



School children living the joys of badminton from the BVG programme in Alaska.

ICY ALASKA GOES WILD FOR BADMINTON



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TEXT BY DIANNE PIERRE | PAUL KNECHTEL & LISA WARD

Paul Knechtel and Lisa Ward have always had a passion for badminton.

Remarkably, Knechtel was introduced to the sport by a Canadian Eskimo in the 1970s. The married couple then decided to take their love for it from North Carolina all the way to Alaska, USA with a big idea. What came next, was astonishing.

In 2005, they founded [BadmintonGoesViral](#), a non-profit organisation which aims to promote healthy and active lifestyle through badminton to motivate the youth of Alaska and beyond.

The tandem introduced badminton to over 50,000 students – about seven per cent of Alaska's population – in Anchorage and BGV has been overseeing a successful grassroots programme since.

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Knechtel and Ward take badminton to Alaska.

profit
spinoff
with
Ward's
school
(where
she was
a
qualified
P.E.
coach) to
bring
people
from the

community into the school," reveals Knechtel.

"It was partly because of sports and for people with a story to tell about their discipline. We invited (retired American shuttler) Kevin Han who had just returned from the Athens 2004 Olympic Games to play badminton with children from the project."

Han left a lasting impression on the students with his "follow your dreams, set your goals and above all else, get your education" message.

In 2017, Knechtel and Ward decided to amplify their programme.

"Why? Because if you can make it in Alaska, you can make it anywhere," Knechtel quips. "Alaska is the largest state in the US, 1.5 times bigger than [the rest of the US] and the most ethnically diverse."

A shuttler herself, Ward brings a wealth of experience to BGV and was able to connect educators with a portfolio of ideas to provide a suitable badminton outreach programme for children.

“Through teacher workshops, conference presentations and in-class

instructions, we’ve reached well over 50,000 children in Alaska,” she says. “We saw how badminton could fit and spread on the programme and that’s our passion.”

Response from the educators proved fruitful as the programme continues to be used. American badminton stars [Iris Wang](#) and [Kyle Emerick](#) have been part of it in recent times.

“Wow, the reaction from the children just blossoms,” Ward excitedly admits.

Funding comes from individuals and the USA Badminton Education Foundation, with former players donating money to the programme. Neither Ward nor Knechtel take a cent.

The children’s enthusiasm for the sport makes Ward and Knechtel want to keep going – they have been inundated with positive feedback.



American Olympian Wang and a student enjoy playing ‘air guitar’.

Another fifth-grade student exclaimed: "This is the best game ever!"

For those in love with badminton, it would be hard to disagree with that.



Wang joins the students for a group picture during her recent visit.

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