Industry Dynamics

Saturation, the shakeout, consolidation, the patent war, and quality · September 19, 2026 · Prepared by Pang for Ryan Eckert · Confidential

The single most important context for a new entrant: the paddle business is in an active shakeout. Entry costs have risen, legal risk has arrived, and the ways to stand out have narrowed.

Saturation and the shakeout (measured directly)

A scrape of the USA Pickleball approved-paddle list (Sept 2026) found:

1,377 distinct brands on the approved list	**670** brands (49%) with exactly one approved paddle	**13.8%** share of all paddles held by the top 10 brands	**~56%** fall in new certifications vs the 2024 peak (1,298 → ~572 pace)

DISCLOSED Author's measurement of equipment.usapickleball.org (98.6% coverage), independently reproducing The Dink's June 2026 analysis. 375 of the 670 one-paddle brands registered in 2023–24 and never returned. Only ~47 brands (~3%) hold pro-play (UPA-A) certification.

Consolidation — capital is rolling the sport up

- **Selkirk** took a $30M investment (~$200M valuation) and is buying rivals (Bread & Butter, ProLite). DISCLOSED
- **Paddletek** is a PE portfolio company (Thirty-5 Capital) rolling up brands (bought PIKKL, 2026). DISCLOSED
- **Apollo Sports Capital** led a $225M investment in Pickleball Inc. (PPA Tour, MLP, Pickleball Central). DISCLOSED

Undefended, undifferentiated brands get bought or buried in this environment — but a distinctive niche brand is also an acquisition target, which is a viable exit.

The patent war

In April 2026 **JOOLA filed an ITC complaint against 11 brands** (Franklin, Paddletek, Engage, Proton, Diadem, Volair, ProXR, Adidas and others) over its foam "propulsion core." DISCLOSED The ITC remedy blocks products from the U.S. market. As of Sept 2026, **8 of 11 had settled** — paying royalties and phasing out specific paddles (patents run to 2043). A well-resourced incumbent can absorb this; a small brand using the standard foam playbook cannot.

The quality crisis: delamination / core-crush

Thermoformed paddles break down internally ("core crush"), which paradoxically makes them *more* powerful — so some brands treated a defect as a feature. This triggered decertifications, recalls and refunds: JOOLA's Gen 3 was delisted and refunded; Vatic cancelled and refunded its entire Oni pre-order. Durability is now the category's most-discussed reputation killer — and, for Cobra, an open lane (see Section 05).

The cost of entry has risen

Certifying paddles is now a real fixed cost: **$2,500** USAP manufacturer registration DISCLOSED plus per-paddle testing fees, and for pro-play **$10,000/yr + $3,000/paddle** (UPA-A), with a ~40% failure rate and a $2,000 retest fee. DISCLOSED Meanwhile power and spin are capped by rule, most paddles come from the same handful of Chinese factories, and Asian brands are now entering directly at half price — so **differentiation on specs is effectively dead.**