

## **The Supreme Court**

*Public facilities get a lot of use, and often, a lot of abuse as well. Here's how to protect your court and keep it looking and playing its best.*

*By Mary Helen Sprecher*

In tennis, “love” means “nothing.” But when it comes to a brand-new tennis court, love does count for something: it’s what players say they feel when they play on a new surface for the first time.

Sometimes, however, that honeymoon is short-lived: Gouges and marks soon appear on the court’s surface. The net droops. And how did broken glass get all over the place?

The problem with tennis courts that are open to the community is, well, they’re open to the community. And while most people using the courts are tennis players who simply want a game, they’re not the only ones who step onto the surface. The resulting damage – whether accidental or intentional – can occur quickly.

So what’s a facilities manager to do? In a recent poll, members of the American Sports Builders Association -- the professional organization of people who design, build, and supply materials to athletic facilities – said that the best way to protect public tennis courts is to try to anticipate the problems (and the temptations) that might be lurking, then do everything possible to head them off. The experts agree that no court without 24/7 supervision can ever be 100% safe, but they also say that several preventive techniques can help limit the potential for damage.

### **On the surface**

It may be a tennis court, but that doesn’t stop kids from coming in with scooters, skateboards, bicycles and other wheeled equipment. And if asked, the kids might say they weren’t hurting anything. The surface of the court, however, would beg to differ.

“Tennis courts aren’t intended for wheels of any sort,” says Tom Magner of DecoTurf, a manufacturer of acrylic tennis surface coatings, in Andover, MA. And unfortunately, short of locking the gates to courts (something many facilities managers are loathe to do), there are few completely effective ways of keeping those with skates, skateboards, bikes or collapsible scooters off of unsupervised tennis courts.

However, Magner says, posting the rules clear can help: “We strongly recommend that our customers put signage on their courts indicating that wheels are prohibited.” Signs prohibiting wheels on a court aren’t usually enough, since kids are notorious for not seeing, or not paying attention to, signs prohibiting them from indulging in a favorite activity.

To supplement the signs, the pros recommend getting the local community involved, by asking those who are on the property to call authorities any time they see the courts being used by skaters or bicyclists. They also counsel managers to keep track of when such abuses are reported, and to try to be on-site to confront those who are breaking the rules.

Asking local law enforcement personnel to drive or walk through the area periodically can also be effective; if skaters and others are run off a few times, they'll get the picture.

Improper footwear can also cause problems, says Tom Magner. While black-soled sneakers can leave marks that are unsightly but usually harmless, spikes or cleats can actually pierce a court's surface. And the damage caused by wheels, spikes and cleats goes beyond the initial gash or scratch, Magner adds; the real problem is "the potential for peeling, bubbling or damage to the subbase, caused by water getting in under the surface."

Once kids start hanging out there, the courts can suffer from what Alex Levitsky of Fair Haven, NJ-based architecture and design firm Global Sports & Tennis Design Group, calls "the creativity of youth." Sometimes, the creativity is relatively innocent, such as spilling a soft drink that makes a stain on the court. Sometimes, though, it's more lasting, such as when kids will sit or lean on the net, eventually causing it to sag and droop.

Then there are the times when the activities can be a whole lot less innocent -- and a whole lot more destructive. "The typical vandalism is graffiti in chalk or worse yet, paint that mars a surface," says David Marsden of Boston Tennis Court Construction Company, a tennis court construction company in Hanover, MA.

Tim Bauer, the director of tennis at the Boars Head Club in Charlottesville, VA, says earlier in his career as a college coach, "we had more than 20 outdoor courts, and we saw everything on the courts from tailgating to skateboarding and street hockey." Bauer recalls that "broken glass, vandalism, chicken wings and graffiti were commonplace," prompting him to secure some of the banks of courts with fences and locks.

### **Good fences – and bad**

Jonnie Deremo of General Acrylics, Inc., a tennis court construction company in Phoenix, AZ says that bicycles, at least, can be fenced out by "welding a piece of chain from the top of the gate to the top of the gate frame." He adds that the chain should be "just long enough to allow the gate to open wide enough for a person to get through, but not wide enough to get a bicycle through." Fence mazes also work to keep out bikes.

But while fences may keep many tennis courts safe, the fences themselves may be subject to problems. They effectively prevent wheelchair-bound players from using the court, and even in communities where wheelchair access is not an issue, fence maintenance can be problematic. Sometimes, fences begin to sag or bulge because children – or adults -- have climbed on them, kicked them or spent too much time leaning or pushing against them. What's more, kids waiting for parents to finish a game might swing or ride on fence gates, causing the gate to sag and eventually drag across the ground, digging into the court surface.

Other fence problems stem from local weather conditions, says Jonnie Deremo. “We get some heavy winds here in Phoenix. If the windscreens aren’t properly attached, they act like a sail in heavy winds, causing fence damage.”

David Clapp of Baseline Sports Construction, a tennis court construction company in Knoxville, TN, says the alert court manager should be on the lookout for gates that don’t work, or gates with hinges out of alignment. He recommends installing gate stops so that gates swing in only one direction.

### **Net results**

Tennis players themselves can unwittingly cause problems on the court, especially when it comes to the net. Sometimes, players try to tighten the net without realizing the limited amount of pressure it can absorb, damaging the winding mechanism as well as the net cable. And in areas where the court is subject to freeze/thaw cycles, the metal cable of an already over-tightened net will shrink still more over the winter, with the resulting stress damaging the post and even cracking the tennis court surface around it.

Experts recommend trying to make net posts as tamper-resistant as possible. Some posts have internal wind mechanisms that allow the manager to set the net tension using a special tool, which is then removed, leaving the net locked at a certain height. “We never leave the cranks on the winding mechanisms of the tennis net posts,” says Matt Hale of tennis court construction company Halecon, Inc. in Bridgewater, NJ. David Baird of the tennis court construction company Industrial Surface Sealer in Cleveland, OH recommends removing tennis nets and center straps entirely in the cold months, a practice he says is followed by many who have courts in the snow and ice belts of the nation.

### **Maintain what you have**

Courts that don’t get direct supervision may not get much maintenance, either. The pros note that a court’s surface needs to be kept free of debris, including pine needles, leaves, petals, seed pods and just about anything else that can cause stains or residue on the surface, or cause a player to slip or trip.

And, as David Clapp points out, courts located near wooded areas often have troubles caused by roots growing under the edges of courts. He recommends that maintenance crews check periodically around the bases of trees that are near the courts, looking for bulges in the earth and cutting roots back if necessary.

Other court builders say that excessive landscaping – either caused by too many plantings, or by simple neglect – can trouble a facility. “I recently looked at one court right after a rain,” says Richard Zaino of Orange, California-based tennis court construction company Zaino Tennis Courts, Inc., “and the water was backed up on the low side because the grass must have been 3” above the court surface. There was terrible drainage and the surface was damaged due to the standing water. Any irrigation watering was adding to the problem.”

Keeping grass trimmed around the court so that rain can drain off will help prevent standing water, Zaino says. Additionally, making sure mulch, gravel and other landscaping material is well below the edge of the court and the fence line will increase the ability of water to move off the courts.

### **To lock or not to lock?**

No single security solution will work for everyone. Some managers have found that keeping gates locked when the courts are not open to the public (such as from dusk to dawn) to be the only way for them to control unauthorized use and abuse. But in an increasingly 24/7 culture, with grocery stores and other businesses open for customers at all times, the pressure is on for public courts to do the same – especially with the economic downturn pushing more people to turn to public facilities rather than to expensive private clubs to get their workouts. And with more parents trying to get (and keep) their kids active, a free fitness facility that the whole family can enjoy together takes on even more importance.

In order to encourage extended use of the courts, some managers opt to keep their facilities -- and the areas around them -- well-lit. Not only does lighting encourage correct use of courts as a sports facility by allowing play after dark and in the early mornings, it also provides a great deterrent to vandals or rule-breakers, since it's a rare troublemaker who enjoys being seen. Lighting can be controlled in a variety of ways: it can be motion-activated, controlled by the user, on a timer, or can work constantly.

### **The busier the better**

In most cases, keeping the courts open and well used turns out to be a facility's best defense. Even a well maintained gate-and-fence system, says tennis coach Tim Bauer, is only "the second best way" to control damage to a court. The real solution, industry experts agree, is having courts in frequent use by players – lessening the potential for the courts to be used as a hangout or as a playground for other activities. As a result, the tennis-playing population will notice changes in the courts, whether caused by damage or by normal wear and tear, and will bring it to the attention of the facility manager.

Then, of course, there's programming, which can also go a long way in terms of keeping courts busy in a legitimate and productive manner. Think lessons, leagues, clinics, Cardio Tennis and more -- it all adds up to a facility in active use.

"Public courts need tennis activities," says Richard Zaino. Facilities don't necessarily need full-time supervision, he notes; they just need tennis, "either through the public department leadership setting up programs or through having approved tennis professionals and tennis groups setting up activities. Once players start coming and there is some teaching or organizing, then tennis life grows and players are invested in the facility. And once that happens, the courts take a life of their own."

Adds Alex Levitsky, “The key to reducing damage on tennis courts is instilling a sense of ownership in all the people involved in and around a specific facility.” In some communities, he says, “that’s a real challenge.” But where it can be done, he notes, “it really is the 90% solution.”

*Note: For more information on tennis court construction and maintenance, the ASBA may be contacted at 866-501-ASBA (2722) or [www.sportsbuilders.org](http://www.sportsbuilders.org)*