

TENNIS, Everyone?

**Why tennis is
important to
your community—
and how you
can acquire funding
to build new or
renovate your
existing courts.**

By Robin Bateman

One of my tennis buddies recently e-mailed to casually announce she had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Because I'm a public park and recreation tennis facility coordinator, she thought I would be able to connect her with other tennis players who had gone through the same experience she was about to endure.

She wanted to keep playing, even through chemotherapy. Tennis might be just a game for some folks, but for her, the racquet and ball illuminated a bright light at the end of her scary malignant tunnel.

She looked to me for assistance. Did I know anyone she could hit with?

Some 25 million people play the game of tennis, making it one of the fastest growing sports around. Across the past seven years, participation is up

by 30 percent.

"Just look at who plays tennis," says Robin Jones of the United States Tennis Association's National Advocacy Task Force. Few other sports offer the same accessibility of participation.

Formats and programs exist to accommodate all types of players, from the very young to senior citizens, from recreational players to advanced competitive ones, from wheelchair to Special Olympics to patients enduring cancer treatments. Tennis is a sport enjoyed by people from all walks of life at every income level. And like my friend, its players want more from the game than scoring points or winning matches.

So, what do tennis players want? For starters, they're seeking more than a plain old hobby. They want physical exercise, social outlets, mental challenges, and an opportunity to compete. They want to lose weight, tone muscles,

or network for their businesses. Parents want a sport that builds character and underscores sportsmanship while addressing the individual needs of the entire family. And, players want all of this on clean, safe courts, preferably with facilities equipped with amenities: showers, lockers, racquet-stringing, and a pro shop where they can purchase equipment.

Because tennis is a mental game requiring physical execution (formats for both individual and team play), tennis answers all of these wants—and then some. With nearly 70 percent of the game being played on public courts, the ability for park and recreation professionals to fulfill these wants is significant.

Money Matters

Today's economy has many of us tightening our belts. The rising costs of trav-



eling expenses find many looking for alternative ways to spend free time, avoiding expensive vacations and frivolous expenditures. Neighborhood courts or a town tennis facility allow community members to stay close to home while remaining physically active in a fun, social environment.

Economic impact. Players aren't the only ones who gain. Communities with programmed courts—active courts with clinics, classes, drills, tournaments, and league play—pump millions of dollars back into the economy. For instance, Larry Fortson, interim director at the city of Macon's Parks and

Recreation Department, says, "With approximately 20 tournaments held at our two tennis centers, the convention and visitors bureau estimates 10,000 visitors and an economic impact of more than \$2.7 million annually."

Players often extend their tennis time to after-match meals or drinks at nearby restaurants. Tournaments bring out-of-town players who book hotel rooms, purchase meals, and buy forgotten items at retail outlets, thus helping out local businesses, as well as contributing to a city's local option sales tax. A \$2.7 million gig rings loud in the ears of those who need convincing before they sign away \$700,000: the cost of renovating the city's 24 courts.

Cost efficient. Searching for the right spot, the town of Cary, N.C., constructed its main facility near the local high school, thus providing an opportunity for an exchange of sorts. Not only are physical education tennis classes instructed on real tennis courts, the high school tennis team now has bona fide "home" courts. In return, the tennis facility uses the high school's parking lot during large events. Fitting the two needs together like a puzzle enabled the town to tackle solutions in cost-effective ways.

Furthermore, having one premier location allowed the town to streamline staff—for instance, maintenance crews and facility staffing. "The locker rooms stay cleaned," says Mary Henderson, director of Cary Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources. "Landscaping is immaculate. Best of all, Cary community tennis players have one central location to meet and play. Before, we had a few sites scattered throughout the town."

Build or Renovate

But what if your town doesn't already have tennis courts? Or what if your existing courts need major renovations in order to host tournaments and provide programs?

You'll want to start by defining clear and concise objectives. Include positive effects the community will experience

Use This TIP

For the past decade, NRPA has partnered with the United States Tennis Association to bring you *Tennis In the Parks*, or TIP, a strategic initiative designed to help improve and expand opportunities in your community for the public to learn and play the lifelong game of tennis.

TIP, and all associated program resources, are free to eligible agencies committed to growing and improving tennis programs and infrastructure.

TIP communities gain access to

- marketing support,
- access to "The Big Serve," USTA's online tennis advocacy resource,
- expert technical assistance from the USTA Technical Team,
- discounts on equipment, and
- training support for coaches.

USTA also offers park and recreation agencies access to Recreational Coach Workshops. These interactive, on-court training programs are designed for tennis

teachers and coaches working with players at the recreational level.

This active six-hour session covers topics such as teaching large groups, a games-based approach to coaching, QuickStart Tennis, running effective team practices, and the Top 10 Games Every Coach Should Know.

The USTA provides full support for your workshop and even provides the instructor at no cost to your agency. Ninety-six percent of past attendees surveyed said they would recommend the event to a friend or colleague.

You can easily make a difference by getting involved with NRPA, USTA, and *Tennis In the Parks* to provide your community with access to tennis education, resources, and a safe, appealing, and functional tennis environment.

For more information or to register for 2009, visit www.nrpa.org/usta.

once the proposal is completed. Seeing a comprehensive plan from scratch to finish can prove daunting. Losing focus—getting bogged down in red tape or caught in unforeseen wrinkles—can sometimes mean failure to complete the task.

Installing new courts and resurfacing old ones cost money. A six-digit outlay is certain to bolster intense discussions, especially if you have to “sell” your idea to city council or to non-tennis-playing residents. Knowing precisely the desired end results strengthens your focus as well as gives you the ability to nudge those who have gone astray.

Research other cities that have realized similar goals. How did they accomplish their set tasks? Did they run into bumps in the road? What were their solutions? Learn from the “mistakes” of others when designing your own pathways.

Next, gather your stats. Your local convention and visitors bureau is a

great place to start. The CVB has likely developed formulas to determine the economic impact your programmed courts bring to the area. Another resource worth looking into is your local community tennis association. CTAs keep records on participation, from walk-ins to instruction to league play. Use these figures when assembling your data. Numbers add weight to your presentations and can underscore the overall success of your monetary requests.

Then, investigate possible methods of achievement. While tedious, skipping this step may prove disastrous. Take the time to examine city policies and procedures. Organize necessary initial presentations and documentation with a conscious effort at adhering to municipal guidelines.

While you’re at it, stop by your local park and recreation agency’s administrative office to look over the master plan; every city has one. It’s a complex, thorough overview containing the

department’s mission, vision, goals, and roles in the community.

Included should be a map of available land and recommended uses for it, as well as a budget with suggested allocations. Your department might already have property or funding set aside for a new tennis facility.

“Some of the legwork may already be done for you,” says the USTA’s Jones. “No sense duplicating efforts.” Jones, who is also founding president of the Cary Community Tennis Association, worked closely with the Cary Parks and Recreation Department as it opened its 30-court public facility equipped with a tennis pro shop, racquet stringing, and concessions.

The Buddy System

Identify the benefactors, and record specific advantages each would reap, along with losses felt if your project was unable to make it to completion.

Carl Hodge, Macon Parks and Rec-

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recreation's tennis director, says it's important to recognize who gains.

"Sure, tennis players will use the courts," says Hodge, "but what about the local businesses that will profit when players frequent their establishments after matches? What about the county and city itself?"

Other organizations, such as USTA and area private clubs, will also benefit, especially in terms of increased participation.

Draw from your list and target those who stand to gain or lose the most. Allied organizations will assist in a variety of ways, including lobbying for money or constituency support; preparing grants, reports, and presentations; organizing fundraising events, or making donations.

When compiling your list of possible partners, don't forget the following:

Governing agencies and nonprofit associations. Programs such as *Tennis In the Parks*, from the National Recre-

ation and Park Association and partner USTA, are front runners in the support of tennis advocacy. Both organizations offer an array of assistance, tackling problems from many angles in their pursuits to grow the game.

Created to assist public clubs and courts committed to increasing tennis, or seeking capital improvements for facility infrastructure, *Tennis In the Parks* promises participating agencies marketing support, technical assistance, training for coaches, access to public funding, and more.

A must-have on your list, the USTA is the official governing body for tennis in America. It offers grants such as the USTA Public Facility Funding grant and the Adopt-a-Court grant, as well as countless resources online at <http://thebigserve.usta.com>.

Local community tennis associations. CTAs, run by local tennis advocates, are your inside track to the tennis world in your neighborhood. They

shape the foundation of any thriving tennis community. They know what your courts need, are familiar with available grants, and can assist with programming when your mission is accomplished.

The Staunton/Waynesboro/Augusta Tennis Association, or SWAT, in Virginia decided to undertake a project to assist Waynesboro, Va., in growing the sport regionally. SWAT decided to financially support the city's efforts to replace its five 40-year-old courts. Bill Rodgers, SWAT project chairman, and Waynesboro's director of parks and recreation, Dave VanCovern, hooked up to secure \$41,000 in NRPA-USTA and Virginia tennis grants.

VanCovern's initial attempt to gain financial backing from the Waynesboro City Council, some five years earlier, had failed. But with the newly obtained resources, coupled with SWAT's promise to help program the courts, the green light was given. Construction



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began in March and five new courts opened three months later.

Universities and colleges. Merge efforts with neighboring colleges for a fun fix to common problems. "The college connection is a cool hook," says Larry Zerbe, director of tennis for the park and recreation department in Reading, Pa.

Zerbe needed new courts as well as expansions for run-down facilities. Reading teamed up with two colleges, both offering different resources. The Alvernia College tennis team needed home courts. Angelica Park's facilities needed upgrades and expansions. For the use of Reading's courts, Alvernia promised to take care of the upgrades. Collaboratively, a mutually beneficial arrangement was achieved.

Another similar bargain exists between Albright College and the town of Reading. The courts on Albright's campus needed nets, scorekeepers, and so forth. Reading needed a place to instruct its inner-city youth. Joining hands, Reading Parks and Recreation and Albright College both walked away winners. The city purchased and maintains the campus courts in order to host programs for participants who might not otherwise pick up a racquet.

Local businesses. Local businesses offer services and trade-outs, and want to distribute advertisements, banners, fliers, and coupons at your centers. In addition, they want to be able to say they are giving back to the community.

Local private tennis clubs. These establishments benefit in the way of increased participation. A resident may pick up a racquet in a USTA Free-for-All tennis class, but join a private club offering clay courts. Local clubs want the run-off traffic from public courts.

Tennis advocates. Take advantage of your "personnel" resources. No one better understands the gifts of tennis than those standing front and center, with racquet in hand. Players will volunteer to organize fundraisers, lobby council and county commissioners for support, and donate money or services.

Game, Set, Match

Tennis is a unique lifelong sport accessible to almost everyone, surpassing the boundaries of age, gender, and income level—and even a few mental and physical impairments.

There's no question that building new courts and refurbishing old ones is

a colossal undertaking filled with bumps and frustrations. But, in the words of one agency director, "Our new courts are a blessing to the community, and, with the partnerships we've developed, I believe they will be a satisfying source for our community for years to come." **P&R**

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