



THAT

PICKLEBALL MEMBER PROFILE

Number 20

By Laurie Einstein Koszuta

From Hooves to Hustle: Michelle Carstensen Swaps the Barn for the Baseline

Before Michelle Carstensen was perfecting her backhand and smashing overheads, she was milking dairy cows every day on her family's farm in Minnesota.

"My mom managed 40 cows, and I took care of 80," she says. "We did all the milking together while my dad handled the feeding."

Raised in the small town of Browerville, Michelle competed in softball, basketball, volleyball, and track throughout high school. Between early mornings on the dairy farm and afternoon practices, she developed the discipline and work ethic that would shape the rest of her life.



A New Chapter

But by age 28, she was ready for a change. As a single mom of two, Michelle left farm life behind and moved with her children to Mankato so she could pursue a degree in sports management at

Minnesota State University.

"I didn't work during school," she recalls. "I took full-time classes and was a full-time mom."

After graduating, Michelle and the kids moved to the Twin Cities, where she pivoted to a career in real estate, using her education to market her business. She became a licensed residential realtor with RE/MAX Results since 2014.

A Paddle and a Nudge

Michelle's path shifted again three years ago on the Fourth of July when pickleball first landed on her radar. Her son, A.J., had gone on a trip with a friend to visit his grandmother in Arizona. While there, both boys discovered pickleball and played it during their stay. In the meantime, one of her friends had also casually mentioned playing pickleball.

"When A.J. came home, he said, 'Mom, you gotta try pickleball.'" Michelle remembered. "He was enthusiastic, so we went to Target, bought some cheap paddles, and started hitting around. We had no idea what we were doing."

That changed after Michelle attended a local event where a woman provided a brief overview of the

rules. That was all the spark Michelle needed to become obsessed. "After that, I was the one teaching everyone with my Target paddle," she laughed.



Getting the Gold

Since then, Michelle has fully committed to the sport. She drills or plays about three hours a day, five days a week. "I also play to avoid injury, but I'd say I'm obsessed," she admits. "My life is filled with pickleball, real estate, and my granddaughter. Those are my top three."

She plays year-round, outdoors in the summer, when Minnesota's unpredictable weather cooperates, and indoors at Lifetime Fitness the rest of the time.

Training Hard, Playing Harder

Michelle actively plays tournaments and recently had seven scheduled in one month. She won the



gold with her women's doubles partner at a local competition and placed fourth in women's doubles at the 2025 U.S. Pickleball Open in Naples. Michelle also played mixed doubles at the U.S.



Joey Coaches the Gold

Open, but unfortunately, her partner was injured during the match, and the team struggled to finish the game. “I’ve gotten silver a lot and gold twice,” she adds.

Michelle’s commitment to growth led her to hire a private coach, Joey Luto, who is now the teaching pro at That Pickleball School. Joey visited Minnesota, for a weeklong training session, resulting in transformative week of personalized instruction. “He taught me step by step; he didn’t just tell me what to fix, he showed me how,” she says. “Even my friends are like, Where’d you learn these things?”

To further sharpen her game, Michelle joined That Pickleball School

and has been diving into the online videos and instructional content. “I realize that having knowledge matters as much as playing the game.”

Pickleball Power Moves

Her aggressive overheads and solid defense define Michelle’s game, skills she says often surprise her opponents. “I keep the ball in play longer than people expect,” she says. “If you’re hitting it at me, it’s coming back.”

She’s currently working on improving her two-handed backhand and return game and aims to push past her current 3.5-skill rating.

Michelle’s love of pickleball recently spilled over into her professional life when she hosted a real estate client appreciation event centered around the sport. Coach Joey flew in to lead an introductory clinic for the 50 attendees, most of whom had never picked up a paddle before.

“Everyone had a blast,” she says. “It’s such a fun, welcoming sport.”

Michelle currently lives on a lake. “People ask me if I go on the lake,” she said, “Nope, I play pickleball.”

