

There's great news for pickleball enthusiasts: the Commonwealth Games of Virginia wants you. There are slots available in the pickleball portion of the Games, so it's not too late to register. One \$49 entry fee is good for entering all three categories available to each player – singles, doubles and mixed doubles.

The pickleball tournament will be held on indoor courts at Liberty University July 14-16, a week before the main Games. It's open to everyone and participants will be categorized by both age and skill level, from beginner to advanced.

Tournament co-director Jack Singer wants to see hundreds of pickleball enthusiasts packing the courts.

Singer and partner Jim Aldrich are in their second year running pickleball for Virginia Amateur Sports, but they have been hosting and running pickleball tournaments for six years, some with upward of 700 participants.

Since the Games are in a central location in the state but near pickleball hotbeds like Roanoke and Danville, Singer said there's a great chance to make this a premier pickleball event. Coupled with the fact that it's indoors – out of the July heat and not subject to summer weather – the stage is ready for a great tournament.

"We're advertising as best we can," Singer said. "We want people to know it's going to be a well-run tournament."

He knows Virginia is rife with pickleball players. At a tournament in Short Pump, he had to turn away 130 would-be players after 750 filled the available slots.

Prior to taking over as co-director, Singer said he was unaware of the Commonwealth Games' addition of pickleball in 2014.

No one can doubt Singer's love of pickleball. The sport saved his life, put him in a wheelchair, and takes up major chunk of his time of his time. Singer and Aldrich even bought a facility in Virginia Beach and made it into an all-things-pickleball club. Called Pickleball Virginia Beach, the facility offers 25 courts on multiple playing areas, memberships, lessons, a pro shop, locker rooms and opportunities to play recreationally or in tournaments.

Singer came to pickleball via the same route as others: seeing it and laughing.

"I was going to the gym doing the elliptical, the treadmill, and hating every minute of it. I was watching little old ladies play and laughed," he says. "Jim started first and about three weeks later I tried. I got beat by a little old lady, but after that I haven't been back to the gym. I tell people it's the best exercise you won't know you're getting."

While at a tournament on New Year's Eve 2021, Singer started feeling ill. He won a match but gave away his spot in the next round to his competitor so he could feel better.

"A doctor was there and he took one look at me and said 'You're having a heart attack,'" Singer says. "If I hadn't been there... if I had been driving or someplace else, I probably wouldn't be here, so I say pickleball saved my life."

After recovering from surgery to implant a stent, Singer went back to pickleball last July on a neighbor's make-shift court in his driveway. One wrong step led to a gruesome compound ankle fracture that meant months in a cast and a wheelchair. Healing takes time, but pickleball beckons.

In the meantime, Singer is happy to spread the gospel of pickleball by being the director of tournaments and facilitating participation in the sport to everyone who wants to play. For anyone who wants to be part of it, the Commonwealth Games would be a perfect place to start.