



Platform tennis, above, originated in New York's Westchester County and was featured in Life magazine in 1940. It was modeled after paddle tennis, left, which is played on a smaller court, which might explain why John McEnroe was trying it.

**December 27, 2008**

## **Tennis Spawns Variations on a Theme**

By [CHRISTOPHER CLAREY](#)

WEST NEWBURY, Mass. — It has been a good month for someone intent on sampling the subcultures of tennis.

First, in late November, I found myself courtside in balmy Mar del Plata, Argentina, as four middle-aged men traded lobs and overheads while playing a sport called padel.

Then, in a different hemisphere and very different season, I was one of four middle-aged men exchanging strokes in the chill of a New England December while playing platform tennis.

For now and for the foreseeable future, the tennis that [Roger Federer](#) and Jelena Jankovic play as they chase summer and paydays around the planet is not in danger of losing its hold on supremacy. But established sports have a

way of morphing into something similar in spirit, yet delightfully different in practice.

Consider rugby and football. Consider windsurfing and kite surfing, and consider tennis and its much more obscure offspring.

First, there was paddle tennis, developed by Frank Peer Beal in 1898 in Albion, Mich., as a playground game for children and a gateway to the established sport that was already rapidly gaining popularity. Beal, an Episcopal minister, later took his creation to New York, where he persuaded the local authorities to lay down courts in Greenwich Village to provide recreational opportunities for youth.

The court was significantly smaller than a traditional tennis court, which made it appealing to space-constrained city dwellers, and one set of lines sufficed for both singles and doubles.

The motivations were different for the inventors of platform tennis. Fessenden Blanchard and James Cogswell Jr., both avid tennis players from the affluent New York suburb of Scarsdale, were interested in getting exercise during the winter months. So in 1928, they built a miniature wooden court on an elevated platform in Cogswell's backyard.

They were not the first to play the game on a platform. Deck tennis was a popular diversion on cruise ships; some of the era's tennis stars, including Bill Tilden and the Four Musketeers of France, would entertain passengers by playing on deck during trips across the Atlantic.

But this was winter on terra firmer, and Cogswell and Blanchard soon arrived at some new concepts. They stretched chicken wire around their court to keep the balls out of the snow, then decided that balls that bounced inside the lines and rebounded off the wire were still in play. The two men used wooden paddles instead of rackets with strings. They also used softer balls to slow down the game.

From the beginning, their game was a diversion for the elite, in part because constructing the court on a platform, a necessity with the ground frozen

below, was an expensive proposition. It remains so today, at an approximate cost of \$60,000 a court.

Padel, the newest and most international of these racket sports, is also a child of the wealthier classes. It takes its name from the Spanish word for paddle tennis.

In 1974, Alfonso de Hohenlohe, a Spanish prince, was in Acapulco, Mexico, visiting his friend Enrique Corcuera. An industrialist, Corcuera had built a different kind of undersized tennis court on his property: one that had solid, fronton-style walls at either end. The ball could be played off the walls with the same sort of perforated paddles being used in platform tennis and in paddle tennis.

Prince Hohenlohe liked what he saw so much that he built courts at his private club in Marbella, on the Costa del Sol, when he returned to Spain. That attracted interest from Manuel Santana, a former tennis great who won four Grand Slam titles, who was living in the area.

Argentine visitors to the region soon exported the nascent game to their country. There it boomed in the 1980s, attracting more than a million recreational players and becoming the second-most-played sport in the country, after soccer. Padel has rapidly lost momentum because of a resurgence of tennis and a new generation of professional stars like [David Nalbandian](#).

Mar del Plata, where Spain defeated Argentina in the Davis Cup tennis final last month, is still considered the capital of padel in Argentina, producing top players who compete on the professional circuit in Spain.

“It’s a great game, but it’s not what it used to be here,” said Marcos Peroggi, a 31-year-old padel player and instructor in Mar del Plata. “Its roots in Spain were in the upper classes. Here it was more a game of the people. But it’s in Spain now where it is strongest.”

Spain has more than a million players and 13,000 courts, according to the Spanish padel federation.

I first played padel in Seville in the 1990s and did so indoors on artificial grass, but outdoor hardcourt surfaces are more common. Padel is played with a thick, smooth paddle that looks like a table tennis paddle on growth hormone. The game also differs from tennis in that the serve must be hit underhand, with contact being made at or below waist level.

The slice — a rarity in the topspin-heavy world of modern tennis — is a staple, as are the lob and the volley. Rallies are long and guile often trumps power, although not quite as often as it does in the wintry platform version of the sport. In paddle tennis, the wire fencing absorbs more pace and fury than the solid walls of padel. With both sports played almost exclusively as doubles games, open space is hard to come by on the small courts.

“One of the great things about our sport is that because it’s so hard to put the ball away and the screens negate the power, you can get in there and play against some really top-level players without necessarily getting blown out,” said Ann Sheedy, the executive director of the American Platform Tennis Association.

Platform players routinely refer to their game as “paddle,” which could cause confusion if they ever got together with padel players. And it does cause confusion when they get together with practitioners of American paddle tennis, now played primarily in California. “We have to be very careful,” Sheedy said.

Although padel is played with modified, underinflated tennis balls, platform is played with solid rubber balls. The racket for platform tennis is thinner and has grit mixed into its painted surface to provide friction. Grit is also mixed into the court surface to help improve footing in chilly conditions.

With the emphasis on defense, platform rallies at the higher levels can and do extend into triple digits. Though players can serve overhand, they are allowed only one serve. A ball that hits the net and lands in the service box is in play, a logical idea that tennis might want to borrow.

But the biggest difference between the parent game and its esoteric child are the typical weather conditions. The surface in platform tennis is elevated to

make room for a heating apparatus, and my partner Greg Pope and I played Saturday after a light snow.

It is a setting that tends to attract the die-hard, and one of the charms of platform tennis is that no one is quite certain how many are out there lobbing in the chill.

“People bandy around the 100,000 number, but I have no way of being sure of that,” Sheedy said. “Our association has 9,700 members, but obviously not everybody who plays is a member.”