

CLASH LEAGUE PICKLEBALL™

THE COMPLETE COMPETITIVE LEAGUE FORMAT

Redesigned from the ground up for fairness, excitement, and reliability

FORMAT AT A GLANCE

- 4-player teams | 3 matches per night | No subs — ever
- Side-out scoring (earn the right to serve, then score)
- Games to 15 — win by 1 after 14-14
- Attendance Integrity System — forfeit rules with teeth
- Match Points + Point Differential for standings
- Knockout Playoffs — single-elimination, seeded by record
- Season Champion earns the Golden Paddle Trophy

2026 EDITION | OFFICIAL LEAGUE OPERATIONS MANUAL

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SECTION 1 — THE PROBLEM WITH CURRENT LEAGUE FORMATS

Before designing a solution, we must be honest about what is broken. League pickleball — particularly formats modeled after Major League Pickleball (MLP) — suffers from a cluster of structural flaws that undermine competitive integrity, player commitment, and fun. Here is a frank diagnosis.

X Rally Scoring Removes Strategy & Tension

Every rally scores a point regardless of who is serving. This speeds up games but eliminates the classic 'earn the right to score' dynamic. It rewards luck over sustained pressure and makes comebacks feel arbitrary. Momentum swings are cheap.

X Players Calling In Sick / No-Shows

In formats where any 4 players can show up and sub in freely, commitment drops. Players who are losing badly or simply bored will 'get sick.' There is zero structural disincentive. Teams get hurt not by opponents — but by their own roster.

X Unlimited or Loose Substitution Rules

When ringers or higher-rated players can sub in mid-match, the entire premise of a team is destroyed. You are no longer competing against the team you registered against. Rosters become fluid and meaningless.

X Total Points / Total Games Standings

Using raw point totals across a season rewards teams that played more games or had lopsided blowout wins. A team that wins 15-1, 15-1 looks identical in the standings to a team that grinds out 15-13, 15-13 wins. There is no differentiation for competitive quality.

X Unbalanced Match Lengths & Unpredictability

Rally scoring to 11 or 15 can produce 6-minute blowouts or 30-minute wars. Court scheduling, venue operators, and spectators cannot plan around this. Leagues run late, courts back up, and energy collapses.

X No Competitive Identity — Teams Feel Disposable

Without strict roster rules, team chemistry never develops. Players feel no loyalty to their team because their team changes every week. This kills the social glue that makes recreational leagues addictive long-term.

X Dreher Effect — Tanking for Better Seeding

In formats where total points matter in tiebreakers, trailing teams have incentive to give up points strategically. This corrupts competitive integrity.

SECTION 2 — CORE PHILOSOPHY & DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Clash League Pickleball was designed from seven foundational principles. Every rule in this document traces back to at least one of these:

#	PRINCIPLE	WHAT IT MEANS
1	EARN IT	Points and games must be earned through serving — not gifted by luck of the rally.
2	COMMIT TO IT	Teams are contracts. If you register, you show up. Structural consequences enforce this.
3	COMPETE AS A TEAM	Rosters are locked. You win and lose as the unit you built. No ringers. No mercenaries.
4	KEEP IT MOVING	Match formats are time-predictable. Every court block is respected. Fun doesn't wait.
5	REWARD QUALITY	Standings reward winning close games, not just racking up blowouts. Grit matters.
6	MAKE IT LEGIBLE	Every player should understand the score, standings, and stakes at all times.
7	PROTECT THE CULTURE	Spirit, sportsmanship, and fun are structural — not just hoped for.

SECTION 3 — TEAM STRUCTURE & ROSTER RULES

3.1 Roster Composition

- Each team registers exactly 6 players — 4 starters + 2 designated alternates.
- All 6 players must be registered and rated before the season begins.
- Rosters are LOCKED after Week 1. No additions after the lock date.
- One (1) mid-season roster substitution is allowed via a formal Roster Waiver Request, approved by the League Commissioner, for injury/relocation only.
- Teams may carry up to 2 alternates but may never field more than 4 players at once.

3.2 Skill Rating & Balanced Rosters

- All players carry a Clash Rating (CR) — a numeric skill score from 2.0 to 6.0 based on self-rating, confirmed by Commissioner review in Season 1.
- A team's Total Roster Rating (TRR) = sum of the 4 starting players' Clash Ratings.
- League may enforce a TRR Cap to prevent stacking. Cap announced before registration.
- Alternates are rated but do not count toward TRR unless subbing in (see Section 6).
- After Season 1, ratings update automatically based on performance data.

3.3 Team Identity & Naming

- Teams must register a team name and a primary color.
- Team names may not duplicate any other team in the league.
- Teams are encouraged to wear coordinating attire — not required but earns Spirit Points.

ROSTER LOCKOUT RULE: No player may compete for a team unless they are on that team's official registered roster. Violation = automatic match forfeit.

SECTION 4 — THE CLASH LEAGUE MATCH FORMAT

A Clash League match consists of THREE (3) individual games played sequentially on the same court. Each game is played as a doubles game (2v2). The team that wins 2 of 3 games wins the MATCH and earns 2 Match Points. A split (1-1 after 2 games) forces a decisive Game 3.

4.1 Game Line-ups — The Clash Rotation

- GAME 1 — Mixed Doubles: One male + one female player per side (if applicable to your league division). In open or same-gender leagues, any 2 of 4 starters selected by team captain.
- GAME 2 — Open Doubles: Any 2 of the remaining 4 starters (the two who did NOT play Game 1).
- GAME 3 — Dream Team: Each captain selects their BEST 2 players from all 4 starters. Players who played Games 1 or 2 are eligible. This is the decisive game.
- Captain must submit the Game 1 and Game 2 line-ups on the official sheet BEFORE the match begins.
- No line-up changes once submitted. Game 3 captains select verbally after Game 2 ends.

4.2 Game Scoring — Games to 15, Side-Out

- Each game is played to 15 points using SIDE-OUT SCORING (see Section 5 for full details).
- You must WIN BY 1 point — there is NO win-by-2 requirement.
- At 14-14, the next team to score while serving wins. No deuce extension.
- The first team to reach 15 while holding serve wins the game.
- Games are NOT timed — but average 18-24 minutes under this format.

4.3 Match Time Cap

- Total match time cap is 75 minutes from first serve.
- If the time cap is reached mid-game, the game in progress is completed normally.
- If the match is tied 1-1 and time is called before Game 3 begins, a 7-point mini-game decides the match (side-out, same rules, first to 7).
- This protects court scheduling while preserving competitive resolution.

GAME	FORMAT	PLAYERS	TO WIN	MATCH POINTS
Game 1	Doubles	2 of 4 starters	First to 15	1 Game Point
Game 2	Doubles	Other 2 starters	First to 15	1 Game Point
Game 3	Doubles (decisive)	Best 2 of 4 (captain's pick)	First to 15	1 Game Point → Match Win
If tied 1-1 + time cap	Mini-Game	Same as Game 3	First to 7	Decides match

SECTION 5 — SIDE-OUT SCORING SYSTEM

Clash League uses a modernized Side-Out scoring system. This is the heart of what makes the format strategically rich, tense, and satisfying. Here is exactly how it works:

5.1 The Core Rule

- YOU CAN ONLY SCORE A POINT WHEN YOUR TEAM IS SERVING.
- If the receiving team wins the rally, they earn the SERVE — but NOT a point.
- A point is only added to the scoreboard when the serving team wins the rally.
- This means every point is truly earned through sustained offensive pressure.

SITUATION	RESULT
Serving team wins the rally	Serving team scores +1 point. Same team serves again.
Receiving team wins the rally	Serve transfers to receiving team. Score does NOT change.
Serving team reaches 15	Game over — serving team wins.
Score reaches 14-14	Next team to score while serving wins. No extensions.

5.2 First Serve of the Game

- A coin flip or rally determines who serves first in Game 1.
- The loser of Game 1 serves first in Game 2 (slight compensation).
- For Game 3, a second coin flip determines first serve.
- The serving team in any game starts with a ZERO score — there is no 'stacking' advantage.

5.3 Doubles Serving Order

- Standard pickleball serving rotation applies within each team:
- Server 1 serves until a side-out; then Server 2 serves; then side-out gives serve to opponents.
- Each time serve returns to a team, they restart from Server 1 (the player who did not serve last).
- Teams track their own serving rotation. Opponents may call a serving order violation.

5.4 Why Side-Out Scoring is Better

METRIC	RALLY SCORING	SIDE-OUT (CLASH)
Strategy	Low — every rally equal	HIGH — serving runs are momentum gold
Comebacks	Cheap — one lucky streak	EARNED — must break serve AND hold
Tension	Moderate	EXTREME at 14-14

Game Length	Short, often anti-climactic	Consistent 18-25 min
Audience appeal	Fast but flat	Builds narrative & momentum arcs
Skill expression	Randomness dilutes skill	Consistency rewarded over time

SECTION 6 — ATTENDANCE & SUBSTITUTION: THE INTEGRITY SYSTEM

This section addresses the single biggest cultural problem in recreational league pickleball: players not showing up and teams replacing them with anyone available. Clash League treats attendance as a CONTRACTUAL COMMITMENT.

6.1 The Roster Contract

- When a player registers on a team, they sign (physically or digitally) the Roster Contract.
- The contract states they commit to attending ALL scheduled matches in the regular season.
- A player who cannot attend must notify their Team Captain at least 24 hours in advance.
- Emergencies (verified illness, family emergency, work crisis) are handled under the Emergency Protocol (see 6.4).

6.2 Substitution Rules — Strict & Non-Negotiable

- REGISTERED ALTERNATES ONLY: The only legal substitute is a player already on your 6-person registered roster (the 2 alternates).
- NO OUTSIDE SUBS: Under no circumstances may a non-rostered player compete. This includes friends, significant others, or other league players from different teams.
- ALTERNATE RATING RESTRICTION: An alternate may only sub in for a starter with a Clash Rating equal to or lower than their own. You cannot upgrade your lineup via injury.
- ONE ALTERNATE ACTIVE PER MATCH: Only one alternate may play in any single match night.
- ADVANCE NOTICE: The team captain must notify the League Commissioner by 6 PM on match day if an alternate will be used. Last-minute no-shows without notice trigger the Default Protocol.

6.3 Default Protocol — When Teams Are Short

SCENARIO	CONSEQUENCE
4 players present (full roster)	Normal match — no penalty
3 players present, 1 absent (Forfeit Game 2 Table)	3v4 in Games 1 & 3 at their own risk, OR accepts 0-1 game loss for that game.
2 players present	Full match forfeit. Opponents receive 2 Match Points automatically.
0-1 players present / no-show	Match forfeit + absent player(s) receive Integrity Strike.
Team forfeits 3+ times in season	Team may be removed from playoffs or league standings adjusted.

6.4 The Integrity Strike System

- Each unexcused absence earns the absent player 1 INTEGRITY STRIKE.
- 2 Integrity Strikes = player suspended for 1 match (team must play with alternates or take forfeit).

- 3 Integrity Strikes = player removed from roster. Team may submit a Roster Waiver to add a replacement.
- Verified emergencies (doctor's note, verifiable work obligation, documented family emergency) submitted within 48 hours are excused and carry NO strike.
- Strike records are public and visible in the league standings portal.

6.5 The Attendance Bonus

To incentivize perfect attendance positively: any team with ZERO unexcused absences through the full regular season earns +1 BONUS MATCH POINT added to their final standings total. This is the Attendance Bonus — it can be the difference in a tiebreaker.

SECTION 7 — STANDINGS, POINTS & TIEBREAKERS

Clash League standings are designed to reward winning, reward quality of competition, and never reward running up the score for statistical padding.

7.1 Match Points (Primary Standing Metric)

- WIN a match (2-1 or 2-0 in games): +2 MATCH POINTS
- LOSE a match (0-2 or 1-2 in games): +0 Match Points
- SPLIT result is impossible under this format — every match has a winner.
- FORFEIT WIN: Team receives 2 Match Points. Forfeiting team receives 0.
- Attendance Bonus: +1 Match Point at season end for perfect attendance (see 6.5).

7.2 Game Points (Secondary Metric)

- Each individual game (within a match) also carries a Game Point.
- WIN a game: +1 Game Point to that team.
- LOSE a game: +0 Game Points.
- Maximum 3 Game Points available per match (one per game).
- Game Points are used as the FIRST TIEBREAKER in standings.

7.3 Point Differential (Third Metric)

- Point Differential (PD) = total points scored MINUS total points allowed across all games played.
- PD is the SECOND TIEBREAKER after Game Points.
- IMPORTANT: PD is CAPPED at +7 per game. A 15-2 win counts as +7, NOT +13. This eliminates all incentive to run up scores and rewards consistent competitive play.
- A 15-13 win = +2 PD. A 15-5 win = +7 PD (capped). A 15-14 win = +1 PD.

7.4 Standings Order — Full Tiebreaker Chain

PRIORITY	METRIC	DESCRIPTION
1st	Match Points	Primary determinant — wins above all else
2nd	Game Points	Individual game wins across the season
3rd	Point Differential (capped ±7/game)	Quality of wins AND losses
4th	Head-to-Head Match Result	Direct result between tied teams
5th	Head-to-Head Game Points	Game wins in head-to-head matches only
6th	Commissioner's Coin Flip	Only used if all above are identical

7.5 Sample Standings Table

TEAM	W	L	MP	GP	PD	AB	RANK
Thunder Dinks	7	1	14	19	+38	YES	1
Net Assassins	6	2	12	17	+29	YES	2
Dink Dynasty	6	2	12	16	+31	NO	3
Smash Bros	5	3	10	14	+11	NO	4
The Picklers	4	4	8	11	-5	YES	5
Court Jesters	2	6	4	8	-22	NO	6
Paddle Smackers	1	7	2	5	-41	NO	7
Wild Cards	1	7	2	6	-41	YES	8

Note: Thunder Dinks (14 MP = 13 base + 1 Attendance Bonus) holds 1st. Net Assassins rank 2nd over Dink Dynasty on Game Points (17 > 16) despite Dynasty having higher PD. This is intentional — game wins matter more than run differential.

SECTION 8 — SEASON STRUCTURE & SCHEDULE

Clash League is designed for an 8–12 week regular season with a 2-week playoff. The following structure applies to an 8-team league (scale up/down as needed).

8.1 Season Calendar (8-Team Example)

WEEK	EVENT	DETAILS
Pre-Season	Registration & Rating	Players rated, rosters formed, TRR verified, contracts signed
Week 1	Opening Night + Roster Lock	Matches begin. Roster lock after all Week 1 matches complete.
Weeks 2–6	Regular Season	Each team plays once per week. Full round-robin over 7 weeks.
Week 7	Regular Season Final	Last regular season matches. Standings finalized by Sunday.
Week 8	Playoff Quarterfinals	Seeds 1v8, 2v7, 3v6, 4v5 — single elimination
Week 9	Playoff Semifinals	4 teams → 2 — best-of-3 match format
Week 10	CHAMPIONSHIP NIGHT	Finals + 3rd Place Match + Awards Ceremony

8.2 Scheduling Principles

- All matches are scheduled on designated League Nights (e.g. Tuesday evenings).
- Match start times are staggered every 90 minutes: 6:00 PM, 7:30 PM, 9:00 PM.
- Home/Away designation rotates each week for court assignment purposes.
- Schedules are posted at least 2 weeks in advance. No schedule changes within 72 hours unless due to facility emergency.
- Rain/facility cancellations are made up in a designated make-up week (Week 7 buffer).

8.3 Bye Weeks & Odd Numbers

- Odd-numbered leagues (5, 7, 9 teams) assign bye weeks rotating by inverse standings.
- The current LAST-PLACE team gets the bye first. This creates slight competitive balance.
- A bye week counts as 0-0 for the week — no Match Points awarded or deducted.
- Bye weeks do not affect the Attendance Bonus calculation.

8.4 Pre-Match Warm-Up Protocol

- Teams are given exactly 8 minutes of warm-up time on court before the first serve.
- The warm-up clock starts when both teams are present on court.
- If a team is not ready within 5 minutes of the scheduled start time, they forfeit warm-up.
- If a team is not ready within 15 minutes of scheduled start, Game 1 is forfeited.

SECTION 9 — PLAYOFF FORMAT

The Clash League Playoffs are a single-elimination bracket seeded by regular season standings. Every playoff match uses the same 3-game format as the regular season — no changes to game rules.

9.1 Playoff Seeding & Eligibility

- Top 4 teams in an 8-team league qualify for playoffs (top 50% — earns participation meaning).
- In a 10-12 team league, top 6 teams qualify.
- Teams with 2+ forfeits during the regular season are **PLAYOFF INELIGIBLE** regardless of record.
- Seeding follows final regular season standings (Match Points → tiebreakers as in Section 7).

9.2 Bracket Structure (8-Team League)

ROUND	MATCHUP	FORMAT	ADVANCEMENT
Quarterfinals (Week 8)	Seed 1 vs Seed 4 Seed 2 vs Seed 3	Best of 3 games (standard Clash format)	Winners advance to Semis
Semifinals (Week 9)	QF Winner 1 vs QF Winner 2 (highest seed gets home court)	Best of 3 games	Winners advance to Finals Losers play 3rd Place
3rd Place (Week 10)	SF Loser 1 vs SF Loser 2	Best of 3 games	Earns Bronze placement
CHAMPIONSHIP (Week 10)	SF Winner 1 vs SF Winner 2	Best of 3 games (Game 3 always played)	Champion earns Golden Paddle

9.3 Championship Night Special Rules

- The Championship match **ALWAYS** plays all 3 games — even if one team wins the first two.
- This ensures the crowd gets a full show and the champion is truly tested.
- The third game in Championship matches uses a called 'Golden Game' format: side-out scoring to 15, but each team may call one 60-second **TIME-OUT** during this game only.
- The Championship MVP is voted by both captains immediately after the match — one vote each, and they may not vote for their own player. Tie = both players are co-MVPs.
- The Golden Paddle Trophy is awarded at the post-match ceremony.

9.4 Playoff Attendance Rules

- Playoff attendance rules are stricter than regular season.
- Both teams must be at full strength or have a registered alternate available.
- No forfeit wins are awarded in playoffs — if a team cannot field 4 players, a 48-hour postponement is allowed **ONCE**. If still unable, they are eliminated.
- All regular season Integrity Strike rules still apply.

SECTION 10 — COURT ETIQUETTE & SPIRIT RULES

Clash League is competitive — but it is also a community. The Spirit System exists to protect the culture that makes recreational pickleball special. Fun and intensity are not opposites. Both are required.

10.1 Spirit Points System

- After each match, both captains fill out a 2-minute Spirit Card rating the opposing team.
- Categories rated 1-5: Sportsmanship, Line Calls, Energy, Hospitality.
- Spirit Points are tracked across the season. A team's average Spirit Score is published.
- At season end, the highest-Spirit-rated team earns the SPIRIT TROPHY — a separate award from the performance standings.
- Spirit Score does NOT affect the competitive standings — it is purely recognition.

10.2 Conduct Rules

BEHAVIOR	CONSEQUENCE
Deliberate line call cheating (reported by 2+ witnesses)	Loss of 1 Game Point from that match
Unsportsmanlike conduct (verbal abuse, paddle throwing)	Player removed from current game. Alternate must sub in.
Repeated unsportsmanlike conduct (2+ incidents in season)	Player suspended for 1 match
Physical altercation	Immediate removal from league. No refund.
Deliberately stalling / delay of game	Warning, then 1 point awarded to opponents
Coaching from sidelines during active play	Warning first offense; Spirit Card deduction second offense

10.3 Positive Spirit Rules

- Teams are encouraged to cheer for great shots — including great shots by opponents.
- Post-match handshakes are mandatory. Each player shakes hands with all 4 opponents.
- Captains exchange a verbal 'Good match' before handshakes begin.
- Teams that bring snacks/drinks to share with opponents earn an automatic +3 Spirit Points.
- The Commissioner may award a 'Moment of the Week' for an outstanding spirit act — recognized at the following week's matches.

SECTION 11 — QUICK REFERENCE CARD

Print this page and post it at the court.

CATEGORY	RULE
Team Size	6 players (4 starters + 2 alternates). Roster locked after Week 1.
Games per Match	3 games. Win 2 of 3 to win the match.
Scoring	Side-Out: only score when serving. Games to 15. Win by 1.
At 14-14	Next team to score WHILE SERVING wins. No extensions.
Substitutions	Registered alternates ONLY. No outside subs. Ever.
No-Show	Integrity Strike. 2 strikes = 1-match suspension.
Match Points	Win = +2 MP. Loss = +0 MP.
Game Points	Each game won = +1 GP (tiebreaker).
Point Diff Cap	±7 per game max. 15-2 win = +7 PD, not +13.
Attendance Bonus	+1 MP at season end for zero unexcused absences.
Time Cap	75 minutes. If tied 1-1 at cap: 7-point mini-game.
Playoffs	Top 4 of 8 teams. Single elimination. No forfeit wins.
Championship	All 3 games played. Golden Game has 1 time-out per team.
Spirit Card	Fill out after every match. Spirit Trophy at season end.
Line Calls	Each team calls their own side. Cheating = Game Point penalty.
Warm-Up	8 minutes. Late 5+ min = no warm-up. Late 15+ min = Game 1 forfeit.

"Show up. Earn it. Clash."