

American master praises Ugandan talent

Global Inspiration. Young Ugandan athletes at Dream Team Pickleball Academy are impressing visiting US player John Murphy with their skill, speed and keenness

ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI

John Murphy and Abdul-Latif Ntale, 12, were strangers but played like a familiar duo that had trained and played together for years.

"He's really good and confident," said Murphy, who travelled for 42 hours from Green Bay, Wisconsin, to

play with Dream Team Pickleball Academy in Kikaaya, Bulenga. The Murphy-Ntale duo played several games, defeating Martin Kiberu and Rayhan Balina 11-8, before losing to Judah Kikku and James Mulwana 11-10, to finish fourth.

Murphy also paired with Madiat Namaganda—who won the girls' singles gold—and was really impressed by these rising stars.

"The kids have played really well.

They are smart," said Murphy, who has played pickleball for five years. "They've got more finesse than even some of the people I have played with (in the US). They hit the soft shots and the hard shots when they should and let the balls go out, when they need to. They move very well, they are quick and they are a lot of fun playing against."

Pickleball is an American sport which was popularised in the Covid-19 lockdown. But Murphy sees Uganda catching up with the world soon.

"Based on what I've seen today, it's not gonna take you long. Because I've heard that some of these girls have played for only three months but they are excellent. They can play with some of the guys I play with [back home]. The boys are also fantastic, and I don't think they have played that long. So here in Africa, you guys are going to catch up really quick."

To get there though, Murphy said, the young boys must keep playing. "Experience matters. There's a difference between playing three

months, six months, one year. Just keep playing. You will learn the little nuances of the game."

These include improving on the soft game, the dinking, getting to the kitchen, and hit more soft shots. The admiration was mutual. "I need to watch his videos," said Hassan Muyanja, who is in Primary Six.

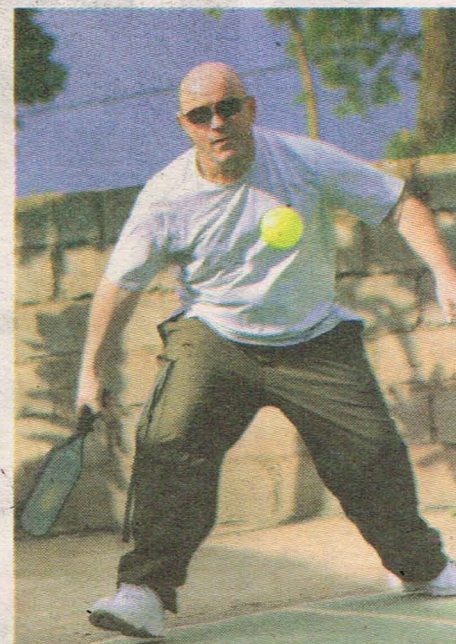
"I wish he could visit us more regularly," said another.

Murphy visited Uganda three years ago, for safari. But this time he came to tour, play pickleball and donate 11 paddles, 30 balls, nine pairs of sneakers, 60 rolls of grip tape and medals.

"In Green Bay, we have a pickleball community of about 100 players and we gathered too much stuff for me to carry at once. There's still a lot in my house to bring next time," Murphy said.

THE TALKING POINT

Future Potential. John Murphy says Uganda's young pickleball players are on the rise, already mastering soft and hard shots with impressive game sense. Club founder Shafick Kabanda welcomed Murphy's donation of equipment praising the programme for nurturing talent.



Skill Showcase. John Murphy demonstrates his pickleball techniques, thrilling the young players at Dream Team Academy and inspiring the next generation of Ugandan talent.



Podium Finish.

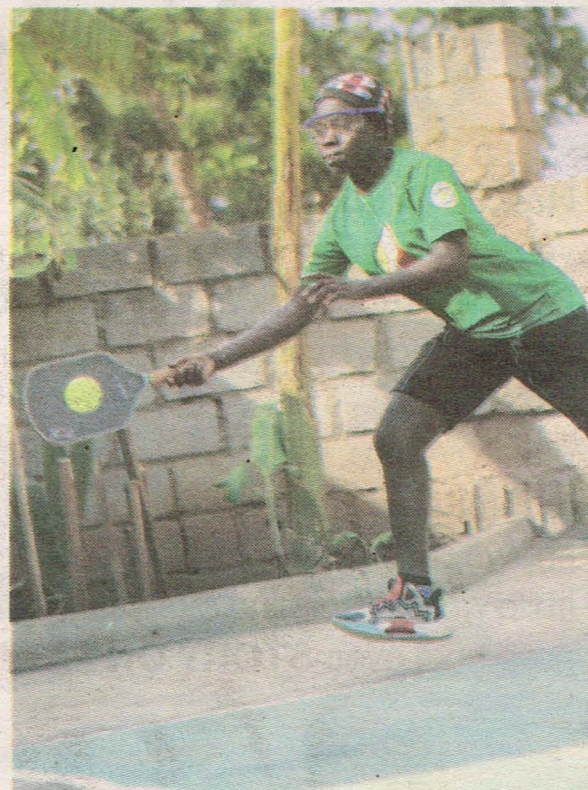
The medal winners celebrate their success at the Dream Team Pickleball Academy tournament, a testament to their skill, determination, and rapid rise in the sport.



One For The Future. Abdul-Latif Ntale, a promising young talent at Dream Team Pickleball Academy, showed that he had silky skills.

Sharp Reflex.

A young player stretches to return a ball from a tight angle during a Dream Team Pickleball Academy match. PHOTOS/ ABDUL-NASSER SSEMUGABI



Golden Girl. Madiat Namaganda worked her way to the girls' singles title, marking a standout performance.

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PADDLE