



## Coaching by Chance, Inspiring by Choice: Tony Stamper's Pickleball Legacy in Lindley, South Africa

*By Laurie Einstein Koszuta*

**W**hen Tony Stamper retired as an accountant in the UK three years ago, he and his wife, Valerie, sought a simpler life – summers in a smaller home in England's Lake District and winters somewhere warm. When the house next door to his sister, a retired doctor living in Lindley, a small town in South Africa's Free State province, went up for sale, she immediately informed Tony. Having lived there for seven years, she could vouch for its warm climate during the UK's cold months.

"It was a no-brainer," Tony recalls. "The price was low, it was warm, so we said yes."

Because of Lindley's remoteness, with endless fields of grazing cattle, corn, and sunflowers, Valerie was mildly concerned about how Tony would fill his days. His sister was more worried. "Since I play pickleball in the UK, I figured I'd play in Lindley," Tony said. "When I said that to my sister, she looked at me and said, 'With who? You're moving to the middle of nowhere. I said I'd figure it out.'"

At one time, Tony played tennis in the UK and took lessons from a young coach. That coach introduced him to pickleball after winning silver at a national tournament. Convinced Tony would excel at the sport, he encouraged him to try it. Once he picked up a paddle, Tony retired his tennis racquet. "With tennis, I never had the confidence to play competitively," Tony noted, "But with pickleball, I've played in national championships in the UK and love it."

When Tony and Valerie moved to Lindley, he brought four paddles, a net, and some balls. The good news was that the town's tennis courts were just 50 yards from their new home. The bad news was that the courts had big cracks and severe disrepair. "The municipality is very political and weren't interested in making repairs, so I tried patching the asphalt myself," said Tony.

Soon after settling in, Tony headed to the courts and started hitting a ball against a wall. No one paid much attention until a local kid stopped to watch and asked if he was playing tennis. “I told him it was pickleball, not tennis. He didn’t care; he just wanted to play.”

After Tony and the boy named TK played, he was eager to return the following day. The next day, TK brought a friend. By the fourth day, nearly 40 kids of all ages showed up. It was unfamiliar territory for Tony as he had never considered himself a coach, nor was he particularly drawn to kids. But now, he taught kids a sport they had never heard of.



To make do, Tony painted lines on the cracked asphalt. “We had one court and four paddles for all the kids,” Tony said. “A friend from the UK sent another net and more paddles, but there were still so many kids.”

Eventually, a core group of about 20 to 25 kids came daily. “The cracks don’t cause too many bad bounces,” he laughed. “Of course, if a kid is about to lose a point, they’ll blame the cracks.”

“They’re all great kids,” Tony said, “but there are arguments. If they get disrespectful, I ask if they’d talk to their parents or teachers that way. If things escalate, I use soccer’s red card system and send them home for the day.”

Three years in, Tony struggles to keep up. “I could beat them easily at first, but now it is a real challenge because they have improved. They’d never held a paddle when they started, and I invented games to help them learn movement and positioning. Now, they’re hitting top spins and using techniques I never taught them.”

One challenge has been getting girls involved, as many don’t seem interested. Another is the cost. “I have taken some kids to play in tournaments in other towns. But a single session at the nearest club costs roughly \$12,” Tony explained. “That’s more than many people earn daily, so I cover the fees.”

Even proper shoes are a luxury. “Traditionally, the kids here grow up and play barefoot. They’ll only wear shoes in competitions.”

Over the years, Tony has interacted with a couple of hundred kids who have come and gone; some stay for just a week, and others stay longer. “We usually play weekdays from 4 p.m. until dark, September through March when I’m here.”

Tony still plays competitively with a partner in the UK. “In Lindley, I don’t play much; we only have two courts and many kids. But I will play the last game of the day, and they love beating me.”

When he leaves for six months, things slow down. But six kids, including TK, keep training year-round studying Kyle Koszuta’s YouTube videos and being a part of ThatPickleballSchool. When I return, I’m amazed by how much they’ve improved.”

Tony reflects on his role. “I didn’t think I could teach how to hit the ball, but I could teach positioning and anticipating the play. And eventually, they figure out how the rest.”

The realities of Lindley’s economy make the sport even more meaningful. “This is farming country, and there’s not much to do or many jobs. Many families rely on government benefits, but it’s barely enough.”

Tony never expected to become so invested. “I’m not an emotional person. But when I watch these kids win tournaments against adults and seeing how far they’ve come makes me emotional. Three years ago, they had nothing to do. Now, they have pickleball.”