

New Tournament Series Focuses on **NEXT GENERATION** of Pickleball Players

Buoyed by a new tournament series that is focused on a younger age bracket, the next generation of pickleball players is shattering the myth that pickleball is a seniors-only sport.

By **Jennifer Brozak**
Photos by Steve Taylor

The tournament series, which the Association of Pickleball Professionals (APP) launched in 2021, is the first of its kind. It is primarily focused on developing champion pickleball players in the 16-23 age range. Aply named the APP Next Gen Series, the tournament's mission is to create a platform for America's top young pickleball players to compete and receive coaching from senior professionals.

"The mission for APP Next Gen is to develop America's next champions," said Ken Herrmann, CEO and creative founder of the series. "This is done not only through match play, but by educating both the player and parents about the road their child is taking if considering a career in professional pickleball."

The APP Tour is the Official Pro Partner Tour of USA Pickleball and has been endorsed by both the Senior Pro and Super Senior Pro councils. Herrmann said he launched the APP Tour in June of 2019 after he spent time developing a vision for all players, ranging from amateur to professional.

Part of that vision was focusing on young players.

"This current generation of players is the future of the sport," Herrmann explained. "If we are able to get this sport into the Olympics, then it is this group of players who will be



wearing those Olympic jackets walking into the stadium. Next Gen is not only an inspiration for those players currently here in America, but also for the thousands of international prodigies who have grown to love the game.”

Next Gen has partnered with Chicken N Pickle restaurant/entertainment centers for the entire series. Each stop on the tour is a three-day tournament held at Chicken N Pickle locations in Oklahoma, Kansas, or Texas.

A tournament held Nov. 19-21, 2021, in San Antonio welcomed 48 players competing for \$15,000 in total prize money, with equal prize money for the men’s and women’s divisions. The series also pays out the top five players for each division, based on the cumulative standings for singles, doubles, and mixed doubles events.

As part of the Next Gen Series, players receive mentoring from senior players, which continues after the tournament. This

mentoring program prepares young adults to represent the United States in future international and APP Tour professional competitions.

John Sperling and Julie Johnson, two of the highest-ranked seniors in the sport, were the first two senior pro mentors, said Herrmann.

Mentors provide seminars on topics like training, media interviews, creating schedules that balance family and tournament time, the mental aspects of the game, off-court

training, nutrition, and fitness programs to improve quickness and skill sets.

Following the tournament, the senior pro mentors also make themselves available for players

who might need extra help planning

Yana Grechkina (Missouri) played flawlessly all weekend, taking the Women’s Singles gold medal.



Silver Medalist Mary Brascia (California)

tournament schedules, discussing sponsorships, or “just being a sounding board for the player and family,” Herrmann added.

“From tournament play, to on-court drilling and then seminars with the senior pro mentoring program, each player left with guidance and direction to improve their games,” he continued. “The senior pros provide an educational element that is not being done anywhere in the sport and is unique to the Next Gen Series.”

Players must have a USA Pickleball Tournament Player Rating (UTPR) of 4.0 to compete in the Next Gen Series. A select number of wildcards are available for those under the age of 16 who meet the UTPR criteria. A committee formed by the senior mentoring program determines the wildcards, and potential wildcard players are asked to submit an essay explaining why they should be considered for one of the open spots.

Currently, eligible players are placed in a single open division with all ages combined. The tournament is held Friday-Sunday and consists of singles, doubles, and mixed doubles matches. Players are encouraged to play all three days of the tournament, as total cumulative points determine the top two finishers—and who wins

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the prize money—at the end of Sunday’s play. The top two finishers also receive paid wildcard entries into a Tier I APP Pro Tournament that is assigned to each Next Gen Series event.

“There were three different types of players who attended Next Gen San Antonio, each with different objectives, but the same goal,” said Herrmann. “That goal was to leave the event a better player, and I think everyone achieved that. The players who attended had aspirations of either performing well and winning the \$15,000 prize purse, having the opportunity to train alongside some of the most talented younger players on the APP tour, or developing friendships that could last a lifetime through pickleball.”

In November’s San Antonio event, former Division I tennis player Yana Grechkina, 23, took home gold in the women’s division. Breakout teen JW Johnson, 19, took the gold in the men’s division.

“Winning Next Gen was pretty special to me,” said Johnson. “It’s one thing to win when you’re the underdog and a young kid, but it’s completely different to win when you’re with a group of your peers. The thing I loved most about it was the whole atmosphere at Chicken N Pickle. It is like a giant party all the time with everything going on, and I thought it was one of the best atmospheres for pickleball.”

Herrmann agrees, stating that he was impressed with the crowd size at the tournament, both in person and via the livestream.

“We’re pleased with how engrossed the public was with these young players, by making comments during the livestreamed matches,” he added. “The crowd was filled



JW Johnson (Florida) wins the gold medal with a strong singles performance.

with excitement and supported the three-day event generously.”

In 2022, the Next Gen Series has tournaments scheduled in Oklahoma City (Feb. 4-6); Wichita, Kansas (March 18-20); and San Antonio (July 8-10). Although the general format will stay the same, with singles, doubles and mixed doubles tournaments, some tweaks may be made for the upcoming tournament in Oklahoma City. For the latest news or to register for the APP Next Gen Series, visit apptour.org. •



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