

Pickleball, the racket sport once loved mostly by retirees, is enjoying a sharp rise in popularity among much younger people. It's played by more than 36 million people and now has a recently launched professional league, while brands like Recess have been referencing the sport's niche appeal. While it's probably too late to get in early on pickleball, the surprising success of a sport named after a briney cucumber and signaled by a divisive hollow thwacking sound shows that there's big opportunity in offbeat sports. We have our eyes on a few others that might pop off next.



FIGHTING

Boxing is the fourth-most-popular sport in the US, while mixed martial arts is close behind at fifth, despite not even making the list, compiled by research firm The Harris Poll, a decade earlier. Some surveys indicate it's the fastest growing sport of the past decade. Brands like Uniq and Modern Vintage Player are giving the sport a makeover with performance-quality equipment.

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ROLLER SPORTS

After cooling sales in the mid-2010s, the pandemic pushed a spike in rollerblading and rollerskating popularity when some longtime brands saw sales boosts of 1,000%. While sales have leveled off, the community has continued to grow as people connect with the joy of the sport. Brands like THEM SKATES and Chuffed Skates launched to improve traditional offerings on wheels – but keep an eye on the next wave, like AtmosGear's recently released electric rollerblades aimed at commuters.



KAYAKING

Kayaking is riding the outdoor-sport popularity wave – the market is expected to grow by around 5.4% a year until 2028, according to a report by Analytics Market Research. Brands are responding to the demand by making products that go from land to water as quickly and easily as possible: Oru Kayak's foldable boats take less than two minutes to set up, while Alluvia Packraft's kayaks reduce to the size of a roll of paper towels.

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IMAGE: Georgia Blackie



FLY FISHING

As outdoor activities have boomed, fly fishing – an angling method using a weighted line – has benefited: the sport saw a 50% increase in participants throughout the 2010s. Gorpcore brands have stepped up to provide river-ready 'fits for those venturing beyond the street, from Toned Trout's vests to BAIT's pink bucket caps. Handmade equipment brands, like Oyster Bamboo Fly Rods, are also seeing a boost.

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PADEL

Padel is similar to pickleball but with a perforated racket and a larger court, and players can also bounce the ball off the walls. However, it's far more popular outside of the US, with 25 million players worldwide – a number that's also recently seen a spike. Padel clubs like Padel Haus and 14/Love Padel cater to this sport alone, while lifestyle brands like TWOTWO are outfitting dedicated players.



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TRAIL RUNNING

Running saw a particular pandemic boost and now enthusiasts are going off pavement: trail running saw a 231% increase in participation over the past decade. However, it requires different equipment from a typical jog. Specialist products are popping up, from Nonda's trail-running shoes to Splat's Sunscreen, while shops like Overland Running Provisions in Girona, Spain, host community runs.

