

**Y**ou may have noticed your local club or neighborhood tennis court is more crowded these days, and there's certainly a good reason why. Participation in tennis is higher than it has been in 15 years. In the U.S. alone, nearly 27 million recreational players took to the courts last year. That represents a 7 percent increase in play in 2008 according to an annual research survey conducted for the USTA and Tennis Industry Association by the Taylor Research Group. The survey also showed increases in both racquet and tennis ball sales in this same time period, especially equipment designed for youth.

Although the studies show there are 25 million plus tennis players in the country, the USTA has just recently reached 700,000 members. It is this gap between total players and actual members that was the impetus for USTA Middle States' (USTA MS) new initiative – "Building a Tennis Community" (BTC). Driven by USTA MS Strategic Plan priorities, this campaign was developed to promote community tennis, diversity, customer service and membership.

BTC targets all of these priorities while reaching out to clubs, Community Tennis Associations, park and recreation agencies, schools and other program providers.

Partnerships with tennis clubs have been a natural fit, as they have goals that are very much aligned with those of the USTA. Clubs look to increase participation in order to maximize revenue. They want to increase their membership for the same reason, while the USTA strives to achieve the same goals of participation and membership.

BTC allows USTA MS to collaborate with sites so that they will incorporate the cost of a USTA membership in to their



## BUILDING A TENNIS COMMUNITY

annual dues or in to specific program fees. Through the sale of USTA membership, BTC re-allocates funds back to a specific facility through customized benefits to the organization or its individual members.

These benefits include communication and marketing support on [www.middlestates.usta.com](http://www.middlestates.usta.com), inclusion in e-newsletter and e-mail blasts as well as advertorials in NetPlay magazine. Additional support provided by USTA MS to participants includes program support by providing equipment and/or providing discounted or free registration to USTA sponsored conferences.

BTC is certainly not a "one-size fits all" concept because each club has different

priorities and current conditions that need to be considered. Partnership packages are "tailor made" for each facility based on the number of memberships that have been purchased and the length of the commitment.

USTA MS piloted the program in 2007 reaching out to a test market of facilities and the results have been outstanding. Through the first two years of the initiative, the section has received commitments from ten facilities, totaling more than 700 memberships.

One organization that has been on board since the beginning is Courtside Racquet Club in Lebanon, N.J. The club's committed more than 250 junior

memberships in its three years as a participant and is the section's largest BTC partner.

"Building a Tennis Community has set us apart from other clubs in our area and given us added credibility," said Bruce Levine, General Manager, Courtside Racquet Club. "I also believe that partnering with USTA Middle States keeps Courtside informed with what events and programs are occurring in our area and allows us to stay on the cutting edge of developmental and instructional programs in tennis, and provide our members with the latest and greatest opportunities that one of the game's premier organization has to offer."

Another significant outcome from BTC has been enhancing existing relationships with

participating organizations by initiating new program offerings into these facilities such as Jr. Team Tennis, QuickStart Tennis and USTA tournament play.

"This initiative has the potential of bringing our customers together and solidifying a long-lasting partnership by providing exceptional customer service that will benefit all participating organizations," said Ben Zislis, Director of Community Development for USTA Middle States, the brainchild of Building a Tennis Community.

According to Zislis it is customer service and relationship building that truly are the keys to the implementation and sustainability of the initiative. "In order for any partnership to grow the lines of communication must be open. With BTC we must be flexible

and creative but most importantly we must listen to the needs of our program leaders because they are always changing." •

-Nathaniel Harrison



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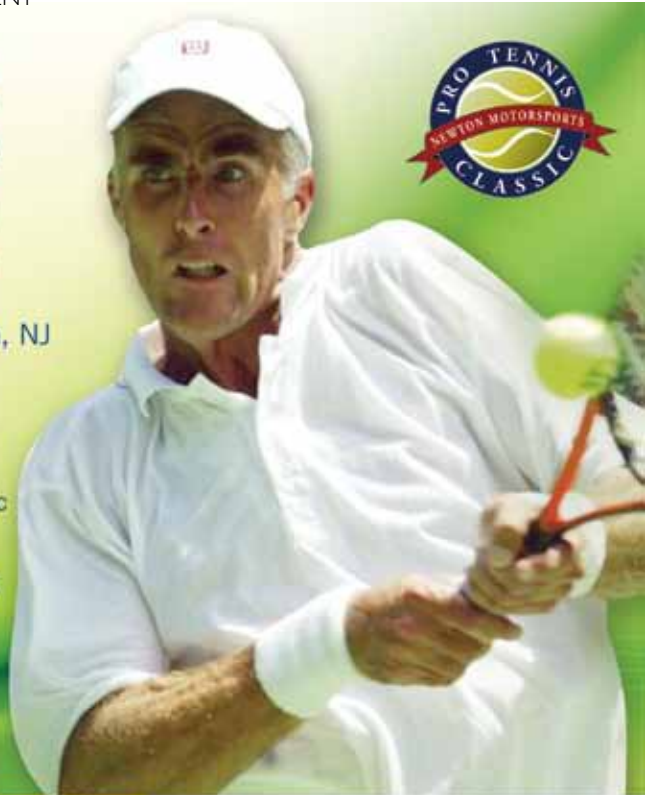
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