

2.3 GAME, SET, MATCH: IF YOU BUILD IT AND MAINTAIN IT, THEY WILL COME PLAY TENNIS

Public tennis courts are the lifeblood of a park. It has been proven time and again that if parks continue to build and maintain tennis courts, the community will respond--in droves. In fact, according to the United States Tennis Association (USTA) nearly 70 percent of tennis is played on public courts.

The benefits to the public are astounding

Known as the sport for a lifetime, playing tennis directly impacts a person's health and quality of life. According to the "Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health," higher levels of physical activities lower mortality rates for all ages, decrease the risk of cancer, heart disease and high blood pressure.

The park and recreation staff in Dothan, Ala , knew that if they built it, the community would come. The town recently decided to expand Westgate Tennis Center at the 243-acre Westgate Park and added four tennis courts, two remote bathrooms and two shade shelters constructed to serve the new courts.

With more than 3,000 Dothan citizens using the Tennis Center, Assistant Director of Leisure Services Kim Meeker says, "The people were already here, we just had to respond to the demand." Just in USTA leagues alone there are more than 1,500 players--a 10 percent increase since 2004--big numbers in a city of only 57,000 people.

Dothan's Westgate Tennis Center's extensive programming was recognized in 2001 with the NRPA/USTA's Excellence in Tennis Programming National Gold Award. Currently, Westgate Tennis Center is running ongoing leagues, and is home to the Movie Gallery USTA Women's Pro Classic circuit event each year, where contenders from more than 20 countries battle for a purse of \$75,000. That tournament is one of several national, sectional state, local, adult and junior tournaments hosted by the Westgate Tennis Center throughout the year.

The commitment to tennis is a joint effort by the Dothan Tennis Association (DTA) and the Dothan Leisure Services Department (DES). The effective division of labors between the two has been key to the success. While the DTA provides the volunteers, programs and advocacy, DLS offers staff

support, computer support, facilities and programming expertise to enhance the efforts of the DTA.

The Dothan community's commitment to tennis as a vital tool for the ultimate growth of the park is clear. To help promote the USTA's Tennis Month campaign in May, Meeker organized the distribution of 12,000 flyers to area school children offering one free lesson at the tennis center.

Hosting a dozen major tennis events annually has also had a very positive effect on the city of Dothan and its citizens, where tennis has become a part of the social fabric. Events not only challenge patrons as players but provide them with captivating spectator opportunities. Since tennis events range in length from three to eight days, they are very attractive to the hotel industry bringing serious tourism to Dothan. In fact, the Dothan Area Convention and Visitors Bureau has become a very strong supporter of the game because of its formidable economic impact.

"Public park tennis programs are a wonderful way to bring the sport to the masses, to people of all ages and ethnicities," says Karen Ford, national manager of the USTA Tennis in the Parks program. "It is a family-friendly sport which not only provides a great aerobic workout, but also teaches values such as teamwork, fair play, sportsmanship and discipline. When people come to the park to play tennis on a regular basis, the increased use of other park amenities is inevitable."

The city of Dothan isn't the only community to catch on to this idea. In Jackson, Wyo., citizens only had a smattering of courts in pocket parks where they could play public tennis--otherwise, they had to use private courts in expensive country clubs. "There has never been a public tennis facility," says Steve Foster parks and recreation director. "Almost all tennis interests have been served through private clubs."

All that changed, however, when the citizens approved a one cent sales tax increase that would go to parks and recreation, as well as a partnership with a local school district. The sales tax increase, as well as a grant from USTA created the funds, while the partnership gave the agency the land to create a new tennis facility with five post-tension concrete courts with a public plaza, fencing, shelter and storage areas.

Creating the first public tennis complex in the area means that Jackson can now serve one sector of the community that had been overlooked. And with a new facility comes a renewed interest in tennis and increased programming. Although the tennis complex had been under snow since its completion in September 2005, the high school boys and girls tennis team already started playing home matches in May.

Foster says that in addition to the high school teams, the school is using the courts in physical education classes and the community tennis association has become more active. And with this new facility, the park and recreation department will focus on creating more programming around tennis.

"Every community is different and their needs are different. But for us, this investment will create an opportunity for the public to play tennis that was never there before," Foster explains. "This will serve those tennis interests and help anyone get into the sport of tennis who hasn't had the opportunity before."

Even if existing tennis facilities are already present, investing in renovation can go a long way in bringing in additional players and money. In Oklahoma City Okla., the city opened a newly renovated facility in May after the citizens passed a bond and USTA awarded the city with grant funds.

Since the addition of an ADA-compliant pro shop, new restrooms, locker rooms and updated lighting and fencing, Parks and Recreation Director Wendel Wisenhunt says he has seen a significant increase in tennis participation and interest

"Spectator attendance has been huge--we've always had the players, but we have huge numbers of spectators," he says. That leads to economic development throughout the city, which citizens are also noticing. Because Oklahoma City residents value sports and quality of life issues, tennis has become very important in the community.

Wisenhunt explains, "Our facility had a glorious past, but as the facility waned we didn't have money to fix it. It is incredible to see who has been drawn to that facility since it reopened."

Meeker agrees with Wisenhunt, and has witnessed first-hand the results of tennis in the city of Dothan. He is a true believer in the importance of tennis to any park and its surrounding community. "Everybody has a tennis racket at home," he says. He adds that it is a wonderful casual sport where people can come to a park for a quick game, have a picnic and enjoy the playground. "The whole experience is a pleasant one."

RELATED ARTICLE: Tennis in the parks.

The USTA and NRPA have teamed up to assist local park and recreation organizations to increase access to quality public tennis facilities and opportunities for the public to enjoy the sport by creating the Tennis in the Parks (TIP) campaign.

"The aggressive programming is the catalyst for increasing opportunities for park visitors," says Kim Meeker, assistant director of Leisure Services for

Dothan, Ala. "But we would not be able to do programs like these without the expansion made possible through the Tennis in the Parks funding."

According to Karen Ford, national manager of the USTA Tennis in the Parks program, "The essence of the TIP initiative is to assist park and recreation agencies in leveraging their tennis facilities to promote lifelong healthy activity, improve their programming, and ultimately, increase usage of the park overall."

Like the city of Dothan, Jackson, Wyo., and Oklahoma City, Okla., both received grants in excess of \$100,000 to improve or create tennis facilities in their respective communities. Without the funds, Jackson Parks and Recreation Director Steve Foster says his agency would not have been able to complete its vision for the tennis complex. "We wanted a very special place that everybody was proud of," he says. "The grant from USTA allowed us to spend money on special things that make it unique."

The USTA and NRPA will continue to work together to guarantee the further growth of tennis in the parks because of the vital impact the sport has on a community and the park system.