



DAVE BLACK

Led by America's best prospect, Chris Jogis, birds of a feather flock together

The World's Fastest Birdie

Badminton makes it into the Olympic ring

There's a new event this summer at Barcelona, and it could be called Watch the Birdie. The official name, however, is badminton. Yes, badminton. Having survived tryouts at the 1972 Games in Munich and the 1988 Games in Seoul, it has now achieved full medal status. Badminton as an Olympic sport? What next, roller hockey? (Actually, yes; roller hockey is a demonstration sport in Barcelona, and if it fares well, it, too, could be a gold-medal contender.)

Competitive badminton is a far cry from the garden-variety game, where families set up the net in the backyard and lazily ping the plastic shuttlecock back and forth while burgers sizzle on the barbie. And none of this plastic stuff for the pros—they use a shuttlecock made of 16 goose feathers taken from the identical wings of four different geese. Played indoors (less wind to blow the bird around), badminton demands speed, quick reflexes and stamina. It is the world's fastest racquet sport—the shuttlecock can come off the racquet at up to 200 mph, and, unlike a tennis ball, it never touches the ground. The humans move almost as quickly: in the course of a one-hour match, a player can run up to six miles. Mark Hodges, executive director of the U.S. Badminton Association, says that in one match he watched, the bird flew over the net 72 times in 40 seconds. Makes one want to head straight back to the lawn chair.

Modern badminton was launched at a party on the estate of the Duke of Beaufort in 1873. British military officers stationed in India discovered poona, a game similar to lawn tennis. When they returned to England, they brought the game with them. The duke took quite a fancy to it and introduced it to British society at his country manor, Badminton, in Gloucestershire. (And what did he serve at the eponymous estate? Sandwiches, of course.) The first badminton club in the United States opened in New York City in 1878, and it quickly became a playground of the rich and famous.

The U.S. players are neither. Since bad-

minton is seldom mentioned in the same breath as "virility," there are no million-dollar sneaker contracts. "Reebok offered to give me one pair of shoes to wear at the Olympics," said Joy Kitzmiller of Manhattan Beach, Calif., a former mathematics teacher and one of three women representing the United States in Barcelona. Three men are also going to compete in the singles and doubles.

But don't expect to hear the American national anthem at the medal ceremonies. Chris Jogis is the No. 1 U.S. player, but he's ranked 63rd in the world. The favorites come from Indonesia, China, Malaysia and South Korea. (The sport is so big in Korea that at the Seoul Games, the badminton-exhibition event was the first to sell out.) In Asia, badminton is an obsession, the players are treated as national heroes and the teams are heavily subsidized by the government. In one preliminary match in Malaysia, 21,000 people came out to watch the speeding birdie. "In Malaysia, there is a court in the backyard of every major house," says Hodges. "It's as common as having a swimming pool in California."

If they can't win a medal, the U.S. players want the next best thing: attention from prospective fans at home. They had hoped for television exposure so Americans could see how the game was really played. NBC had committed itself to airing the men's singles finals but then recently decided to dump it, ruffling, no doubt, a few feathers. Not even the pay-per-view Triple-Cast plans to show the match. Badminton may have the last laugh: more Americans will be playing the game than subscribing to the cable service.

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SUMMER
92
OLYMPICS

BADMINTON
AUG. 4

A British variation of an old Indian game has become the modern, high-speed rage of Asia

From a Duke's Manor to Your Neighborhood

	OFFICIAL BADMINTON	BACKYARD VERSION
Shuttlecock	Made from 16 goose feathers and cork covered with goatskin	Plastic
Racquet	A choice of graphite, ceramic, boron or fiberglass; gut string	Wood or aluminum
Venue	Indoors	Outdoors
Shuttle Speed	Up to 200 mph	That birdie won't fly
Uniform	75% of outfit must be white	No tweeds
Beverage	Coca-Cola	Check the fridge