

# Badminton a smash hit

Badminton nets new popularity as Asian arrivals reinvigorate game

By Colleen O'Connor  
Denver Post Staff Writer

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Kathy Zimmerman misses the return as partner Antonius De Leon, 41, of Denver, watches during the A men's doubles semifinals at the State Games of America in The Denver Athletic Club. Kathy is the only woman to compete in men's doubles. (Omar Vega | The Denver Post)

Steven Giang, a native of China, is a badminton fanatic who happily shells out \$500 for a stash of shuttlecocks and polishes his strategy by staying up until 3 a.m. to watch live video of Asian tournaments. When his wife announced she wanted to relocate to Colorado from California - the American mecca of badminton - he refused to go unless she first found a place to play.

They moved to Castle Rock in April, and faithfully commute more than 40 miles every Thursday night to a badminton club at the Westminster Recreation Center, where play has become so popular that a crowd of 50, and growing, sometimes waits an hour for a court.

They smash birdies with guys like Paul Sasseville, 31, a former junior national champion from Canada who totes around a BlueKnight badminton bag stuffed with seven rackets, worth about \$1,400. And with women like Sabine Diehl of Highlands Ranch, the first Romanian to win a gold medal in the Balkan badminton championships.

"It's crazy," she says. "Badminton has become really popular."

New immigrants to Colorado are reinvigorating the venerable sport of badminton, which had its heyday in the 1950s when it rode the postwar wave of suburban backyard cool.

More than 2 million people play regularly in the United States, according to a 2007 study by the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association. That means more Americans engage in badminton than archery, ice skating, racquetball, gymnastics, ice hockey and lacrosse. The numbers are rising as much as 8 percent a year, according to some surveys.

The surge is fueled by a multicultural mix, led mostly by recent arrivals from Asia, where badminton is a way of life. That makes its growth in Colorado a natural. The state's Asian population is the fastest-growing minority here, increasing 27.3 percent since 2000.

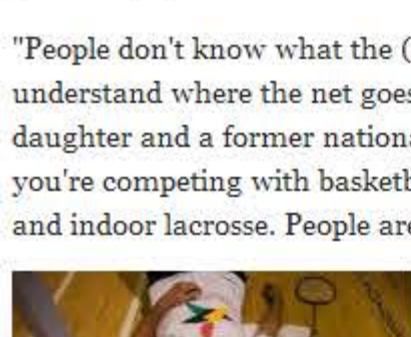
"You can go to four different badminton clubs and see a very crowded situation," says Ed Zimmerman, a medal

winner at the Senior Olympics who plays badminton three times a week at the Denver Athletic Club.

By his own informal estimate, "about 90 percent of the people are Asian, 8 percent Europeans and 2 percent Americans."

They maintain a zeal for the game - despite the formidable inconveniences. A dearth of facilities, classes and coaches is complicated by a lack of understanding of how, exactly, the game is played.

"People don't know what the (court) lines are, and they don't understand where the net goes," says Kathy Zimmerman, Ed's daughter and a former national women's champion. "Then you're competing with basketball and volleyball, floor hockey and indoor lacrosse. People are fighting for gym time left and



Herman Batelaan, 42, of Lincoln, NE, lays on the court in exhaustion after defeating Antonius De Leon, 41, of Denver, in the A men's singles finals during the State Games of America at The Denver Athletic Club. Herman is originally from Holland and has been playing for 25-years. (Post / Omar Vega)

right."

Worse, badminton has something of an image problem.

"Americans don't really see it as a serious sport," says Pavel Zelinsky, 17, who emigrated from Moscow and now runs the badminton club at Fairview High School in Boulder.

Some say it's not even a sport, just a game.

"The image of badminton is something you play on July 4 at a picnic," says Kevin Han of Colorado Springs, a native of China who has competed on the U.S. Olympic badminton team. "You have a hot dog in one hand, a beer in another, and you play some badminton."

In reality, badminton is an aerobic challenge that demands more snap and stamina than the other racket sports.

"You need the whole athletic

package to play," says Han. "Endurance, speed, agility and the power of using your body to jump up and smash the shuttlecock at speeds of more than 200 miles per hour."

One study that compared tennis with badminton showed badminton players competed in matches for half the time but ran twice as far and hit twice as many shots. An average two-game match is the equivalent of running a mile.

And it can be more exciting to watch than a Wimbledon final.

The buzz in the local badminton community after the recent State Games of America, the national multisport event held every two years, centered on the blistering men's singles competition between Indonesian-born Antonius De Leon of Denver and Herman Batelaan of Lincoln, Neb., a native of the Netherlands.

Picture it: De Leon leaping 4 feet into the air to smash the shuttlecock with cracks that echoed like gunshots. His opponent firing back with drives, net dribbles and sneaky trick shots.

Toward the end, Batelaan - suffering from a torn knee ligament - raced backward, racket extended, and slipped in a puddle of his own sweat. He fell hard, grunting with surprise, but bounced back to win the match, despite being pelted by a relentless flurry of kill shots.

"They were like the walking wounded," says player Damith Chandrasekara, "but they kept at it no matter how tired they were."

It is that kind of action that draws in new players at places like the Boulder Badminton Club, where membership has quadrupled since its inception in 2002, thanks to an international crew from four continents: countries like Sri Lanka, China, Malaysia, India, Germany, Russia, Peru, Canada and Scotland.

"The numbers last month were crazy," says Alan Mills, a British-born player who co-founded the club in 2002 with his Malaysian wife, Siew Gin Mills.

And now the sport may be on the verge of a major leap: professional status.

Kathy Zimmerman is at the forefront of the effort. This year, she co-founded the Intercollegiate Badminton Association. She's also helping launch the American Badminton Professional League, expected to debut in 2008.

"It's like the NFL of badminton," she says, a league of teams spread across the country, battling it out before paid audiences.

The movement will likely be energized during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, where the sport reigns. Badminton is set to receive expanded television coverage, piggybacking on the success of the International Badminton Federation World Championship in 2005, when Americans Howard Bach, born in Vietnam, and Tony Gunawan, born in Indonesia, won the doubles title - the first time any Americans made it past round 16 in either the world championships or the Olympics.

"There really is a badminton resurgence," says Brent Cutcliffe of Lakewood, who during the mid-1990s coached Colorado kids into a badminton powerhouse, snapping up medals like candy during the U.S. Junior National Championships.

"You see private clubs being built around the country," Cutcliffe says. "On the East Coast, badminton clubs had died out, but they're now starting up again. Los Angeles and San Francisco have two or three clubs each, and I just heard Seattle started one a year ago."

It's a cherished dream for local players: a warehouse converted into a private club, open at all hours.

"I truly believe I could find a facility and make money running badminton here," says Mills. "That model worked in California, and I think it will work in Colorado."

Staff writer Colleen O'Connor can be reached at 303-954-1083 or [cconnor@denverpost.com](mailto:cconnor@denverpost.com).



Kathy Zimmerman shakes hands with Herman Batelaan, 42, of Lincoln, NE, at the net after defeating them in the A men's doubles semifinals during the State Games of America at The Denver Athletic Club. Kathy is the only woman to compete in men's doubles. Her partner was Antonius De Leon, 41, of Denver, not pictured... (Post / Omar Vega)

