

Parks & Recreation

SEPTEMBER 2019
WWW.NRPA.ORG



THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL RECREATION AND PARK ASSOCIATION

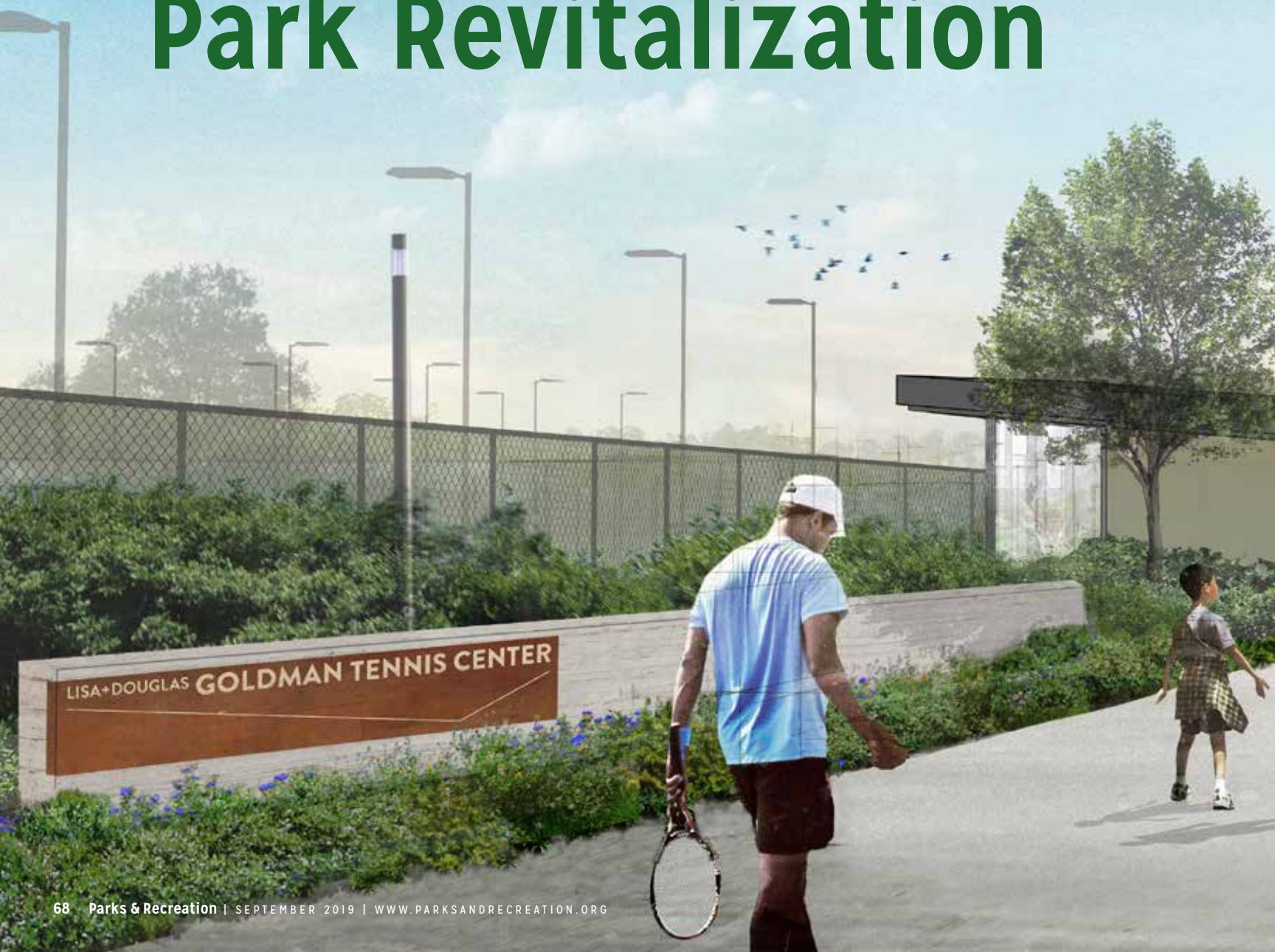
**A CONVERSATION
WITH CAL RIPKEN JR.**



Recreation and Esports | 2019 NRPA ANNUAL CONFERENCE ISSUE | What Makes a Great Park?

TENNIS:

A Game Changer in Park Revitalization



How growing the sport can mean new business – and a whole new outlook

By Mary Helen Sprecher

Psst! Hey, park and recreation directors. Remember us? We're your tennis courts. Oh, sure, you may have forgotten all about us (and, sometimes, it shows), but we have a message for you: We're still here. People still love us. And we have potential you aren't even aware of. In fact, we might even be the answer you've been looking for to help make your park busier and more vibrant — and to raise its public profile. Oh, and did we mention we could even give you a new revenue stream?

You see, parks have traditionally been the epicenter of tennis in the United States. In fact, 70 percent of all tennis is played at public facilities, either free or for very little cost. And, the appeal of tennis goes across all demographic and socioeconomic groups. It is, after all, the sport for a lifetime. It can be learned in childhood — or adulthood, for that matter. It can be played by three generations (and, sometimes, even more). Because of this, and because of

its wide appeal, the sport aligns with NRPA's Health and Wellness and Social Equity Pillars.

And, all it takes is a committed effort to get things moving — as a few groups have discovered. You may even find yourself inspired to shake the dust off your racquet and make tracks to your courts — just to see what both you and those courts can do.



Artist's renderings of the new Golden Gate Park Tennis Complex in San Francisco. Once completed, it will have 17 new courts, including a stadium court with built-in seating for 200, a pickleball court and a new 7,800-square-foot clubhouse.



IMAGE COURTESY OF RECREATION AND PARK DEPT ARCHIVES/HISTORIAN

Drawn in 1892, this map of Golden Gate Park provides a view of the wide range of facilities available to visitors.

Building from the Ground Up

Renovating an existing facility, says Ginsburg, required the Tennis Coalition of San Francisco — as the promotional organization became known — to “inspire donor confidence” that it would really happen. But a different challenge faced the partners who worked to make the Bay Community Tennis Center a reality.

Bay City, Michigan, says Joe Ricard, president of the Bay Community Tennis Association, was an area that needed some recreational opportunities. Ricard, the coach of a high school team that lacked its own courts, was constantly seeking out facilities for practices and matches. Nearly a decade ago, came the *aha* moment.

“The mom of one of my former players and I would go to other schools when we wanted to play,” Ricard explains. “One day, we looked at each other and said, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we had our own courts?’ Well, one thing led to another and suddenly, the fingers just pointed to me, and I accepted. I was the logical person to take it on, I guess,” he laughs. “That was eight years ago.”

Fast-forward to early this past summer, with the grand opening of the eight-court Janet H. Jopke Bay Community Tennis Facility — and the home courts of Bay City Central High School’s team. But, between the *aha* moment and the ceremonial first serve was plenty of work. The city donated land that was laying fallow, occupied by a vacant school. The Bay Community Tennis Association, comprised of staunch supporters of the courts, went to work raising funds for the old building to

A Historic Venue Gets New Life

In San Francisco, construction of the Golden Gate Park Tennis Complex is underway. When completed in 2020, the facility will feature 17 new courts, including a stadium court with built-in seating for 200, a pickleball court, a new 7,800-square-foot clubhouse with a players’ lounge, recreation room, locker rooms, kitchen and dedicated space for a tennis and learning center and other amenities. The installation of new lighting on all courts will bring the potential for up to 30,000 hours of additional playtime each year.

That’s impressive, but what’s even more impressive is the storied history of the facility.

“The tennis center will celebrate its 150th anniversary next summer,” says Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the San Francisco Parks & Recreation Department. “It dates all the way back to the 1880s, although the current center has remained more or less the same since the 1950s.”

Over the years, the park’s courts

have become known as the Cradle of Champions. Billie Jean King, Alice Marble and Rosie Casals have all played here, and countless children have hit their first serves on these courts. The facility has been a hub for underserved youth, who not only received tennis lessons but academic coaching here, as well. An urban tennis center, Golden Gate Park serves what Ginsburg calls “a beautiful eclectic mix of senior, youth, competitive, LGBTQ and schoolchildren,” and has done so for decades.

But, says Ginsburg, the tennis facility was showing its age. “Oh, it had been loved to death. It had outlived its time.”

Bringing the center forward nearly 75 years was no easy task, and it took a public-private partnership to make it happen. Most of the funding for the project — \$26 million of a total of \$30 million — was raised through public donations. “We had some very generous gifts,” adds Ginsburg. “The project has a lot of support, both from the community and a lot of political support, as well.”

be leveled and the tennis center constructed.

And now, says Beth Trahan, recreation coordinator for Bay County and Bay Community Tennis Committee member, “the courts are showcase beautiful. It’s hard not to ask yourself, ‘Why wasn’t this done before?’”

The courts cost slightly more than \$500,000, with additional money set aside in an endowment fund for maintenance and upkeep. And, just as with the Golden Gate Park project, the majority came from donations.

“We put together over \$450,000 by fundraising,” notes Jerry Schloff, one of the project’s most ardent supporters. “We had donations that went from \$45 to \$100,000.”

And oddly, it all started with a carwash held by a former player — the one whose mother Joe Ricard was playing with when the whole idea came about.

“We had no idea how much it would all cost,” admits Ricard. “We really didn’t.”

Part of what made the project affordable was the donation of approximately \$100,000 in labor and equipment from Shaw Contracting Co., whose principal, Brad Shaw, lives only a few miles from the court. And, Shaw notes, he’s already seeing a return on his investment.

“Our kids already benefited from it — our three little boys were going to a tennis camp there right after it opened. They had a great time.”

Making It Work: Resources and Programming

Public-private partnerships work, say those in both Bay City and in San Francisco, because someone wants them to work and is willing to put the effort into them. In addition to having strong fundraising campaigns, volunteers were able to leverage professional assistance from the United States Tennis Association (USTA) to help move their projects along. Both areas were also the recipients of grants from the USTA’s Facility Assistance Program, which readily supports community projects with technical, financial and business development resources. (For information about this program, see sidebar on p. 72.)

Although fundraising gets a facility built, having a viable programming schedule makes it succeed. According to Beth Trahan, simply having the courts open in Bay City isn’t going to be enough. “We need to get tennis back on track,” she says, the determination evident in her voice. “We need to get some programming to bring the people in.”

“That’s true,” Joe Ricard agrees. “It has been difficult to get the word out. A few people signed up for leagues, but we’re planning to offer them again next year, along with cardio tennis, adult programs and lessons. I want those courts full.”

Bay City has developed a partnership with the local YMCA and YWCA to help get the word out and so far, it is helping to create awareness and bring in players.

One formidable obstacle is the perception of public tennis courts as bare-bones structures with sagging nets and cracked surfaces, which players avoid. And, unfortunately, if nothing is done to provide maintenance and create programming, that perception can become reality. “We do see tennis courts that are allowed to fade out over time,” says Steve Bigelow of Bay City Public Schools.

“Unfortunately, you’ll hear people say, ‘Let’s take the court out and put something else in,’” adds Alison Vidal, manager of community, development and partnerships with USTA Northern California. “That’s why our sport declines. But tennis in the parks was such a big thing when I was growing up. We need to get back to that.”

Building in a maintenance budget — something both Golden Gate and Bay City have done — is also crucial to success. And, while hard courts require far less upkeep than their clay counterparts, they still need care if they are to be kept in the best possible playing shape.

“Obviously, we want to grow the game — we want everyone possible to be holding a racquet,” says Steve Leube,



CAMPING CABINS IN YOUR PARK, AT NO COST

-  We purchase and install the cabins at our expense.
-  We maintain the cabins and fill them with happy visitors.
-  You get a revenue share and ownership of the cabins.

Contact Amanda Scott at (928) 310-8446
or ascott@camprrm.com.
Learn more at www.park-cabins.com.

 RECREATION RESOURCE
MANAGEMENT



PHOTO COURTESY OF RICK GLAZA, OWNER, GREAT LAKES DRONE WORKS

The showcase-beautiful, eight-court Jan-et H. Jopke Bay Community Tennis Facility in Bay City, Michigan.

executive director of USTA Northern California. “But, there’s not a park and rec place worth a dime that you don’t pay minimal court fees that go toward maintenance.”

Creating a Destination

Well-built, regularly maintained courts with high-quality amenities create additional revenue opportunities for the cities that host them. In addition to lessons, leagues and other local play, tennis facilities, when properly marketed, can host outside events, including tournaments on a local, regional and national level.

Resources Available

The USTA Facility Assistance program offers communities and volunteers assistance with technical, financial and business development resources. In addition, communities are appointed project consultants from the USTA National staff, who work with interested groups to help move projects from the drawing board to reality. Information is available at the USTA’s website, www.usta.com/facilities.

Park and recreation-specific resources help municipalities develop and improve their courts, and also can be found at www.usta.com/parksandrecreation.

Another invaluable tool is the **USTA Community Advocacy Handbook**, available online free of charge. Use the search term, *USTA Community Advocacy Handbook*, to access a downloadable copy.

Such competitions bring in economic impact stemming from hotel rooms, restaurant use and shopping in local businesses. They also attract further donations.

Julie Exley, executive director of the San Francisco Tennis Coalition, says Golden Gate Park needs to get back to that. “The San Francisco Open has been running consecutively at this site for 115 years, which is pretty amazing,” she notes. “We share a vision with one of our major donors, Tad Taube, to reinvigorate this historic community event. In addition, it would be wonderful to see some USTA play-offs right here in our backyard.”

By starting small, such as hosting high school matches and tournaments, parks can build up their résumé. Making outreach to the local convention and visitors bureau or sports commissions and creating a portfolio for the facility — describing how many courts are available, whether or not they are lighted, the adjacency of facilities, such as rest rooms and bleachers, the availability of parking and other amenities — can raise awareness as well. Convention and visitors bureaus create an inventory of sports facilities available. Often, large tournaments

will use courts at a variety of sites, so getting on the radar prior to the playing season is critical to success.

“My high school championships were always held in Golden Gate Park,” says Alison Vidal. “One year, Rosie Casals gave out the trophies.”

Community member Beth Trahan says Bay City is already leveraging a range of assets to attract tourism. “We have a river that runs through town and someone has opened a kayak and boat rental business. We also have a rail trail on the riverfront that extends to our state park, and in the future, it’ll run all the way to Saginaw,” she says. “I think all that, plus the courts, will help people reacquire themselves with the outdoors.”

Those interested in improving tennis facilities, says Virgil Christian, USTA’s senior director of section & strategic infrastructure, will find that although it’s a formidable task, it’s not one that needs to be undertaken alone.

He adds: “Improving, rebuilding (or even building) public tennis courts and making them into welcoming, active community engagement centers is a process, rather than an event. It takes determination and dedication to do it successfully. The good news, when it comes to community advocacy, is that tennis players are across-the-board passionate about their sport. What we’ve seen is that with a committed group of volunteers working together with a city, and with a strong public-private partnership, there really isn’t any limit on what can be accomplished.”

Mary Helen Sprecher is the Managing Editor of *Sports Destination Management* (mhsprecher@gmail.com).