Tampa Indoor Pickleball Performance Center

An Air-Conditioned Pickleball, Training, and Community Sports Facility

Business Plan

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Thesis

The opportunity is not simply to add more pickleball courts to Tampa. The opportunity is to create the right kind of courts: indoor, air-conditioned, professionally operated, easy to reserve, close to the city's active population, and built for year-round use in a climate where outdoor play is often uncomfortable and sometimes unsafe. Stephanie Dowling Sports Project will turn large commercial shells into efficient sports facilities where pickleball play, training, leagues, and community can operate almost continuously.

1. Executive Summary

Stephanie Dowling Sports Project will develop and operate a dedicated indoor pickleball and training facility in the Tampa, Florida market, within approximately 20–30 minutes of downtown Tampa. The concept is built around a simple but powerful market reality: Tampa is a hot, humid, physically active, growing city where outdoor play is possible but often uncomfortable, seasonally difficult, and at times medically risky for intense recreational sports.

The proposed facility will convert a large warehouse, flex, or storage-type commercial shell into an air-conditioned pickleball center with optimized court layout, professional coaching, organized open play, leagues, private court rentals, and after-game social/rest space. The facility will include restrooms, seating, check-in, small pro-shop/vending options, and simple relaxation areas, but will initially avoid expensive locker rooms and showers in order to keep construction and operating costs under control.

The core business model will combine several revenue streams: hourly court rentals, open play, memberships, clinics, private and group lessons, leagues, tournaments, corporate events, junior programs, and selective sponsorships. Coaching will be a major operational engine. Professional trainers will generate direct instruction revenue, and a portion of that revenue will be retained by the facility through court fees, revenue sharing, programming fees, or employment/contract arrangements.

The recommended first facility should target approximately 20,000–28,000 square feet, supporting 8–10 courts at launch, with a possible expansion path toward 12 courts if a larger shell is available and capital allows. A smaller facility may be easier to finance, but the economics of indoor pickleball improve with enough courts to support open play, leagues, coaching, events, and private rentals at the same time.

The project should proceed in phases: first market validation and property search, then capital formation and site control, then design/permitting/buildout, then pre-sale of memberships and programming, followed by soft opening and full launch.

2. Market Opportunity

Tampa is a strong candidate for this concept because it combines several favorable features: population growth, a relatively young city profile, a strong recreational culture, significant year-round sports participation, and an outdoor climate that creates a natural demand for indoor air-conditioned recreation.

Pickleball is no longer a retirement-community niche sport. It is now a cross-generational sport with strong adoption among young adults, working adults, families, and older players. This matters for Tampa because the city can support multiple player segments at once: young professionals looking for evening social play, families seeking weekend recreation, retired or semi-retired players seeking daytime play, and serious players seeking coaching and structured competitive development.

The market should not be presented as empty. Tampa already has public and private pickleball options. The better investment thesis is that the existing supply does not fully satisfy the demand for a reliable, professionally operated, climate-controlled, bookable indoor facility close to downtown and major residential/employment corridors. Public indoor play is often limited by hours, small court counts, community-center schedules, and summer camp conflicts.

Outdoor courts are useful but exposed to heat, humidity, rain, sun, and evening crowding. Private facilities exist, but the market appears to be expanding rather than saturated.

The project should position itself not merely as “more courts,” but as a better playing environment: cooler, safer, easier to schedule, professionally programmed, social, clean, well-lit, and designed around high utilization.

3. Customer Segments

The primary customer groups are:

1. Recreational players who want dependable indoor court time without weather disruption.
2. Beginner and intermediate players who want structured lessons, clinics, and social entry into the sport.
3. Serious players who want drilling, coaching, league play, DUPR-style rating events, and tournament preparation.
4. Young professionals who see pickleball as a social sport after work.
5. Active adults and seniors who want exercise but need protection from heat and outdoor fatigue.
6. Families seeking weekend activity for adults and children.
7. Corporate groups looking for team-building events.
8. Hotels, apartments, employers, and healthcare/wellness partners seeking an attractive recreational amenity.

4. Facility Concept

The recommended launch model is an 8–10 court indoor facility in a warehouse/flex shell. Each regulation pickleball court requires a 20 ft × 44 ft playing surface, but practical facility planning should use approximately 30 ft × 60 ft per court as the minimum playing envelope. More generous spacing is preferable where the building allows.

For an 8-court facility, the court area alone requires roughly 14,400 square feet before lounge, restrooms, check-in, circulation, storage, and mechanical space. For a 10-court facility, the court area alone requires roughly 18,000 square feet. A practical 8–10 court launch facility should therefore target approximately 20,000–28,000 square feet. A 12-court version would likely require approximately 28,000–35,000 square feet, depending on layout and common-area design.

The facility should include:

- 8–10 dedicated indoor courts at launch.
- High-quality acrylic or cushioned court surface.
- Permanent nets and court dividers.

- Strong, glare-controlled LED lighting.
- Air conditioning and dehumidification designed for sports use.
- Destratification fans and proper air circulation.
- Acoustic treatment where needed.
- Reception/check-in desk.
- Restrooms, but no showers in Phase 1.
- Seating and post-game relaxation area.
- Small pro-shop wall or vending area for balls, grips, paddles, drinks, and snacks.
- Storage for nets, ball machines, cleaning supplies, and teaching equipment.
- Optional video/training court in later phase.
- Online booking and membership management system.

The facility should not initially attempt luxury-club complexity. The operating philosophy should be economical but professional: excellent courts, excellent climate control, clean restrooms, smooth booking, strong coaching, and a welcoming social atmosphere.

5. Location Strategy

The site should be within 20–30 minutes of downtown Tampa and must satisfy the following criteria:

- Sufficient building size: preferably 20,000–28,000 SF for launch.
- Clear height: ideally 18–22 feet or higher over court areas.
- Minimal interior columns or a column grid compatible with court layout.
- Adequate HVAC capacity or feasibility for HVAC retrofit.
- Adequate electrical service for lighting, HVAC, fans, POS, security, and future training technology.
- Sufficient parking, preferably 50–80+ spaces depending on court count and event ambitions.
- Zoning that allows indoor recreation or can be approved without excessive delay.
- Ability to obtain a Certificate of Occupancy for indoor recreation/assembly use.
- Good road access from downtown, South Tampa, Westshore, East Tampa, Brandon, and North Tampa corridors.
- Low residential conflict due to pickleball noise, traffic, and evening use.

The strongest submarkets to explore are:

East Tampa / Ybor / I-4 / US-301 Corridor

This area offers proximity to downtown and industrial/flex inventory. It may offer better economics and access to both urban Tampa and Brandon/East Hillsborough. It also contains existing pickleball activity, so differentiation will matter.

Drew Park / Westshore / Airport Area

This area has strong access to South Tampa, Westshore office users, airport-area employees, and higher-income neighborhoods. It may be more expensive, but it could support stronger pricing and corporate event activity.

North Tampa / Seminole Heights / Temple Terrace Edge

This area can capture residential players, USF-related users, families, and commuters. It may be slightly less downtown-focused but may offer workable buildings and parking.

Brandon / Riverview Edge

This may be attractive for a second site or a larger first site if downtown proximity can still be maintained. It offers family growth and potentially larger shells, but traffic patterns must be carefully evaluated.

The first site should not be chosen simply because it is large and cheap. For this business, parking, clear height, HVAC feasibility, zoning, and visibility are as important as square footage.

6. Real Estate Options: Lease vs. Purchase

Lease Option

A lease is the lower-risk first move if the team is still validating demand. A 20,000–28,000 SF lease at approximately $12–$18/SF/year base rent, plus NNN expenses, could produce an all-in occupancy cost in the approximate range of $25,000–$45,000 per month, depending on size, condition, location, taxes, insurance, and landlord concessions.

Advantages of leasing:

- Lower initial capital requirement.
- Faster entry.
- Less real estate risk.
- Ability to test the model before owning property.
- Possibility of negotiating tenant improvement allowance.

Disadvantages:

- Rent escalation.
- No building equity.
- Limited control over long-term occupancy.
- Large buildout investment in a property owned by someone else.

A lease should ideally include renewal options, a right of first refusal, or an option to purchase.

Purchase Option

Purchasing a warehouse or flex building is attractive if the project has sufficient capital, a strong investor group, or access to SBA/commercial real estate financing. Ownership can turn the project into both an operating business and a real estate investment. A 20,000–30,000 SF building in Tampa could plausibly cost several million dollars before buildout, depending heavily on submarket, condition, parking, and existing tenants.

Advantages of purchase:

- Control of the property.
- Long-term fixed occupancy structure if properly financed.
- Participation in real estate appreciation.
- Ability to improve the building without fear of lease expiration.
- Potential for separate real estate investor structure.

Disadvantages:

- Higher capital requirement.
- Longer closing and due-diligence timeline.
- Environmental, structural, roof, HVAC, and code risks.
- Debt service may be heavier than rent in the early years.

The most financeable structure may be a two-company model: a real estate LLC owns the building, and an operating LLC runs the pickleball facility and pays rent to the real estate LLC.

7. Startup Cost Estimate

The following are preliminary planning ranges and should be refined after a specific property is selected.

Lease-Based Launch: 8–10 Courts

Estimated startup requirement: approximately $1.2 million to $2.5 million.

Major cost categories:

- Security deposit, initial rent, legal, inspections: $75,000–$200,000.
- Architecture, engineering, permits, code compliance: $75,000–$200,000.
- Court construction/surfacing/dividers/nets: $300,000–$700,000.
- HVAC upgrades, dehumidification, fans: $250,000–$700,000.
- Electrical and lighting: $150,000–$400,000.

- Restrooms, lounge, check-in, office, storage: $150,000–$400,000.
- Furniture, fixtures, signage, POS, security: $75,000–$200,000.
- Software, website, booking setup: $10,000–$40,000.
- Pre-opening marketing: $75,000–$150,000.
- Working capital reserve: $200,000–$500,000.
- Contingency: 10–20%.

Purchase-Based Launch: 8–12 Courts

Estimated total project requirement: approximately $4.5 million to $8.0 million or more, depending on building size and price.

Major cost categories:

- Building purchase: likely several million dollars.
- Closing costs, due diligence, environmental, appraisal: $100,000–$300,000.
- Buildout and court conversion: $1.0 million–$2.5 million.
- Pre-opening marketing and staffing: $100,000–$250,000.
- Working capital reserve: $300,000–$700,000.
- Contingency: 10–20%.

The purchase path is stronger long-term but should not be forced unless the property is right and the financing is conservative.

8. Revenue Model

The facility should combine recurring, transactional, and program-based revenue.

Court Rentals

Private court rentals will be the foundation. Rates should vary by time:

- Off-peak: approximately $30–$40 per court hour.
- Standard: approximately $40–$55 per court hour.
- Peak: approximately $50–$65 per court hour.
- Special events/tournaments: premium pricing.

Open Play

Open play should be organized by level and time slot. This is critical for community building and utilization. A typical model may charge $10–$18 per player per session or per hour, depending on format.

Memberships

Memberships should not give away too much free court time. They should provide:

- Advance booking.
- Discounted court rates.
- Discounted open play.
- Member-only events.
- Priority clinics.
- Guest passes.
- Optional family add-ons.

Initial membership tiers might include:

- Social / basic: $29–$49/month.
- Player: $79–$99/month.
- Premium: $129–$169/month.
- Family or corporate packages.

Coaching and Training

Coaching should be a central profit center. Programs should include:

- Pickleball 101 beginner classes.
- Beginner-to-intermediate clinics.
- Drill-and-play sessions.
- Private lessons.
- Small-group lessons.
- Junior development.
- Competitive training.
- Ratings preparation.
- Senior-safe movement and strategy sessions.

The facility can retain revenue by charging coaches court fees, using revenue splits, employing a head pro, or taking a percentage of clinic revenue. A practical model is to let coaches earn well while the facility receives a steady programming share.

Leagues and Tournaments

Leagues create predictable weekly traffic. Tournaments create weekend revenue, sponsorship opportunities, and visibility. The facility should run beginner, intermediate, advanced, mixed doubles, women's, men's, ladder, and corporate formats.

Events

Corporate events, birthday parties, fundraisers, school groups, and apartment-community nights can generate premium revenue during otherwise weaker hours.

Secondary Revenue

Secondary revenue should stay simple at launch:

- Paddle and ball sales.
- Rental paddles.
- Grips and accessories.
- Water, sports drinks, coffee, protein snacks.
- Branded shirts/hats.
- Sponsorship banners.
- Local health/wellness partnerships.

Food, alcohol, and kitchen operations should be avoided in Phase 1 unless a partner handles them. They add permitting, staffing, insurance, and operational complexity.

9. Preliminary Financial Outlook

A realistic first-year goal is not maximum profit but market capture, membership growth, utilization discipline, and operating stability.

For an 8–10 court facility, a credible stabilized annual revenue target may be approximately $1.5 million to $2.5 million after the ramp-up period, depending on court count, utilization, pricing, memberships, coaching volume, and event programming.

Approximate annual operating expenses for a leased 20,000–28,000 SF facility may include:

- Rent and NNN: $350,000–$700,000.
- Payroll and staffing: $350,000–$650,000.
- Utilities/HVAC: $150,000–$350,000.
- Insurance: $50,000–$120,000.
- Cleaning and maintenance: $75,000–$180,000.
- Marketing: $75,000–$180,000 in year one; lower after brand establishment.
- Software, admin, accounting, supplies: $75,000–$150,000.
- Repairs, replacement reserve, contingency: $75,000–$150,000.

A stabilized leased facility could target positive EBITDA once utilization reaches approximately 45–60%, especially if memberships and coaching revenue reduce dependence on simple hourly court rental. A purchase-based facility may produce stronger long-term value but will require enough cash flow to support debt service.

The most important operating metric should be revenue per available court hour. Management should track:

- Total available court-hours.
- Sold court-hours.
- Utilization by daypart.
- Revenue per court-hour.
- Membership conversion.
- Member retention.
- Coaching revenue per court-hour.
- Event revenue.
- Customer acquisition cost.
- Repeat booking rate.

10. Staffing Plan

The minimum project team should begin lean but professional.

Pre-Opening Team

- Stephanie Dowling — Project Manager / General Manager.
- Commercial real estate broker.
- Architect and MEP engineer experienced with assembly/recreation conversions.
- General contractor.
- Sports court contractor.
- Permit/zoning consultant if needed.
- Attorney.
- Accountant/bookkeeper.
- Insurance broker.
- Head pickleball professional or programming consultant.
- Marketing contractor or agency.

Opening Operating Team

At launch, the smallest practical operating team is:

- Stephanie Dowling — General Manager / Project Lead.
- Operations and Membership Coordinator — full-time.
- Head Pro / Program Director — contractor or employee.
- 3–5 contract coaches.
- Part-time front desk/court monitors for peak shifts.
- Cleaning/janitorial contractor.
- Maintenance/HVAC contractor.
- Bookkeeper/payroll support.

The facility can use online booking and access-control systems to reduce staffing, but it should not initially operate unattended for long hours. For safety, customer service, and brand reputation, at least one trained staff person should be on site during operating hours, with additional staff during peak periods, clinics, events, and tournaments.

11. Technology and App Strategy

The project should not build a custom app at launch unless there is a very specific reason. Existing court-management platforms can handle booking, payments, memberships, clinics, leagues, and player communication at a much lower initial cost.

The recommended approach is:

Phase 1: Use an existing court reservation and membership platform.
Phase 2: Add community/group tools for matching players by level and availability.
Phase 3: Build a custom branded app only after the facility has enough members and recurring traffic to justify it.

The custom app idea is strong, but it should be treated as a growth feature, not a launch requirement. The first priority is not software originality; it is court utilization.

12. Marketing Plan

The marketing should begin before the facility opens.

Pre-Opening

- Create name, logo, landing page, and founding-membership campaign.
- Build an email/SMS waitlist.
- Offer refundable founding membership deposits.
- Run local ads targeting Tampa pickleball, tennis, fitness, CrossFit, yoga, running, apartment communities, and corporate wellness.
- Visit outdoor courts and introduce the coming facility.
- Recruit local pickleball ambassadors.
- Partner with coaches before opening.
- Invite apartment buildings and employers to founding group events.
- Create video content showing the heat/weather problem and the indoor solution.
- Run “first 500 founding players” campaign.

Launch

- Soft opening with controlled groups.
- Free or discounted beginner clinics.
- Influencer/community nights.
- Corporate preview events.
- Media outreach to Tampa business and lifestyle publications.
- Grand opening tournament.
- Founder wall or founding-member recognition.

Ongoing

- Weekly beginner clinics.
- Leagues by level.
- Women's nights, young professional nights, senior-safe play sessions.
- Corporate leagues.
- DUPR-style rating nights.
- Junior camps.
- Seasonal tournaments.
- Referral incentives.
- Partnerships with PT/orthopedic/wellness providers.

Recommended marketing budget:

- Pre-opening: $75,000–$150,000.
- First operating year: $100,000–$250,000 total.
- Stabilized ongoing: 4–7% of revenue.

13. Capital Strategy

The capital strategy should match the real estate strategy.

Option A: Lease-Based Launch

This is the most practical first step if speed and lower risk matter most.

Capital needed: approximately $1.2 million to $2.5 million.

Sources:

- Founder/sponsor equity.
- Private investors.
- Landlord tenant-improvement allowance.
- Equipment financing.

- SBA 7(a) or conventional small-business loan.
- Founding memberships and deposits.
- Sponsorships.

This option is easier to launch but should include lease protections: renewal options, purchase option, right of first refusal, and landlord approval for indoor recreation use.

Option B: Purchase-Based Launch

This is more ambitious but can be stronger if the right property is found.

Capital needed: likely $4.5 million to $8.0 million total project cost.

Sources:

- Real estate investor group.
- SBA 504 financing if owner-occupancy requirements are satisfied.
- Bank first mortgage.
- Sponsor equity.
- Operating-company equity.
- Equipment financing.
- Founding membership pre-sales.

A strong structure may separate the property from the operating business. The real estate LLC owns the building and leases it to the pickleball operating company. Real estate investors receive a more asset-backed investment, while operating investors receive upside from the sports business.

Option C: Lease With Option to Purchase

This may be the best balanced approach. It allows the project to launch faster, prove demand, and preserve the right to buy the property later.

14. Implementation Timeline

Phase 1 — Feasibility and Market Validation: Month 0–1

- Finalize concept and target facility size.
- Visit local competitors.
- Interview coaches and players.
- Build preliminary financial model.
- Identify target submarkets.
- Begin capital conversations.
- Launch landing page and waitlist.

Phase 2 — Property Search and Capital Package: Month 1–3

- Engage commercial broker.
- Review lease and purchase candidates.
- Screen for zoning, parking, clear height, HVAC, and power.
- Obtain preliminary contractor estimates.
- Prepare investor package.
- Negotiate LOI on preferred property.
- Begin financing applications.

Phase 3 — Due Diligence, Design, and Permitting: Month 3–5

- Confirm zoning and change-of-use path.
- Obtain architectural and MEP plans.
- Confirm HVAC requirements.
- Confirm fire, ADA, restroom, parking, and egress requirements.
- Finalize lease or purchase agreement.
- Submit permits.
- Continue founding-membership campaign.

Phase 4 — Buildout and Pre-Sales: Month 5–8

- Court construction.
- HVAC/electrical/lighting installation.
- Restroom/lounge/check-in buildout.
- Install software, signage, security, POS.
- Hire staff and contract coaches.
- Sell founding memberships.
- Book first leagues and clinics.

Phase 5 — Soft Opening: Month 8–9

- Open with limited hours.
- Test booking, staffing, cleaning, lighting, HVAC, and customer flow.
- Run founder events and beginner clinics.
- Collect player feedback.
- Adjust pricing and schedule.

Phase 6 — Full Launch: Month 9–12

- Expand hours.
- Launch leagues, tournaments, clinics, and corporate events.
- Increase marketing.
- Track utilization and member retention.

- Decide whether to expand hours, add courts, or prepare second location.

A purchase-based project may require 12–18 months depending on financing, closing, permitting, and construction complexity.

15. Risks and Mitigation

Risk: Market is more competitive than expected

Mitigation: Define the facility as climate-controlled, training-centered, professionally programmed, and socially organized, not merely another court warehouse.

Risk: Buildout costs exceed budget

Mitigation: Do not sign without contractor walk-through, HVAC estimate, electrical review, roof review, and 15–20% contingency.

Risk: Zoning or Certificate of Occupancy delays

Mitigation: Make lease or purchase contingent on zoning, permitting, and occupancy approval.

Risk: Summer demand is high but winter outdoor play competes

Mitigation: Build membership, leagues, coaching, and events so the business is not weather-only.

Risk: Coach dependency

Mitigation: Use a head pro plus multiple contractors; do not let one coach control the entire program.

Risk: Parking constraints

Mitigation: Reject buildings without adequate parking or shared-parking rights.

Risk: Liability and injuries

Mitigation: Proper flooring, spacing, waivers, insurance, AED, first-aid training, safety policies, and heat/cooling protocols.

Risk: No showers may limit premium appeal

Mitigation: Position Phase 1 as economical, clean, efficient, and sport-focused. Add showers only if member demand justifies the capital cost.