

Parks & Recreation

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Generation

Parks and recreation and school districts partnering to grow the game of tennis

By Ashley Marshall

For years, sports such as basketball and football have ruled playgrounds and parks across America. But now tennis — a sport once considered to be out of the reach of many families — is vying for the attention of youngsters.



Tennis is being played in schools and at the grassroots level more than ever before. When it comes to this sport that can be played for a lifetime, there's no better doubles partnership than the one between park and recreation departments and their school districts, especially once they've aligned with Net Generation, the official youth tennis brand of the United States Tennis Association (USTA).

"The partnerships between schools and their local park and recreation departments are absolutely vital for the growth of the sport of tennis," says Craig Morris, chief executive, community tennis, USTA. "Net Generation provides a platform for these groups to collaborate in order to impact more kids than ever before."

There are clear benefits for both groups: Schools get help and support teaching children a new sport and another way to lead an active, healthy lifestyle. They are also able to point youngsters to a safe place where they can continue to

play tennis away from the classroom, either alone or with friends. Park departments get a chance to interact with a potential new group of users who can, in turn, introduce their parents to new activities, leagues and social-play opportunities in their own community. "It's valuable because it's not something that is taught in urban schools historically," says Matt Lubas, Reading Recreation Commission COR Tennis Program supervisor. "Having resources available to them will help schools deliver programs. You go to any playground in any city, and there's a basketball court, and there's green grass. There aren't always tennis courts.

"We run before- and afterschool programs, and we're very active in going into their P.E. classes. We try to reach as many kids as possible by making the game of tennis available. It emphasizes fun, increases wellness and self-esteem and tackles life skills that participants can carry on the rest of their lives."

Reading Parks and Recreation

In Reading, Pennsylvania, staff from the park and recreation department go into each of the city's 13 elementary schools for either one or two weeks and teach every third, fourth and fifth grader tennis during P.E. lessons. Eight of these schools have either before- or after-school programming, and six support a travel team. In the summer, the city runs the tennis programming for the Reading Recreation Commission and for the Boys and Girls Clubs.

As a community partner of Net Generation, Reading received a free Community package, which includes an equipment roller bag, 20 racquets, 36 red felt balls, two rolls of barrier tape, chalk, hats, shirts and a community curriculum.

"The Reading Recreation Commission COR Tennis Program is a wonderful asset to the USTA Middle States section," says Renee Lentz, the schools coordinator for the city of Reading and a former tennis service representative for the USTA Middle States section for nine years.

"Its impact on the community goes well beyond the sport of tennis. Kids are going to college when they never thought they'd go to college — to places like Alvernia University and Albright College — and then they're coming back and teaching here. The city of Reading is the fifth largest city in Pennsylvania, but it has the highest percentage of people living in poverty. Using tennis to impact the lives of kids here is incredible."



Emphasizing fun and positive coaching is part of the United States Tennis Association's Net Generation brand.

Balls and racquets are part of a free Community package of equipment provided by Net Generation to community partners.

Reading isn't the only city reaping the benefits of schools and park departments working hand-in-hand.

Cabot Parks and Recreation

In Cabot, Arkansas, the school district and Cabot Parks and Recreation department entered into a joint-use agreement for shared use of facilities, like tennis courts. By crafting the agreement, both sides have clearly delineated responsibilities while having legal protection.

There are nine elementary schools and two middle schools in the Cabot district. By working with the park department in conjunction with Net Generation, schools can efficiently introduce children



to tennis. “We have a shared vision of what we would like to accomplish,” explains Kelly Spencer, who served as the liaison between the park and recreation department and P.E. coaches and is now the assistant athletic director for the Cabot School District. “We’re both offering programs that are provid-

ing opportunities for kids to be physically active and make healthy lifestyle choices.

“We also share the same vision of what participation in sport does for kids as far as character development — giving them those lifelong skills and values of dedication, integrity and sportsmanship. I think it’s

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great because, from a school district perspective, you're providing those physical education teachers with not only training, but also the equipment and the curriculum. It's a win-win for our teachers. And once you get the buy-in from the teachers, they're going to believe in it, and they're going to pass it on to the kids. When the teachers get excited about it, the kids get excited about it."

So far, more than 3,500 teachers nationwide have undergone a background screening through the National Center for Safety Initiatives and completed SafeSport training, courses organized by the U.S. Center for SafeSport with the aim of making sports "free from bullying, hazing, sexual misconduct or any form of emotional or physical abuse." In addition, more than 1,700 teachers have registered their P.E. programs for Net Generation.

The Cabot Parks and Recreation department runs a tennis program, called Rally Cats, that's aimed at 4- to 10-year-olds and helps introduce youngsters to the sport. It

was started in the spring and attracted 40 children to the first session. Many also registered to join a youth league that's run by the park department. The program was offered for an hour a week over a six-week period during the school break. Next year, the department will use the Net Generation curricula to offer different programs depending on a player's ability.

"Everyone was wanting to try a dif-

Cabot Parks and Recreation's Rally Cats tennis program helps introduce 4- to 10-year-olds to the game of tennis.

ferent sport, especially in the summer when they're at home," says Cabot Parks and Recreation Program Director Lorenzo Mendoza. "It gets them outside and helps them stay active. We have football, basketball, softball and volleyball that are growing, so why not offer a different sport, too? It's a great opportunity we have to work with the school district."

Jamie Oitker, a supervisor and P.E. teacher at Central Elementary School in Cabot, adds: "[The partnership] is huge because we're building the foundation, and then they're providing opportunities to reach even higher levels. They're providing kids extra preparation for lifetime activities.

"Any exposure to learning the fundamentals is great, especially if it makes them excited to play or makes them ask their parents to do more. It's awesome. We need to inspire our kids to be active their whole life. Just giving each of the kids a racquet and a ball, they absolutely loved it. The laughter, the smiles and screams of joy, they had a blast." 🌿

For information on any of the programs mentioned in this article:

- **United States Tennis Association:** www.usta.com/en/home/play/programs-for-everyone.html#high-school-tennis
- The USTA hosted a webinar, titled "Working with Schools and Parks & Recreation," earlier this year. To view the recording and a list of USTA webinars: <https://usta.com/webinars> or USTA.com/webinars
- Find your **Tennis Service Representative:** <https://www.usta.com/en/home/organize/program-resources/national/finding-your-tennis-service-representative-ts-r.html>
- **Net Generation:** <https://netgeneration.usta.com/>
- **Net Generation Parks and Recreation page:** NetGeneration.com/parksandrec
- **Cabot Parks and Recreation department:** www.cabotparks.com/cabot-youth-tennis-rallycats/

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