

Courting new friendships Sports network helps players find competition

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Neighbours

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Anyone for tennis? How about squash?
Badminton? Racquetball?

If you're into racquet sports, or even sports like table tennis, paddle tennis, volleyball, wallyball or golf, the Challenge Network Calgary is for you.

It is a free, online athletic social network that boasts more than 150 members who have played more than 9,500 games since it began in January, 2004.

Back then it was network founder and prime mover Brent Johner and his friend Ian Bruseker who got things started.

"It started because I was tired of not being able to find people to play squash with," says Johner. "I was in the typical routine of a guy whose life is changing, getting married and having kids and moving to a different part of the city. I was losing my personal network of squash players."

By the spring, there were six members. Now, while Bruseker is no longer active, with a growing family to attend to, Johner has more playing partners than he knows what to do with.

"This has changed my life," says Johner, who runs the network from his home office. "I have lost 30 pounds and gained 150 new friends."

Johner says the routine most squash players fall into is they find a friend they can have a good game with and then they only play that person.

"It's kind of like a serial squash partner," he says with a chuckle.

"But if one of you gets injured, then the other one doesn't play."

Challenge Network Calgary's biggest membership base is in tennis.

"It's great," says member Brad Dragland. "You can meet other players, that's the big thing."



CREDIT: Jenelle Schneider, Calgary Herald
Brent Johner, owner of Challenge Network Calgary, has set up an internet service to help tennis players find other people to play against in the city.

Johner got into tennis because he wanted a way to meet other squash players.

What ended up happening is tennis, a more social game than squash, took off and pulled the squash group along with it.

"Tennis is our most active group, it's the most social group," he says. "In squash, you're playing in a 21-by-32-foot box and there's just two of you. It's not a social thing. Most people who play tennis play doubles and if you have four courts of doubles, that's 32 people and they're all talking to each other and interacting."

With more than 150 public tennis courts in Calgary alone, Johner is not surprised to see the tennis part of the network take off.

"As soon as you get a network of people on a website, it starts to respond to the needs of the network," he says.

For Dyron Daughrity, an advanced player who played college tennis in Texas and New Mexico, the challenge network has gotten him back on the court.

He didn't play from 1992 to last year, mostly because he couldn't find anyone to play against.

"It's been excellent," he says. "I've been exposed to some guys who are pretty good players that I wouldn't have known at all.

"The fellowship is great. The challenge network got me back into tennis."

Aside from just a player introduction service, the challenge network is a series of ladders and box leagues in the various sports that gets people out and playing, most importantly against different opponents.

The challenge network ladder doesn't work in the traditional way.

Instead of rewarding those who win, this ladder puts a premium on playing and competing against a variety of people.

"People want to join a ladder and they want to be No. 1," says Johner. This gives people of all abilities the chance to cycle into the top 10. People who are inactive or exclusive -- who only like to play one buddy all the time -- are going to be low on the ladder."

The challenge network is run by members for the members.

"There are no boards to deal with," says Johner.

"We keep things really simple. We run it like a business in that we respond to what the customers want. We make decisions in days, not weeks."

The network is simple to use. Players can sign up at www.challengenetwork.com and their name, ability and contact information goes into a database. They are then able to access the database and connect with players of similar ability to arrange games.

All scores are posted on the site and there are tournaments and other activities throughout the various seasons.

"It's up to people to be involved at whatever level they want to be involved in," says Johner.

While the network service is free, there are entry fees for tournaments and to participate in the various box leagues.

All ages and abilities are welcome. Johner says there is a particular need for senior tennis players.

"We have some seniors who joined last year who want some more seniors to play," he says.

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