

Match, Set, Burn: This Is No Genteel Afternoon Game

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AFTER decades of teaching aerobics and training individual clients, Debbie Bowyer is sick of going to the gym. And she suspects she is not alone. "People are getting tired of the club atmosphere," said Ms. Bowyer, 51, who exercises nearly every day and teaches at a Y.M.C.A. near her home in Williamston, S.C. "I'm bored with machines. I'm bored with classes."



So two months ago, when a friend invited her to a nearby court to try a new fitness class called cardio tennis, she decided to give it a try. In the past she had steered clear of tennis because as a novice she didn't think it would be a good enough workout.

But cardio tennis didn't have the leisurely pace of a friendly match. For an hour Ms. Bowyer was in constant motion as a boom box piped Queen's greatest hits onto the court. She chased balls the instructor fed her, hit shot after shot, and between turns at the net, zigzagged around cones and did lateral shuffles and other drills.

After one class she was hooked. "You don't really need to know anything about tennis to do cardio tennis," said Ms. Bowyer, who has since roped her daughter, a marathoner, into coming to her weekly class at Brookstone Meadows, a Alpharetta, Ga. tennis club in Anderson, S.C. "We laugh at each other because we are all so bad at hitting the ball."

Cardio tennis is the latest effort in a decade-long campaign by the Tennis Industry Association, a trade group, and the United States Tennis Association to expand the game. The organizations have been giving free lessons, helping newcomers find courts and instructors, and using Cartoon Network characters in a promotional campaign to lure new junior players.

Yet in recent years tennis's popularity has remained flat. Five million to six million novices try the game each year, but the same number quit, so the number of Americans playing hovers around 24 million. That player base includes people who pick up a racket as little as once a year; frequent participants who get on a court more than 20 times a year

number only 4.6 million.

This new approach is an attempt to redefine tennis as a grueling workout. Its promoters hope it will appeal to time-crunched former players, current players who want to spend more time on the court, beginners who want to learn the basics and fitness enthusiasts like Ms. Bowyer.

Michele Krause leading a demonstration
of cardio tennis at the United States Open.



Introduced nine months ago, cardio tennis classes are already offered at more than 650 places nationwide, and about 15,000 people have taken them, according to Jim Baugh, president of the Tennis Industry Association, who came up with the cardio tennis concept. (Locations can be found at www.cardiotennis.com.)

It is too early to tell whether many novices who participate in cardio tennis will graduate to playing matches. Some in the industry question whether a class focused on rapid-fire drills can teach people to play the game, let alone get them to take it up for life.

Still, a convenient workout in an hour or less seems to be what many Americans want. Witness the rise of 30-minute express gyms like Curves in recent years. Or that 56.7 million Americans participate in fitness activities 100 days or more a year, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association. Only 22 million play team sports that often.

Recreational tennis matches often do not keep a player's heart rate elevated as consistently as exercise classes do.

"With singles, if I play someone who is better than I am, who can run me all over the court, I get a good workout," said Kevin Quarantello, 47, from Ridgefield, Conn., who recently took up cardio tennis after three decades playing the sport. "If I play someone I'm better than, at the end I'm wondering, what else can I do for a workout?"

Bill Mountford, the director of tennis at the USTA National Tennis Center, in Queens, where the United States Open is being played through Sunday, said: "A lot of people don't associate sweating with playing tennis. In certain circles it still has the reputation of being an afternoon pastime."

But with cardio tennis, which Mr. Mountford has been teaching since November, he said, "before you know it, your shirt is wet, and you've had fun and burned as many calories as a five-mile jog." In most cardio tennis classes, students use heart rate monitors (usually

provided by the instructor) to gauge if they are working hard enough, or too hard. And at the end of the hour the gadgets also calculate how many calories exercisers have burned and how long they have stayed in their optimal heart rate zone, roughly between 65 percent and 85 percent of the recommended maximum.

As an avid exerciser I took a cardio tennis class recently and was surprised to find that my heart rate sometimes exceeded 85 percent of the recommended maximum for my age and height. I had to slow down to recover. And although I had rarely even held a tennis racket before the class, after some quick pointers on forehands and backhands, I was able to hit half the balls the instructor sent my way over the net. But would a few months of cardio tennis classes enable a novice to pick up tennis?

"If you want to learn to play tennis, it's better to join a group class" and do cardio tennis only for exercise, said Jorge Andrew, the director of operations at the Lexington County Tennis Complex in Lexington, S.C., who teaches both cardio tennis and lessons.

Other tennis pros argue that it is easy to inject constructive criticism into cardio tennis without disrupting drills. "I can run a class of 14 and have them never stop moving, and still give them pointers," said Heather Silvia, the president of Silvia Tennis Academy in Alpharetta, Ga.

Mr. Mountford, who used to run a tennis academy for junior players, noted that people don't take lessons before taking a spinning class, so why should they need to before tennis? "People can learn to play by doing," he insisted.

Cardio tennis participants so far are a mixed bag of veterans and first-timers, and that can make two-on-two volleys tricky. "If everyone on the other side of the court is of a much lower level," Mr. Quarantello said, "I don't think you get the same enjoyment."

But Greg Moran, his instructor at the Four Seasons Racquet Club in Wilton, Conn., keeps players of all skill levels on the move. His class is at least in part about camaraderie and motivating one another. "There are four or five guys; you have to make sure you're not the one passing out," Mr. Quarantello said with a laugh. "Greg loves it when he sees us there with our hands on our knees."

Finding a nearby class may be an obstacle for many people. But the Tennis Industry Association is making an effort to persuade more clubs to offer cardio tennis, and to get certified tennis professionals excited about teaching it. The group offers package deals on Polar heart rate monitors, a reduced price for a Sony portable stereo to use on court and even a modest discount on amped-up Madonna remixes from the leading source for group fitness music. By year's end, Mr. Baugh said, there should be about 1,000 locations

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Even then, the number of classes may be limited by the need to keep from annoying other players with the music. Vincent Granito, a co-director of the East Brunswick Racquet Club in New Jersey, said members "absolutely love" the three classes he teaches during off hours in the mornings and late evenings. But he explained: "I just don't know if it's going to be booming here at this club. It's just not as easy to get the court time, so that other people aren't distracted. If people are playing doubles next to you, they don't want to hear Michael Jackson."