

## **On and Off the Court**

*Maintenance of tennis surfaces is a good investment of time and money.*

*by Mary Helen Sprecher*

Almost any park can have playable tennis courts. After all, that just means courts are well-maintained and that they can provide a good game. But if you want a tennis complex that actually draws people in, you're going to have to put out a little extra effort. Want a 'new and improved' tennis season? Let's get started.

### **From the outside looking in**

Look around for a minute. What do you see? As long as your courts are clean and well-maintained, you shouldn't see, well, anything. There should be nothing that catches your eye -- no debris on the surface, no stains, no cracks, no digs or dings. A player should be able to concentrate on his or her game, without any distraction. Note: This goes for the nets too; they should be clean, crisp-looking and even, without drooping in the middle or having holes in the fabric or torn or dirty headbands.

Next, take a look at the periphery of the courts. If the courts are lit, you'll want to make sure all the lights are working, and working evenly. Readings should be taken with a light meter from various areas around the court. Inspect the fence too, and make sure there are no bulges, sagging rails, rusted spots or areas where the fence fabric has sharp edges or burrs.

Make sure windscreen is straight, and that it is fastened tightly to the fence to prevent it from flapping and becoming damaged.

Some of these problems are easy fixes -- removing debris from the court surface or having light fixtures relamped, for example. But others -- identifying the cause of a crack and providing a recommendation for the correct type of repair, for example, is something best left to a tennis court contractor.

The person who originally installed your courts is a good place to start; if not, check with colleagues for the name of a reputable sports specialty contractor. A tennis court is actually a highly specialized installation, and a general contractor may not have the expertise necessary to do it correctly.

One word of caution: you want to keep your tennis courts in use as just that: tennis courts. Don't allow inline skating, basketball, skateboarding or any other use. You'll see a decline in your player population, and you'll see damage to your courts.

### **Courts for young players**

One of the growth areas for tennis is children's play. The USTA has championed 10 and Under Tennis using the QuickStart Tennis (QST) format. QST advocates shorter courts, lower nets and softer balls to allow children to master the strokes earlier and play the game sooner. Pros love it because kids love it, and kids love it because they can actually play short games against their friends, rather than simply practicing hitting drills.

The format allows the lines for 10U play, as it has become known, to be painted on regular courts. While some facilities have designated courts for children in the shorter sizes, many find it just as easy, and a lot more economical, to have lines painted on existing courts.

"It actually doesn't cost much to line a court for 10U play," says Mark Brogan of Pro-Sport Construction, Inc. in Devon, Pennsylvania. "On average, I think, people are charging less than \$500. You have to figure a club is going to make that up in the first set of group lessons they book."

Brogan, chairman of the American Sports Builders Association, says he has yet to hear complaints from a customer who has had the new lines put on. In part, this is because lines for 10U play are generally a different color from the existing lines and are unobtrusive to those who have been playing for years.

The book, *Tennis Courts: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*, notes that while the use of dedicated QuickStart courts is preferred,

"both the ITF and USTA agree that painting QuickStart lines on 78-foot tennis courts is acceptable, even on courts used for competition, except those used for Davis Cup, Fed Cup and ITF-sanctioned matches. Painted lines for QuickStart courts should be a color within the same color family of the 78-foot court surface (i.e., light blue on a dark blue court). This differentiates QuickStart playing lines from the lines of the 78-foot court."

If the playing lines on the regular court are white, for example, the new lines should not be white, nor any color that might easily be mistaken for white (such as grey).

"We have striped a lot of shared lines on various colored courts," says Lee Murray of Competition Athletic Surfaces in Chattanooga, Tennessee. "Using a color several shades darker than the playing area is the best solution. Adult players aren't as distracted when the Quick Start lines are darker than the playing area and farther from the color of the white lines."

Complete information, including court diagrams, can be found at <http://www.10andundertennis.com/>

### **The learning experience**

To reinforce the facility's ability to host new players, make it welcoming to those who want to teach. A court that is to be used for teaching should have the following:

- **Electrical outlets:** These come in handy for using teaching equipment such as ball machines. If there are several courts in a battery, there should be multiple outlets so that extension cords don't have to be used any more than necessary.
- **A sound system:** It's useful for many things, including giving instructions. If your facility is used for Cardio Tennis, a pro will be able to use upbeat music to encourage players to keep moving.
- **A hitting wall,** rebound net or backboard, to allow players to groove their strokes.

Other useful amenities, not necessarily tied to teaching, include benches or tables so that players can rest, storage lockers so that phones, mp3 players and keys can be safely stowed, and more. A secure

area where the pro can keep his or her equipment is also useful. Having a clock by the courts will help pros and players.

As a side note, some tennis court builders advocate higher fencing around courts used by new players. Others, noting that those with developing skills may be self-conscious, recommend keeping 'beginner courts' as private as possible by using windscreen, divider netting and other equipment.

### **The watching game**

In courts used by players who may have more experience, spectator seating is a nice amenity. This can range from an outdoor 'lounge' area where individuals can wait for a court or watch a casual match in progress, to a more competitive stadium court, with bleacher-style seating.

Shaded seating is always appreciated, as are amenities like water fountains, rest rooms, a pro shop and more. The level of amenities provided will, of course, be tied to the budget of the municipality. Some regard a tennis court as more of a do-it-yourself fixture (much like basketball courts) that players use on a first-come, first-served basis, while others use time reservations and are more program-oriented.

### **Bringing in the people**

A park director's nightmare is having unused or underused facilities, despite having used resources to improve them. So ultimately, once the tennis complex is in good repair, and the proper amenities are in place, what helps bring in the people? The old 'If you build it, they will come' philosophy doesn't generally hold true.

Bring in the people by creating awareness, say the pros. Schedule play dates, 'try tennis' events, set up a mini tournament or a pro-am or call a local tennis shop and ask about partnering with them for a 'demo day' to showcase new racquets, grips, strings, shoes and so on. The most important thing is to make people aware of the facility, get them out on it, and then keep them coming back.

Your tennis complex may be two, four, six, eight or a whole lot more courts. No matter how many you have, getting them filled and keeping them filled is the best recipe for success.