

Fomo is fuelling pickleball's rise

KUALA LUMPUR: If you're an avid social media user, chances are you've come across videos of friends or celebrities playing a unique sport that combines elements of ping pong, badminton, and tennis — known as pickleball.

This activity has been gaining popularity, even among those who initially had little interest in sports but eventually got hooked due to the psychological phenomenon known as the Fear of Missing Out (Fomo).

According to Norezzati Md Hanafiah, a psychologist at Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah Hospital, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Fomo — often linked to social pressure or unhealthy lifestyle habits — can actually be used positively, including to encourage a more active lifestyle.

She explained that from a psychological perspective, this drive is closely tied to the human instinct to be accepted within a social group, which is essential for emotional well-being. In the context of pickleball or other light sports, Fomo can turn into a positive motivator.

"One might start as a spectator, then develop an interest in trying it out, which can become a turning point toward adopting a healthier lifestyle. If handled properly, Fomo can spark healthy habits that spread widely within a community," she said.

Beyond physical benefits, pickleball also contributes to mental health through its relaxed and fun social aspects — enhancing mood, providing ongoing motivation, and offering social therapy for those dealing with work stress or burnout.

According to Norezzati, the approach to health promotion is evolving, with a greater focus on the fun-first concept, as seen in pickleball. This makes physical

activity enjoyable and more effective than approaches that emphasise beauty or weight loss.

"When an activity is seen as fun rather than a burden, people are more likely to stick with it. This makes a healthy lifestyle something to enjoy rather than something to be forced into," she said, adding that social media plays a major role in spreading the trend and creating a wave of normalisation that encourages more people to try it without feeling embarrassed or self-conscious.

Pickleball is also the sport of choice for national hockey legend Datuk Mirnawan Nawawi, 53, who was drawn to the game's unique, low-impact nature, making it suitable for all age groups.

"I find pickleball to be perfect for maintaining an active and healthy lifestyle. Previously, I only did brisk walking and went to the gym for workouts," said Mirnawan, who has been actively playing since mid-last year.

As the owner of Pickleball Playground in Shah Alam, he also encourages participation among youth under the age of 18, seeing their potential as future athletes who could elevate the sport to greater heights.

Mirnawan also described pickleball as a wallet-friendly and accessible sport, noting that with court rental fees ranging from RM50 to RM70 per hour — usually split among several players — and minimal equipment requirements, the sport is suitable for people from all walks of life.

"In residential areas, for instance, the community or management could make use of and modify existing badminton or basketball courts slightly, so residents can play for free and enjoy a variety of recreational sports," he said. — Bernama