

Love at first smash How the racket sport of padel became a massive pandemic hit

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At one of Italy's darkest moments in the pandemic, the government introduced a list of draconian rules to halt the outbreak of Covid, including which sports Italians would be allowed to practise.

Among the activities the authorities considered to be safe were a few Italians barely knew about. One was padel, a fast-paced racket sport popular in Spain that is similar to tennis but with a dash of squash thrown in.

For many Italians, it was love at first smash.

According to data from the Padel National Observatory, since early 2020 the number of padel courts in Italy has increased fivefold, rising to almost 5,000. Padel schools and clubs have tripled, with the game

likely to become the most practised sport after football in Italy.

"No sport in Italy has ever had such success in such a short time," said Salvatore Palumbo, 35, a Sicilian former under-18 tennis champion and soon to become a padel instructor.

"Italians had to deal with one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. Playing sports was the only relief and a reason to leave the house," he added.

Sports such as football and basketball were in effect banned for months because they were considered contact sports and therefore risky, while gyms and swimming pools were shut down.

"At this point there were few options left, such as tennis and padel," said Palumbo. "But if the former requires lengthy technical preparation, the latter is much easier to learn and lots of fun. Success was immediate."

Padel was invented in 1969 by a Mexican businessman, Enrique

Corcuera, who had wanted to build a tennis court at his holiday home in Acapulco. Not having enough space on his property, he decided to make a smaller court and to use the walls that delimited the area as an integral part of the game.

Padel is almost always played in doubles. The courts, about 25% smaller than tennis courts, are surrounded almost entirely by



5,000

The number of padel courts now in use in Italy, which represents a fivefold increase since early 2020

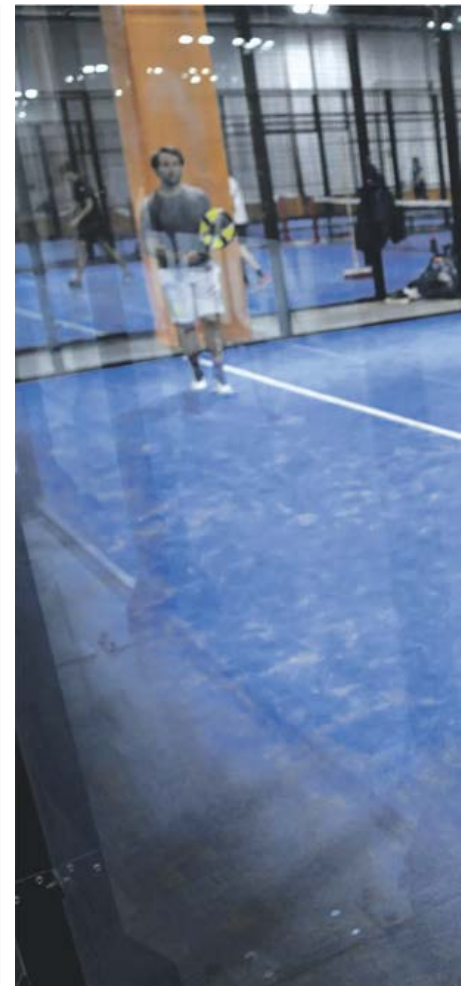
walls – part glass and part metal mesh. Unlike tennis, the ball remains playable if, after being hit on the ground, it then hits a wall.

By the time Italy began to ease Covid restrictions, padel had taken hold throughout the country. But, faced with hundreds of thousands of people eager to play, the few hundred courts scattered around Italy were overwhelmed.

"At one point demand far exceeded supply," said Edoardo Scarlata, 38, a lawyer from Palermo. "In Sicily there were already dozens of padel players, but [later in] the pandemic they became thousands."

"So last year, with a group of friends, we decided we had to seize this opportunity and invest in this sport," he added.

Scarlata is now one of the owners of Padel City, a club with seven padel courts in a residential neighbourhood near the centre of Palermo. Today Palermo has about 100 padel courts – there are only 90 in the UK – and many of these have



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