

York Region 'pioneer' for rollout of new accessible sport in Ontario



[Rob Paul](#)

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1 / 3 Former professional tennis player Lionel Eli and Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas get ready to have some fun on the road tennis court at Wednesday's launch event. | Rob Paul/NewmarketToday

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Integrating a new sport into the community can be a tough task — usually it takes years, and sometimes even decades.

According to Mark Gravett, Ontario Sports Hall of Fame president, pickleball, a sport taking North America by storm, took 12 years to get off the ground in Ontario.

That's why Gravett is elated about the quick success of road tennis, a sport that originated in Barbados.

"This sport was introduced to our guests at the 2022 (Ontario Sports Hall of Fame) induction gala and was an immediate success," he said. "It was natural for us to continue to work with local representatives and the government of Barbados to extend this experience."

In the gymnasium of Aurora Heights Public School on Wednesday, road tennis officially launched as a sport within York Region public schools with dignitaries, including Aurora Mayor Tom Mrakas, Newmarket-Aurora MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, Newmarket-Aurora MP Tony Van Bynen, and Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy, in attendance.

But how did a sport that was invented in Barbados in the 1930s become the new sport of York Region? Well, it all began when Ron Kellman, a Barbados ex-patriot living in York Region, and Ron Weese, president of Sport Aurora and a councillor in Aurora, came to Gravett and Dan Giantsopoulos, Ontario Sports Hall of Fame vice-president, last year.

"I stuck my neck out and told them to bring the road tennis to us (at the induction gala last year)," said Gravett. "Here you have 500 people all nicely dressed and we set up a court... it was perfect. Ironically, one of our inductees was Daniel Nestor, one of (Canada's) best tennis players, and we got him to start playing road tennis and Barbados flew up professionals."

From there, Gravett said it snowballed because in that setting it allowed them to show just how accessible the sport can be to people of varying ages and abilities.

"We had young people, old people, everyone was playing, and that's what kicked off the conversation and led us into York Region," he said. "We're ecstatic that York is the pioneer for rolling this out across Ontario."

The sport is a variation of tennis that started when the working class in Barbados couldn't afford to play lawn tennis. It uses wooden rackets, a tennis ball without the fur, and an eight-inch-high plank wood net and is played on a 21x10-foot court that can be marked with tape.

"We felt that the sport was an excellent game for youth and it had high potential for adoption in York Region through the school system" said Weese. "It is inexpensive to play, is fun and develops all the qualities of physical literacy needed in a curricular activity."

The big draw of it for the school board was not only the affordability, but the accessibility of the sport.

“This allows a lot of our students to have a taste of this very accessible and inclusive sport,” said Ron Lynn, York Region District School Board chair. “We’re starting with the Town of Aurora and expanding to the whole of York Region to have more of this amazing sport.”

As both the school board, and the government, look for more ways to ensure inclusivity while promoting physical activity, road tennis appears to be a sport everyone is in agreement on.

“It’s got a lot of potential with the capital needed, the way it’s accessible, and it’s a way of getting people engaged,” said Van Bynen. “It creates social engagement and makes sure people will be more active.”

“There’s so many things we’re working toward as communities and we talk a lot about diversity and inclusivity,” added Roy. “What a great fun way to promote that, this is a sport that’s inclusive of all people of all abilities.”

Physical education specialists with the York public board supported the sport and it will now be added by YRDSB for the 2023-24 school year.

“The sport has significant cultural value, being an indigenous sport in Barbados and this cultural connection was immediately considered through the Identity-Affirming Health and Physical Education Program in elementary schools,” said Kellman.

The Ontario Sports Hall of Fame is already having conversations with other provinces and Gravett said the hope is that it will begin in York Region before being integrated across the province and eventually the country. It’s currently being considered by the Olympic Committee as a future sport.

“I transitioned from road tennis and became a professional tennis player,” said Lionel Eli, who will be leading the technical development of the sport for the schools. “This sport is a sport that can take you to any level. We have big plans.”

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