

Platform Tennis Purists Disdain Fashions

By GEORGIA DULLEA

Something chic is happening to platform tennis.

No sooner did the season begin this month than the stores served up a new line of shoes, warm-up costumes, and pastel paddles "for women." Mrs. Ledyard Bowen of Wilton, Conn., is one woman who isn't buying.

"They're probably going to make paddle bunnies the way they made ski bunnies," said Betty Bowen on a recent Sunday, lamenting the advent of pink paddles and peering out the window of the warming hut next to her private platform tennis court.

On the other side of the glass, her husband, "Tad," a vice president of Famous Artists Schools in Westport, lobbed the spongy orange ball with the style that won two silver tournament bowls.

The thermometer read 38 degrees, which seemed almost tropical to Mr. Bowen and friends, who've played doubles at 5 below. Halfway into the second set the men began peeling away layers of clothing. Off came the faded windbreakers and the ratty sweaters that are de rigueur in "paddle," as they call it. Connecticut paddle demons like the Bowens — they installed the country's first all-aluminum court two years ago and threw it open to 140 neighbors for daily 10 A.M. to 10 P.M. play—regret the intrusion of fashion in a racquet sport of cultivated casualness.

In Westchester, other paddle purists share their regret:

"The fun of this game is that it's not tennis. It's not the whites," said a White Plains pulp and paper company executive.

"Paddle players should look sloppy as hell," insisted a Mt. Kisco newspaperwoman. "Anybody who tries to look nifty gets booed off the court."

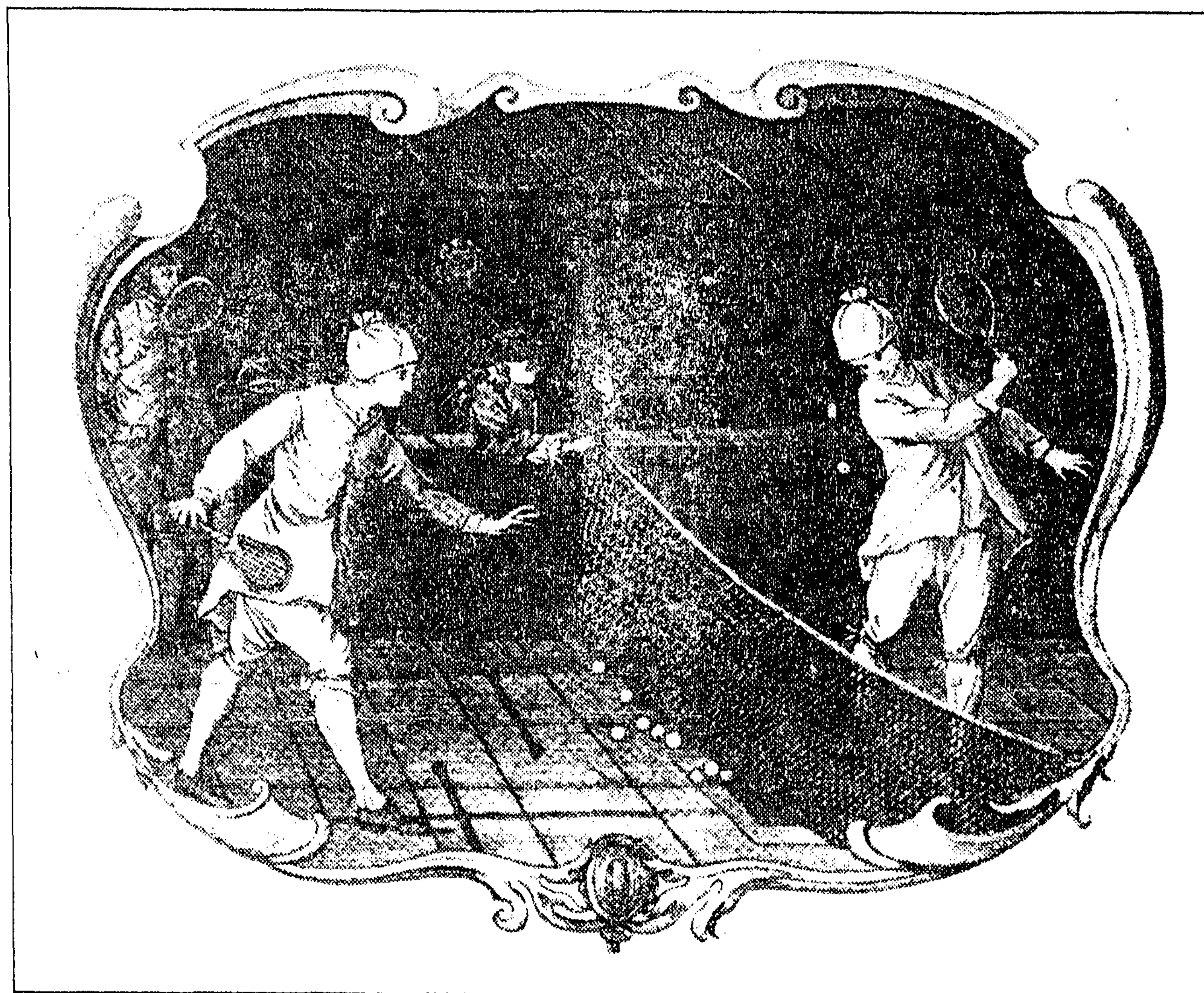
If paddle gets nifty, blame it on the masses. After more than 40 years of knocking about the eastern clubhouse circuit, platform tennis is finally getting off the ground.

Promoters claim a 25 per cent growth rate for the sport. The American Platform Tennis Association, sponsor of 43 tournaments between November and mid-April, estimates that there are now 50,000 paddle players in the country.

"And I will bet about 40,000 of them live right here," said G. Eastbrook Kindred, A.P.T.A. vice president, indicating the general New York, New Jersey, Connecticut area.

Clubs in Chevy Chase, Short Hills, Darien, New Canaan, Greenwich and especially Scarsdale (where Fox Meadow keeps nine courts in frantic play) still breed most of the nationally-ranked players.

But, increasingly, the little green or brown decks with the chicken wire fence pop up in suburban backyards or on city rooftops. And while players there may



A framed copy of one artist's interpretation of tennis as it was in the beginning is one of the focal points in the warming hut adjoining the platform tennis court of Mr. and Mrs. Ledyard Bowen.

never wear the coveted A.P.T.A. blazers (for men) or custom-designed charms (for women) they are grabbing an hour or so of puffing, perspiring outdoor exercise. Paddle, they claim, is more invigorating than indoor tennis and less expensive than skiing.

"It's instant tennis," said Robert L. Nash, president of the scrappy Perry Heights Paddle Pack that works the wires in Chappaqua, N.Y. "If you can play Ping-Pong, paddle comes fairly easily."

Other fans liken the game to squash, four-wall handball and, of course, lawn tennis. They're all right, in a way.

Players use a short handled, perforated wooden paddle ("Feels like a log," a tennis classicist sniffs) and a sponge rubber ball painted orange to stand out against the snow.

The court measures 60 by 30 feet (half a regulation tennis court) and perches on concrete piers. This, enclosed by a 12 foot high screen, reminds Mrs. Bowen of "an overgrown monkey cage."

Paddle is scored the same way as real tennis. It differs, though, in two key rules: participants get only one serve, but they also get to play the ball off the wire screen.

This wire wrinkle makes for long, spirited rallies and much of the game's fun, in Mr. Kindred's view: "Tennis is a game of winners and paddle tennis is a game of losers. The secret in paddle, really, is keeping the ball in play."

The wire rule evolved, quite by chance, while the late Messrs. Fessenden Blanchard and James Cogswell were inventing the sport on a Scarsdale estate in 1923. They started out, so the story goes, to build a wooden platform for winter deck tennis, badminton and volley ball.

But the gentlemen soon tired of chasing the ball in the woods and chasing the dogs off the court, so they put up a mesh screen. Trouble was, the ball had an irksome habit of sticking in the mesh.

"I remember once when that happened on our side of the net I ran around behind the back net and gave the ball a

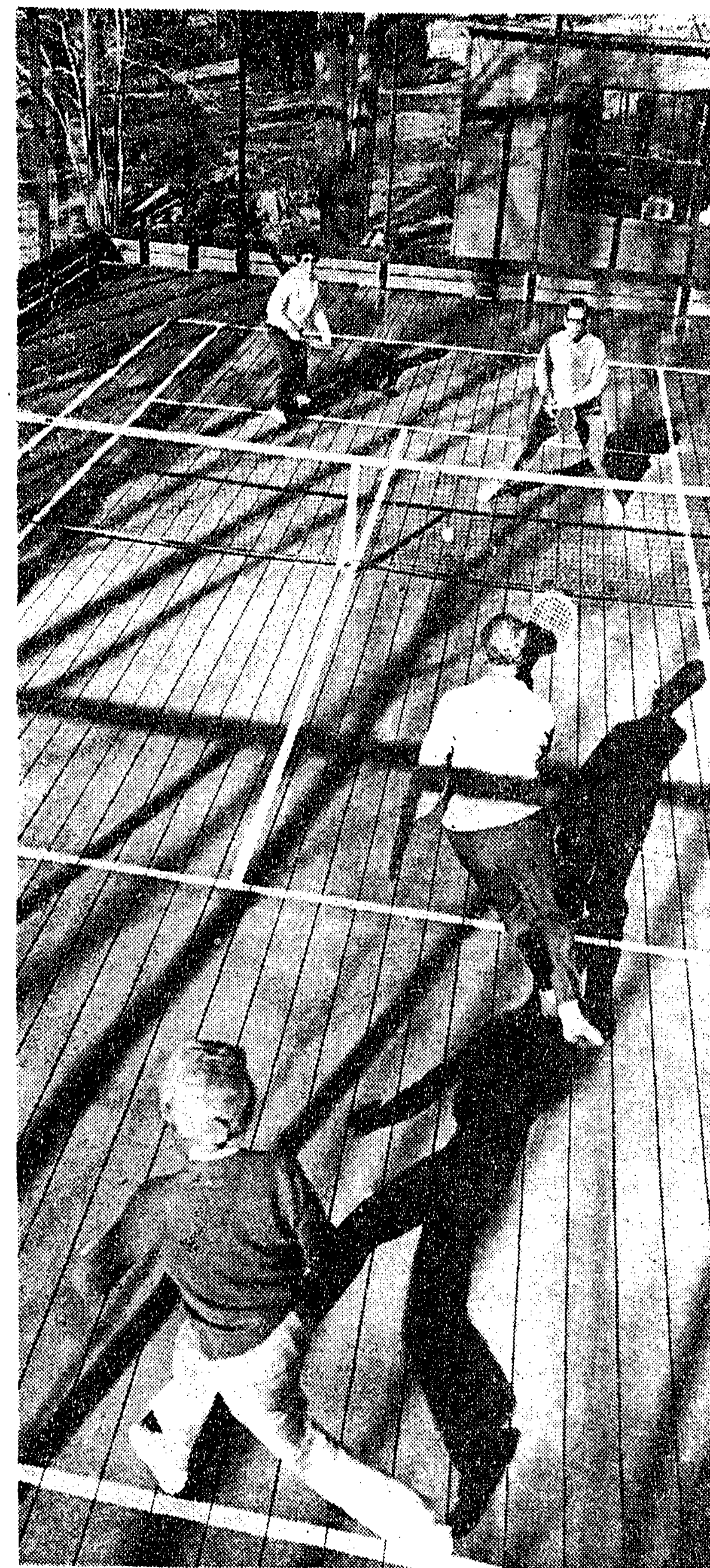
hefty swat," wrote Mr. Blanchard in his book, "Platform Paddle Tennis."

"To everyone's surprise," he continued, "it went over the net into the other court. My partner kept the ball in play until I got back and we finally won the point. Or, so we argued..."

Later, a more sophisticated back-stop and screening system were added to the game. But not before Mr. Blanchard's serendipitous swat had sent paddle's fortunes soaring.

Other improvements like the Bowens' aluminum, gas-heated, snow-melting court have brought a note of indulgence to a spartan sport. Heated courts are rare, though; most paddle decks are wooden. And some owners will shovel them before tackling their own driveways.

Mrs. Bowen retains fond memories of the wooden court they used for 15 years. "We're still burning it," she said, pointing to a potbellied stove in the warming hut.



Photographs for The New York Times by ROBERT M. KLEIN
Tad and Betty Bowen, foreground, oppose Peter and Jackie Mundy in doubles on the Bowens' all-aluminum court.

The New York Times

Published: November 26, 1972
Copyright © The New York Times