

THE PAPER

RECREATION

It's two below. Tennis, anyone?*The platform game takes the chill off**David Medaris on Thursday 02/15/2007.*

"The reaction time can be brutal," says Eileen Goode. She and her husband, Tim, are explaining the appeal of platform tennis – a wintry outdoor variation on the traditional game – as they serve and volley on the court they've built at the intersection of Mineral Point Road and County P in Pine Bluff.

Here, on the grounds of the Red Mouse Sports Bar and Grill, they've found a home for their nascent Madison Platform Tennis Club, itself a platform for introducing a game that traces its origins to the 1920s.

With an in-bounds area of 20 by 44 feet, the raised court's dimensions are only about one-third the area of a regulation grass or clay court. Thus the advantage to people with fast reflexes. The entire deck, made of aluminum beams surfaced with grit for traction, is only 60 feet by 30.

These dimensions shift the game's emphasis from chasing down serves and volleys to hitting, Tim observes. "We've figured out that in an hour, you'll hit five times as many balls" in platform tennis, he adds.

There are other distinctions between platform and standard tennis. Platform tennis is designed for doubles teams. Though about the same size as a tennis ball, a platform ball is composed of heavier materials, better suited to cold weather and the gritty surface. Instead of strung rackets, platform tennis players wield large perforated paddles with shorter handles and smaller heads than tennis rackets.

Perhaps the greatest difference between platform and standard tennis is the 12-foot fence of heavy-gauge chicken wire that surrounds the deck. The barrier is a defensive advantage. In platform tennis, players can recover the ball off the fence and keep it in play. This sometimes results in lo-o-ong volleys. "I've seen some 100-hit points," says Tim.






Tim and Eileen Goode.

Credit: David Medaris

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“This is a very complex sport,” he says. “You’re putting topspin on the ball, cutting it, changing your grip.” Service wins are uncommon, he adds, because “all you really do with the serve is introduce the ball” into play.

Platform tennis is scored like traditional tennis, but players only get one attempt to serve. There’s no such thing as a double fault, and aces are rare. “It’s not a power game,” says Eileen. “It’s a game decided by unforced errors. It’s a game of restraint and strategy, not power.” As such, platform tennis accommodates beginners as they hone their skills.

Eileen acknowledges that the differences have made some tennis devotees wary of the platform game, out of concern that it would affect their play on regulation courts.

Tim scoffs at the notion. Any effects platform tennis has on his technique vanish soon after he returns to a standard tennis court in the spring. “It takes me about three hours to adjust,” he says.

Eileen, 46, and Tim, 55, came to the sport from tennis backgrounds. Eileen played Division III collegiate tennis at California’s Chico State. Tim played for the University of Wisconsin during his freshman year. Both maintain rankings with the National Tennis Ratings Program, both have taught tennis professionally, and both compete in platform tennis tournaments at the national level.

The Goodes were introduced to platform tennis in the 1990s, while living in Colorado. “The public recreation center in Boulder had two courts,” Tim recalls. Relocating to Madison several years ago, they learned that the nearest platform tennis courts were in Milwaukee.

Determined to import the sport to Madison, the Goodes searched more than three years for a site. They approached several municipalities, including McFarland and Middleton, only to be rebuffed by neighbors’ objections.

But the Goodes’ frustrations melted when they reached an agreement with proprietors of the Red Mouse Sports Bar and Grill, which already had softball and volleyball facilities on its property.

The Goodes invested \$50,000 in the Madison Platform Tennis Club’s first court, including lights and a pair of 400,000-BTU propane heaters to help keep the deck clear of snow and ice.

Opened last December, the club has already attracted 12 dues-paying members on the strength of low-key open houses and word of mouth. The Goodes are now offering pro-rated mid-winter membership rates of \$150 per person. Dues purchase unlimited play and “a lot of instruction from us,” says Eileen, to help new members scale the learning curve. The couple plan to start league play once they’ve recruited another 10 members.

Eileen figures the club’s capacity at between 35 and 40 members for one court. “Our plan is to put a second court in here,” she notes. The Goodes also hope to establish a warming facility nearby.

But as Tim notes, the nuance, finesse and long points make platform tennis “a good game for staying warm.”

Point, set, match

The Madison Platform Tennis Club’s next open house is scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 18. For hours and to RSVP, phone 438-8906 or e-mail info@madpaddle.com. For more on the club, visit its Web site at www.madpaddle.com. For a thorough overview of the game, visit the American Platform Tennis Association’s Web site at platformtennis.org.