COBRA PICKLEBALL · MARKET & STRATEGY PORTFOLIO SECTION 00

Executive Summary

The pickleball paddle business, and where Cobra can win · September 19, 2026 · Prepared by Pang for Ryan Eckert · Confidential

This portfolio assesses the U.S. pickleball paddle industry as a business and defines a strategy for Cobra Pickleball, a new premium American-branded paddle company. Every figure is labelled DISCLOSED SELF-REPORTED or ESTIMATE ; sources and limitations are in Section 06.

The bottom line

The sport is genuinely large and healthy, but the **paddle business is consolidating hard and the easy-money window is closing.** The popular story — "a few people building a $10M paddle brand from a garage" — is real for a small handful and **survivorship bias** for everyone else: of 1,377 brands on the USA Pickleball approved list, **670 (49%) certified a single paddle and never returned**, and 375 of those registered during the 2023–24 boom and vanished.

24.3M
US players 2025 — but H1 2026 growth was just +1.3%, the first real slowdown in five years

1,377
paddle brands ever certified; 49% made one paddle and disappeared

<$1B
total pickleball equipment market — smaller than the $3B facility market

~56%
drop in new-paddle certifications from the 2024 peak

What the money actually looks like

A premium $170 paddle carries a fat gross margin (~80%), but it is eaten downstream by the **cost of acquiring each customer** — that, not manufacturing, is what kills small brands, and it is rising as the market crowds. A real founder's disclosed numbers show ~$50 contribution per paddle before any salary, marketing or R&D. A 63-year-old maker (GAMMA) just filed Chapter 11 on $14M of sales, losing $3.3M — proof that revenue alone does not equal profit here.

The "$10–15M with a few employees" story, specifically

The clearest real example of the claim is **11Six24**: a single founder (ex-HubSpot) who **did not hire his first employee until ~2025**, self-reports a **~$10M brand "built mostly on his own,"** and appeared on a podcast titled "$15M... 1 Employee." SELF-REPORTED **CRBN** is the other, larger example (~$20M ESTIMATE) — but with ~25 staff, not "a few."

How it is even possible: a paddle brand can be started for roughly **$20,000** by buying "catalog" paddles from the same overseas carbon factories every brand uses and adding a logo; on a $170 paddle the gross margin is ~80%, so a winner scales fast and lean. ESTIMATE **Why almost no one repeats it:** those two are the survivors of a field where 670 of 1,377 brands made one paddle and vanished — you hear the winners, not the graveyard — and the entry window has since narrowed (Sections 02 & 04).

Cobra's opportunity

Almost every small brand is crammed into a **value-carbon price war** ($85–150, same carbon, half the price, beloved on word-of-mouth) that Cobra cannot and should not fight. But the **premium American / patriotic lane is genuinely open** — no small brand owns "premium, American, carbon, $160+." The only whole-brand patriotic player sits at ~$50 and looks like a struggling budget launch. Cobra already stands in that empty, defensible lane, and the **Ivan Lendl signature is an anchor no value brand can copy.**

> **Recommendation, in one line:** Own the premium patriotic lane with genuine substance (American brand, veteran/first-responder program, the Lendl name) — not just flag graphics; hold price above the value war; make durability and warranty a headline; win customers through organic demand instead of paid ads; and never claim "Made in USA," which is a real FTC risk. Full detail in Section 05.