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Adult Social Tennis League Programs in Local Parks

By Erin Maher

The game of tennis, once viewed as an elite sport open to a select few, is more accessible than ever before, thanks to the United States Tennis Association's (USTA) adult social play programs. "Adult social programs should really be understood from the mindset of 'social first, tennis second,'" says Elliott Pettit, director of program development for the USTA. "They represent an opportunity to introduce tennis in a fun, noncompetitive environment that requires no prior experience to enjoy."

Social play tennis programs allow participants to fulfill their desire for competition, while keeping the focus on fun, meeting new people and hanging out with friends.

Customizable Programming

Social play programs are akin to intramural softball or adult kickball programs, which allow participants

to satisfy their desire for competition, while keeping the focus on fun, meeting new people and hanging out with friends. These programs are unique and innovative, can be customized to a specific community's needs and can further diversify a park's programming options. Public parks are the perfect venue, with many programs currently running nationwide. Following are a few examples of the play options that are available:



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Public parks are the perfect venue for social play programs, which can be customized to a specific community's needs.

Gainesville, Florida

In Gainesville, the “Love to Learn” and “Love to Play” programs held at the Joyce Oransky Tennis Center at Albert Ray Massey (Westside) Park offer a two-tiered approach that’s custom designed for adult beginners to learn tennis in a fun, fast-paced, no-pressure environment. “Love to Learn,” which is facilitated by USTA Florida, provides six weeks of play, court time and pro fees for \$25. No racquet? No problem. The program also offers loaner racquets to participants if needed. During the six weeks, tennis pros work with participants



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This T-shaped 18' x 36' Champion model near a splash pad in Inspiration Park, McKinney, TX features Standing Seam roof in Cool Leaf Green.

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Adult social tennis league programs can help further diversify a park's programming options.

on shot basics, such as the forehand, backhand and volley, while fellow participants support and encourage one another.

A player who completes the "Love to Learn" can then transition to "Love to Play." This three-week program pairs these players with tennis ambassadors and mentors in the community so they can continue to hone their skills and feel even more welcomed to play the sport. "Feeling welcomed is a major part of tennis when picking up a racquet and trying to become a part of a community," says Chris Champion, head pro for USTA Florida. The

mentors and ambassadors help participants learn on-court etiquette, scoring, how to call lines and the rules of regular match play.

Since the inception of "Love to Learn" and "Love to Play" in February 2019, there have been 60 participants who have completed the program. "The 'Love to Learn' program has been very well-received," says Jeff Moffitt, recreation supervisor for the city of Gainesville. "People, who would normally be intimidated, are coming out and finding out that it's such a fun environment to get involved in the game."

Arlington, Virginia

Operating out of the Quincy Park tennis courts, the Arlington County Tennis Association (ACTA) Practice

Series is a weekly social drop-in opportunity for players of all skill levels. Established in 1989, the ACTA is a volunteer-run, nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote tennis within the community. It is also responsible for the maintenance and growth of quality public tennis facilities within Arlington.

While the ACTA has hosted a robust USTA League community for years, the USTA Mid-Atlantic section was interested in helping it expand its offerings. ACTA wanted to focus less on competition and more on social engagement and leverage the group's already-established relationship with the park and recreation department. So, in 2017, the ACTA Practice Series was born.

Practice Series is a five-week program that costs participants \$55, which covers 1¼ hours of court time each week and includes the tennis balls. It is well-suited for beginners, with a session devoted to players who have a National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP) level of 2.5 to 3.5, and another for players with an NTRP rating of 3.5 to 4.0. The NTRP classification system identifies and describes general characteristics of tennis-playing ability, with levels ranging from 1.5 (beginner) through 7.0 (touring pro).

“The Practice Series is the vehicle that gives another option to those folks looking for something more social,” says Morgan-Abrams Nichols, vice chair for the USTA Adult Social Play Committee. When participants

arrive at the Practice Series, a social coordinator is there to help pair players of the same level with each other. They are encouraged to spend their court time either rallying with other players, engaging in friendly match play or even participating in a rallying game with their opponent(s).

In the past two years, this program has had an impressive 70 percent retention rate, averaging approximately 20 players per session. The Practice Series has been instrumental in growing camaraderie, and tennis, in the Arlington community.

Getting a League Started

Adult social play tennis programs are ideal for getting people in the game and, most importantly, engaged with others in the community.

Adult social play tennis programs are ideal for getting people in the game and, most importantly, engaged with others in the community.

The USTA is committed to helping to grow and foster these programs nationwide and has equipment and grants available to help you get your program started, today.

For more information on how to include a social tennis program in your park and recreation department’s offerings, visit usta.com/adultsocialplay.

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