made from behind the end line on the server's half of the court. At the time the ball is struck, the server must have at least one foot on the ground behind the end line. The other foot may hover over (but not touch) the court on the appropriate half of the court.

C. Both volley serves (hitting out of the air) and drop serves (hitting off of a bounce) are allowed. In the case of volley serves, paddle contact cannot be made above the waist, and the head of the paddle cannot be above the highest part of the wrist at contact. Regardless of the serving method, the server's arm must move in an upward arc when striking the ball.
D. The server must not manipulate the ball to add spin with any part of the server's body or the paddle prior to hitting the ball to make the serve, except that the server may allow the ball to roll off the face of the paddle by gravity. Spin may be applied to the ball upon contact by the paddle.
E. The serve must be made diagonally cross court. A serve that lands within the non-volley zone ("kitchen") or on the non-volley line is considered a fault.
F. A serve that hits the net and lands in the non-volley zone or on the non-volley zone line is considered a fault. A serve that hits the net and lands beyond the non-volley line, crosscourt is considered in-play.
G. Only one serve attempt is allowed to put the ball in play (no re-dos).

10. Positioning and Serving Sequence

A. Both players on the serving team have the opportunity to serve and score points until the serving team commits a fault. Exception: The team serving first in a game is only allowed one serve (by the player on the right half of the court). The serve passes to the receiving team upon a fault by the serving team.
B. The first serve of each side-out is always made from the right-hand side of the court.
C. If a point is scored, the server switches sides and the server initiates the next serve from the lefthand court. As subsequent points are scored, the server continues switching back and forth until a fault is committed and the first server loses the serve.
D. When the first server loses the serve, the partner then serves from their side of the court (except for the first service sequence of the game as mentioned previously).
E. The second server continues serving until their team commits a fault.
F. Once the service goes to the opposition (at side out), the first serve is from the right-hand court and both players on that team have the opportunity to serve and score points until their team commits two faults.
G. Except while serving and receiving, there is no restriction on the position of the players, on or off the court, as long as they are on their respective side of the net while the ball is live.

11. Returning Serves & Volleying

A. When the ball is served, the receiving team must let it bounce before returning, and then the serving team must let it bounce before returning. This is called the "Two Bounce Rule."
B. The return by the receiving team does not need to clear the non-volley zone.
C. After the initial two bounces, the ball may be played in the air, or "volleyed." The exception to this rule is that the ball cannot be played in the air if a player is in the non-volley zone upon contact or falls into the non-volley zone after a hit.
D. The ball can only be hit once per side, and no more than one bounce is allowed on each side.
E. Players may not touch the net. Paddles may cross the net as long as no contact is made.
F. A player must signal if they aren't ready for play by raising their paddle or hand above their head and audibly stating "not ready."

G. A player must have clear possession of the paddle when hitting the ball (i.e. a player cannot throw a paddle at a ball to knock it out of the air)**.**

Pickleball Etiquette

Pickleball is a very social sport with a strong sense of community and sportsmanship. Please keep the following in mind during play:

- Games are usually self-officiated at all but the highest levels of pickleball. Players are expected to be honest about whether balls are in out, call faults on themselves and teammates if they recognize them, and otherwise be honest about the outcome of any given play
- Know the rules. This aligns with the previous point, and you shouldn't need to call a court monitor over every couple minutes to ask a rules question
- Pickleballs can travel at high rates of speed, and you'll likely hit another player with a shot at some point. It's customary to apologize, check on the other player, and see if that player needs a short break or any first aid before continuing
- Consistently and intentionally hitting balls over your opponents' heads with the goal of landing them in bounds (a "lob" shot) is frowned upon by many people. You may develop a reputation as a "lobster" if you engage in these types of shots, and it's not an endearing term. Running backward is not advisable in pickleball and can lead to injuries, so it's customary to keep the game in front of all players
- MSSC doesn't have time limits on individual games, but each game is slotted for 15 minutes, and players must be respectful of upcoming games on the schedule. Players should self-police games running over and agree on an end point. Example: A particular match is very competitive and the score is 7-7 at the end of 15 minutes. A hard cap of 9 could be imposed
- It's customary to give your opponent the benefit of the doubt if uncertainty arises about one of your shots or a fault you may have committed
- Level the playing field: Tone down the aggressiveness of your shots if you find your team playing against an opponent who is severely overmatched. There's no need for hard serves, drives, and smashes against a newer team trying to have fun and learn the game. Don't always hit the ball to the weaker player on a team or otherwise take advantage of any player's physical limitations
- Label your equipment. Other players may have the same paddle or bag as you, and the vast majority of people playing outdoors are probably going to be using X-40 balls. Make sure your stuff stays your stuff and you don't take someone else's belongings
- Some players prefer to tap the handle of the paddle (rather than the face) after games to avoid potential damage to the face. It's customary to do as your opponent does in this situation

Miscellaneous Administrative Rules and Notes

- MSSC accepts registrations for Individuals (or players without a team). Each league has a maximum capacity, so a cap may be placed on the number of teams and/or Individuals allowed to register
- Spectators are welcome at matches provided they abide by rules mentioned earlier in this document

- Club management reserves the right to alter the setup of the league at any time before or during the season

End of Play

At the completion of play, all players are expected to tap paddles and/or shake hands and otherwise show good sportsmanship, regardless of the final score or any disagreements or situations that may have arisen during the game. The scorecard will be submitted to MSSC as proof of the final scores.

Results and Standings

Results and standings will be posted or linked on the Pickleball page of the MSSC website following receipt of the official scores from each night. Pickleball leagues may use non-traditional scheduling formats and therefore may not have standings posted in that section of the Pickleball page.

Cancellation/Rainout Policy

Play may be postponed or cancelled due to dangerous weather, extremely poor court conditions, or a number of other factors. Rescheduled games are not required to be played at any specific location, but the location must be agreed upon by both teams. In general, cancelled games are added to the end of the regular season schedule. **All cancellations will be e-mailed to all registered players and posted on the MSSC website. Do not contact us via e-mail or phone to inquire about rainouts, as those messages will not receive a response.**

Good Sportsmanship

The final section will reiterate what was stated at the beginning of this document: The purpose of our leagues is first and foremost to have fun. Winning should always come second. Pickleball in particular is a sport that emphasizes a sense of community and good sportsmanship. All participants must realize that not all players will be on the same skill level, and that there may be vast differences in skill level between players in the league. Boasting, bragging, taunting, verbally abusing, or otherwise putting down other players will not be tolerated. The Site Monitor and/or a representative of MSSC reserve the right to issue warnings, penalties, and ejections if any of the above-mentioned behavior becomes too severe. Winning may be important to you, but good sportsmanship must take priority over wins and losses.