

New sport is a kick in the ace

Thomas Hoffarth, Columnist

If you've bought into the idea that hybrid technology is the way to go, Thomas Dooley has something to show you. He promises it's a gas.

The former U.S. national team soccer captain doesn't claim to have any patents on this thing he modestly refers to as Soccer-Tennis. The energy-efficient activity has long been used as a way for kickballers young and old to hone their ball-control and passing skills on an area much smaller than the grassy, pot-holed pitch.

But the thing Dooley hopes to do today by filling a few thousand seats at the Los Angeles Tennis Center on the UCLA campus is, by inviting a few of his high-profile soccer pals from around the world and throwing a few thousand dollars on the table, show the open-minded sports fans of Southern California that there's more than one way to crossdress.

"Think of playing tennis with soccer skills - no racquet, no hands, but anything else," said Dooley, who is basically the self-appointed commissioner of the American Soccer-Tennis Organization (ASTO) and can make up the rules as he goes along. "You move the ball around to find the open spot on the court to place it for a point. But not like soccer, you don't focus on putting the ball in the net. Here, you avoid the net."

It's three on a side (using the full tennis court). Scoring is like volleyball. Serving involves drop-kicking. Three touches and it has to go back over the net. Diving headshots and even the flashy bicycle kicks are encouraged because of the fact the tennis court is covered in XL Turf, the high-tech synthetic grass.

The fun really comes in, Dooley says, when the players get creative and even start a little trash talking.

A little John McEnroe. A little Alexi Lalas.

Dooley, a German native who was recruited into the American soccer movement in the early '90s

because his birth father was a member of the U.S. Army, says a friend of his in Germany pitched this cross-pollinated sport idea because of the fact many tennis courts in his country were going unused in the post-Steffi Graf and Boris Becker era. The idea to launch this as a viable spectator and participatory sport came after Dooley, who lives with his family in Laguna Niguel and runs a youth soccer academy in Aliso Viejo, saw potential in having it seep into the many tennis venues in Southern California as the focus begins on the World Cup in Dooley's native land.

Dooley, a torrid defensive midfielder on the U.S.'s '94 and '98 World Cup teams who turns 45 this week, kind of threw together this event with little time to promote it. His vision five years from now is to have it become international for both men and women, professionals and amateurs, ages 15 to 60. Exposing it to youngsters now is key, he says, because "they learn a lot from watching the best use the best techniques, and on a tennis court, you can get close enough to hear them breathe, and talk and laugh."

In the evolving high-tech sports world, the only real hybrids that seem to catch on are the performance-enhancing gizmos, such as bikes, golf clubs or shoes. Beach tennis - which calls itself hybridized tennis, badminton and beach volleyball - has started to catch on in some parts of the country and last month staged an event in Santa Monica.

But some hair-brained scheme to take two established global sports that, separately, can be quite tedious to watch and smash them together - remember the movie "BASEketball?" It's no home run/slam dunk.

"Explain what hybrid means, actually," asked Dooley, who, while able to speak fluent English, does hit a road bump now and then with the language. "I have never really heard that name. It's not a word used much in Germany.

"I just agreed to use it because the graphic designer for our event brought it up to use on our flyers. Is a triathlon a hybrid?"

We'll allow Dooley to hit the crossbar with that one.

said.