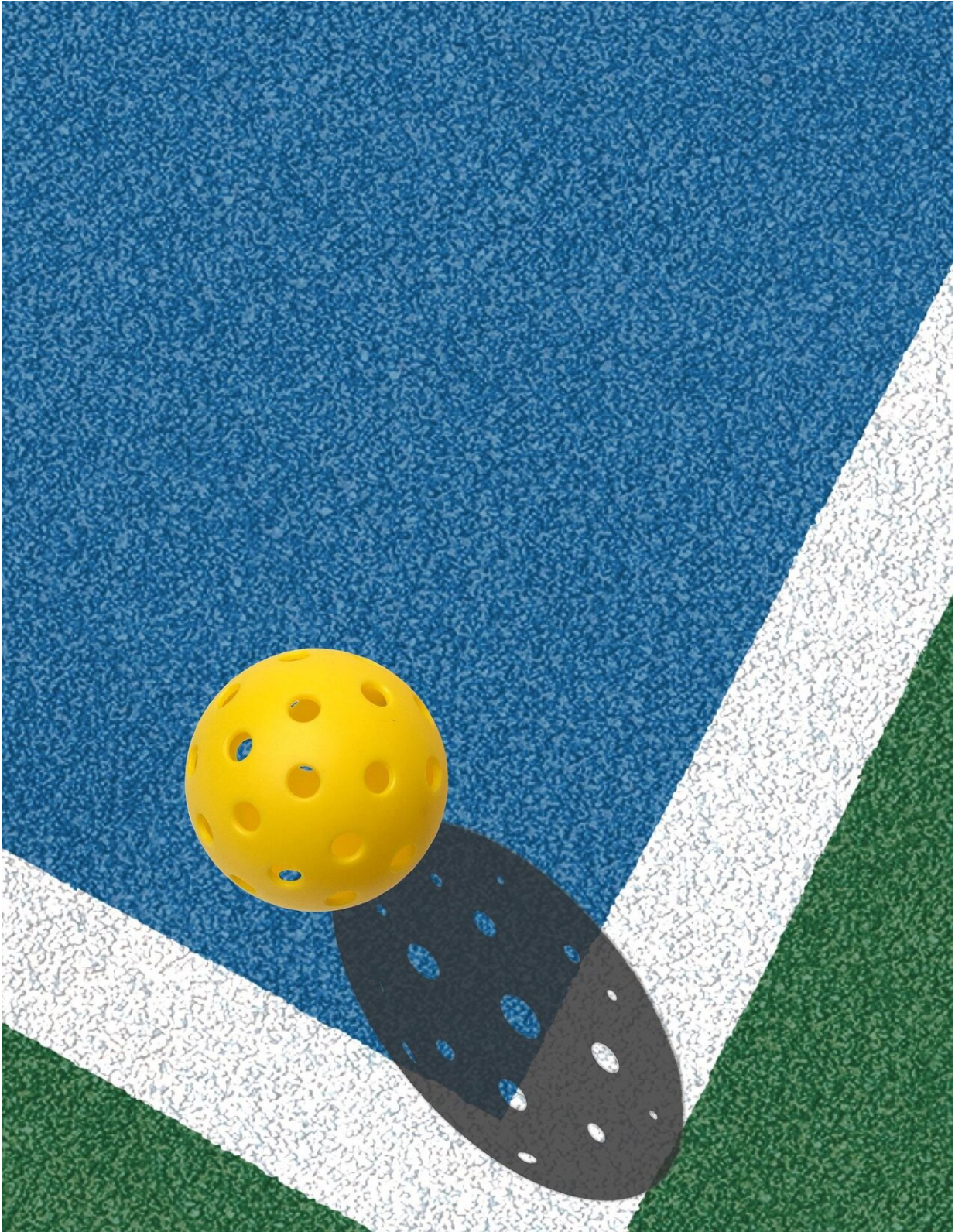


Esports, pickleball, and obstacle course racing are surging in popularity. What are their health benefits?

April 5 2024, by Ben Singh and Carol Maher



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In an era when digital domains and traditional sports fields merge, a new wave of athletic pursuits is on the rise.

[Obstacle course racing](#), [pickleball](#), and [esports](#) are gaining both participants and fans. As these sports carve out their niches, they prompt us to consider their broader societal implications.

How do they impact physical and mental health, and what strategies can we employ to maximize their benefits while mitigating potential risks?

Obstacle course racing: Conquering challenges

Obstacle course racing involves participants navigating a series of physical challenges, including climbing, crawling, and jumping over natural and man-made obstacles.

Events like [Tough Mudder](#) and [Spartan Race](#) attract a diverse demographic of participants seeking a [full-body workout](#) that also blends [physical endurance](#), mental resilience and [community spirit](#).

Some of the key benefits of obstacle course racing are the sense of accomplishment, [camaraderie and community it fosters](#).

Participants encourage and support one another, fostering a spirit of teamwork and perseverance.

However, the physical demands of these events also pose potential risks of [injuries](#), highlighting the importance of proper training, safety measures, and medical support during races.

At community level, these races can promote a culture of health and

wellness, promoting an inclusive view of physical activity that is fun and challenging, encouraging individuals to engage in regular physical activity.

But it's essential to balance the enthusiasm for these events with environmental considerations, to ensure sustainability in course construction, waste management and minimizing natural habitat disruption.

Pickleball: A game for all ages

[Pickleball](#), a hybrid of tennis, badminton, and ping pong, is billed as one of the fastest-growing sports globally.

Though it is growing in popularity across all age groups in [Australia](#) and many other world regions, the growth is particularly fast in the older adult demographic, because it offers an accessible, low-impact path for promoting physical, mental and social well-being.

It has reached another level in the United States—pickleball is now a pop culture phenomenon, with [a burgeoning professional scene](#), including sponsorships, pro leagues and tournaments offering significant prize money.

Pickleball offers substantial health benefits, including improved cardiovascular fitness, agility and coordination, with a relatively low risk of [injuries](#).

Pickleball courts take up less space than most other sports and can be accommodated by existing indoor and outdoor recreational facilities that already cater for badminton, tennis and basketball with minor adjustments, such as portable nets and temporary line markings.

The sport requires minimal equipment and is easy to learn, making it a welcoming entry point to physical activity for individuals previously disengaged from physical exercise.

Esports: a virtual phenomenon

Esports, short for electronic sports, is a form of competition using video games.

It has rapidly transformed from a casual hobby into a professional and highly organized industry, with major national and international tournaments attracting millions of viewers and offering substantial [prize pools](#).

There is growing crossover between [traditional sports](#) and esports, with professional sports teams, including [Paris Saint-Germain](#) (soccer), [Barcelona](#) (soccer) and [the Philadelphia Eagles](#) (American football), creating esports teams in recent years.

This shift has opened up professional gaming as a new career path young people may aspire to. Many universities and colleges are offering [certifications](#) and scholarships for esports, recognizing it similarly to traditional sports.

Proponents tout its benefits beyond gaming skills, such as teamwork, strategic thinking, quick decision-making and communication.

Studies indicate videogaming and esports can boost [cognitive skills](#) and offer [social benefits and social connectedness](#).

Evidence regarding their mental health impacts is more mixed, with some studies highlighting mental health benefits such as stress reduction and enhanced mood but others raising concerns about increased [anxiety](#)

and the potential for [addiction](#).

Long gaming sessions also pose [the risks of prolonged sitting time](#). As well, the time for practicing video games competes with time for other daily activities such as exercise, potentially compounding the physical health impacts.

This emphasizes the need for [education and moderation and for gamers to balance screen time with physical exercise](#).

Balancing act: leveraging benefits and addressing risks

The rise of these emerging sports marks a shift in how our society engages with physical activity and leisure, embracing diversity, inclusivity, and community engagement.

These sports illustrate the growing appetite for varied, accessible recreation that caters to different interests, ages, and abilities, moving beyond traditional sports paradigms.

They leverage technology, notably in esports, to create new platforms for competition and connection, demonstrating the significant role of innovation in shaping contemporary sports culture.

These activities offer substantial social and [mental health](#) benefits, fostering community building and enhancing well-being through communal participation and achievement.

The professionalization and commercialization of these sports open new economic and career opportunities, further legitimizing them within the broader sports landscape.

Collectively, obstacle course racing, pickleball, and esports reflect modern society's dynamic approach to physical fitness, leisure, and the value of creating inclusive, global communities united by shared interests.

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