

From Borrowed Paddles to a National Championship: How Pickleball Became Part of Ukraine's Recovery

Inside Ukraine's first veterans pickleball championship: borrowed equipment, taped courts, and athletes who refused to stop competing.

SAN DIEGO, CA, UNITED STATES, July 31, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Inside a drafty gym in Kyiv that smelled of floor polish and wet coats, the sounds of recovery echoed off the walls. The sharp pop of the paddle. The squeak of wheels and rubber soles. Somebody yelling "Out!" too late. Everybody laughing anyway.

These were athletes who knew the weight of body armor and hospital sheets, and here they were arguing about a line call. Nobody was talking about rehabilitation schedules. Nobody was checking a phone for bad news. They were checking the score.

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Together, we believe in the power of sport to inspire, heal, and connect people across borders.”

*Anna Glotova, Co-Founder,
Ukrainian Pickleball
Federation*



Freedom Fighter Paddles displayed on a Ukrainian Pickleball Federation equipment rack at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship, Kyiv, April 2026.

This was the scene at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship, organized by the [Ukrainian Pickleball Federation](#) (UPF) and the Ministry of Veterans Affairs of Ukraine, held in Kyiv in April 2026. One hundred four combat veterans from 20 regions competed in four categories. Outside the venue, the war did not stop. Inside, a quiet revolution in recovery was taking shape.

Anna Glotova never expected airport lounges would become part of her office. She had built a calm life in New

Zealand when a calling pulled her back to Kyiv. As UPF co-founder and Director of Strategic

Partnerships, her work means emails at odd hours, calls across time zones, and grant applications written on laptops in cold departure halls. She explains to anyone who might help: this is not just a sport. This is part of how we rebuild people.

Working with borrowed paddles and taped-off courts, she and a small team of athletes and volunteers spent two years introducing pickleball in schools, gyms, and rehabilitation centers across Ukraine. They emphasized participation over spectacle. They kept going.

"Pickleball is one of many ways to support those who have sustained life-altering injuries on their path to a dignified, full life," Glotova said. "Together, we believe in the power of sport to inspire, heal, and connect people across borders."

Founded in 2024, the UPF led Ukraine to become the 60th member of the Global Pickleball Federation in 2025 and has since represented the country internationally, including at the English Open and the Pickleball World Cup in Florida, volunteers carrying scuffed duffel bags through airports to ensure the flag was present at player check-in. Developing pickleball during wartime is not a retreat from the world. It is proof that Ukraine is still here, still moving, still competing.

To help address the equipment shortages facing these expanding programs, [Anywhere Pickleball](#), a San Diego-based company, became the UPF's first American strategic partner in June 2025. Together,



Combat amputees Oleksandr Dehtiar and Mykola Zarytskyi, both from Ukraine's Sumy region, compete at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship in Kyiv, April 2026. The pair earned bronze and the Fantastic Team award.



Wheelchair athletes compete in doubles pickleball at the First Ukrainian Veterans Pickleball Championship in Kyiv, April 2026, organized by the Ukrainian Pickleball Federation. Players hold Freedom Fighter Paddles as spectators watch courtside.

they developed the [Freedom Fighter Paddle](#), the official paddle of the championship. Designed by Ukrainian artists Dasha Volkova and Andrii Voloshyn, the paddle carries the colors of the Ukrainian flag, the Leleka (white stork representing hope and return), and the Tryzub (golden trident). On its face, a verse by national poet Taras Shevchenko: "Boritecya – poboryete!" (Fight and you shall overcome).

"We've been UPF's first American partner since June 2025," said Angus Wong, founder of Anywhere Pickleball. "We know how valuable and vulnerable freedom is."

Among the competitors were Oleksandr Dehtiar and Mykola Zarytskyi, two combat amputees from the Sumy region who had never played together before the event. Oleksandr had no hands. Mykola walked on a prosthetic leg. They paired up on arrival, played every match, and won bronze. The UPF presented them with the Fantastic Team award on stage. Oleksandr's mother, Tetiana, stood between them. She had been there through the coma, through the hospitals, through the months of relearning how to speak and walk. She thanked the organizers with tears in her eyes, the good kind a mother cries when she watches her child find his way back.

"This is a vital step for the development of pickleball in Ukraine," said Volodymyr Svirskii, president of the UPF. "It inspires, unites, and gives faith in one's own achievements."

Outside the gym, the war continued. Inside, veterans argued over line calls, celebrated winners, and laughed at shots that missed by inches. For a few hours, they were not patients. They were athletes. And in a country still fighting for its future, that turned out to be exactly enough.

About Anywhere Pickleball

Anywhere Pickleball is a San Diego-based company and the official strategic partner of the Ukrainian Pickleball Federation. The Freedom Fighter Paddle is available at [freedomfighterpaddle.com](#).

[anywherepickleball.com](#)

About the Ukrainian Pickleball Federation (UPF)

Founded in 2024, the UPF is the 60th member of the Global Pickleball Federation, representing Ukraine internationally and developing the sport across schools, gyms, and rehabilitation centers throughout Ukraine.

[pickleballukraine.net](#)

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