



West Side Tennis Club provides four different types of court surfaces for its members.

West Side Tennis Club: **Superintendent Preserves Tradition In An Evolving Sport**

Tennis comes into full swing during the summer. Television coverage of the Grand Slam and the U.S. Open boosts the popularity of the game. Courts fill with everyone from novices to life-long hobbyists seeking exercise outdoors.

Like golf, tennis is a sport for all ages. As a person grows older and finds flag football, basketball, and softball a bit too much to handle, tennis is an excellent alternative. He can set his own pace on a tennis court and, with regular practice, can remain competitive long into retirement. From the sport's origin, men and women have participated equally.

Tennis facilities are adapting to the varied condition and skill levels of our maturing population. Today, a choice of tennis surfaces helps control the safety and pace of the game. It also increases the responsi-

bility and value of the superintendent or groundskeeper.

Jim Sheridan, club superintendent at The West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills, NY, has witnessed the changes in tennis over two generations. His father, Owen Sheridan, began grooming the 13 acres of colonial bentgrass and clay courts in 1932. Located just outside New York City, West Side helped launch tennis in the United States and for decades was the site of the U.S. Open.

What has taken place at the club closely follows the evolution of tennis in this country from a gentlemen's sport to a highly commercialized attraction. It helped build recognition for tennis, served as a primary stage for television coverage, and then drew the line when the Open outgrew its stadium. It remains one of the premiere

private tennis clubs in the world and fulfills its promise to members that they will not have to wait more than one hour to get on a court.

Tennis Tradition

West Side still serves metropolitan New York as well as an international membership. It hosts numerous tournaments between May and October. Tennis professionals of all ages, countries, and genders frequent its courts during the year. Most of them know Jim Sheridan on a first name basis.

They should. He started working there under his father when he was 14 years old. He continued part-time throughout high school and college. His father encouraged him to complete a degree in Ornamental Horticulture and Turf Management at Cornell University in Ithaca and a Masters in

Business Administration at Fordham University in the Bronx. Even after he became administrator of grounds at Fordham in 1976, he exchanged information with his father. In 1980, he assumed the superintendent's position after his father retired.

It didn't take Sheridan long to begin changing the way athletic facilities were managed at Fordham. "Before you can permanently solve the problems associated with athletic fields, you have to treat them separately from the rest of campus maintenance," he told the university's administration. The fields really should be under a separate budget with specially trained personnel. You don't get results without making a commitment, one that isn't constantly being challenged by other campus needs. Fordham adopted Sheridan's idea and has since rebuilt its main fields. Now the athletic department is in the process of reinstating the school's once successful football program.

"Fordham is like an oasis in the middle of the Bronx," he boasts. "It's a beautiful campus that helps build pride in the midst of the city."

The same can be said for the tennis club. When the club moved from the west side of Manhattan to Forest Hills in 1913, the area was farmland. It soon featured 36 grass courts and more than 20 clay. The stadium was built in 1923 to hold 15,000 tennis fans, a phenomenal crowd for the times. The U.S. Open was held in this stadium until 1978, when it moved to the National Tennis Center in Flushing Meadows. In 1980, the club hosted its first Tournament of Champions.

"The Open was played on grass until 1975," said Sheridan. "Then the stadium was converted to Har-Tru because the players wanted more uniformity. Maintaining grass for tournament play is a nightmare. We'd resod patches along the baselines almost every night. By the end of two weeks, though, the courts were essentially dirt. The climate and the construction of the courts here is a lot different from Wimbledon. The soil there contains more clay than our topsoil. Even when the grass wears thin, play can continue."

The popularity of grass courts continued to wane during the '80s. The original 36 courts were converted to other surfaces gradually over the years. First to 22 and now to eight. "Grass is nice for the recreational player," states Sheridan. "We protect our courts by rotating them daily, maintaining a sod nursery, and using a few tech-



Bentgrass courts are mowed at 5/16-inch.

niques to keep the bent growing vigorously. Each year we host the Men's Eastern and National Women's Senior Grass Court Championships.

"There's definitely a place for grass courts in tennis today," continued Sheridan. "After a lull ten years ago, the use of our grass courts picked up again. Some players prefer grass over anything else. We make sure they have a place to play."

Variety of Surfaces

Today, Sheridan maintains eight grass courts, seven red clay courts, four DecoTurf courts, and 23 Har-Tru courts. The club also has three platform tennis courts and covers four Har-Tru courts with a bubble for winter play.

The hard court is actually an adaptation of tennis brought on by American court builders and the glamorization of the fast-paced, power game played by young professionals in this country. Hard courts play faster, have a more predictable bounce, and provide superior footing. They benefit the younger player and power in regard to shotmaking. However, they also are less forgiving on knees and leg muscles.

Clay and grass courts take some of the speed off the ball when it bounces. The emphasis is placed on shotmaking. Most foreign tennis professionals develop their skills on clay and grass. In fact, most major tournaments outside the United States are held on other than hard surface courts.

West Side has four Deco-Turf hard courts for its members who enjoy the fast game. But the majority of its courts are surfaced to please those who like more traditional playing conditions.

Court Maintenance

"This country has ventured away from traditional tennis surfaces partly because of the maintenance involved in clay and grass courts," Sheridan points out. "They require a daily regimen of maintenance practices. Most parks don't have the budget or trained staff to manage anything besides hard courts. As a result, most people learn tennis on hard surfaces and aren't exposed to the differences grass and clay courts offer."

According to Sheridan, there is a general lack of knowledge on how to care for more traditional tennis surfaces. He is constantly receiving phone calls from tennis enthusiasts with their own courts. "I frequently consult members on court care," says Sheridan. He also is a regular speaker at Har-Tru's annual maintenance school.

"Just like no two golf greens are exactly alike, no two grass or clay courts are the same," explains Sheridan. "There is a wide variation in grass courts because of the soil and the varieties of bentgrass used. Our courts and nursery were constructed with a local topsoil amended with USGA greens mix. The surface is probably in the range of 70 percent sand and 30 percent humus. We aerate, drill seed, topdress, and roll the courts in October. Deep aeration in April has also proven helpful."

Sheridan has gradually incorporated different varieties of creeping bentgrass and perennial ryegrass into the courts. "I've tried using just one variety in the past and found that mixtures are more wear tolerant," he reports. The courts are now a mixture of ryegrass and Cobra, Penncross,

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and Penneagle bents.

"In the '40s, my father tried Ugandagrass on a portion of the nursery," adds Sheridan. "It didn't green up until the end of June."

The other items Sheridan watches closely are moisture and fertility. "Our irrigation system is all manual with quick-coupler heads," he says. "There is no zoning. I'd prefer an automatic system, but our night irrigation man knows to watch the grass courts very closely."

Since the rootzone contains a high portion of sand, Sheridan tries to avoid quick-release nitrogen sources. "There is a lot of concern over nitrates leaching into the groundwater around here," he states. "I also don't want lush turf growth. I'm fairly happy with a line of fertilizers from Huma-Gro. It includes complete fertilizers as well as supplements of potassium, phosphorus, and minors. The turf seems to be tougher, better in hot periods, and less prone to disease. It is not quite as green. That's where a few selected applications of nitrogen and iron come in."

Sheridan is trying milky spore to control grubs and is considering biological pesticides for billbugs and the Northern crane fly. He alternates Bayleton and Chipco 26019 for diseases. "I don't go to preventative fungicides unless there's an unusual problem caused by weather," he adds. Two applications of Trimec keep the weeds under control.



Jim Sheridan.

The grass courts are neatly trimmed at 5/16-inch with two walk-behind greensmowers. "They are a total of about two acres," reveals Sheridan, "so I'm considering a riding triplex greensmower."

Included in his bag of tricks are a special line marker and an occasional touch up with green dye for televised events. "The marker uses a two-inch roller to apply a light coat of paint to the grass," he says. "It helps cut down on paint buildup that you can get from a sprayer."

It might appear that the grass courts require more attention than the others. This is not true according to Sheridan. "You have different concerns with clay and

Har-Tru. Brushing, filling in low spots, and maintaining the right level of moisture are constant jobs for clay-type courts. We manage our red clay courts differently from the Har-Tru. The Har-Tru is crushed light-green stone. It drains better than clay, but it also requires more water to maintain its firmness. The advantage of Har-Tru is the material is consistent," claims Sheridan. "Clays vary a great deal and they also contain fines which cling to the ball and clothing." There is enough to clay court management that it takes Sheridan more than three hours to cover the subject at the Har-Tru school.

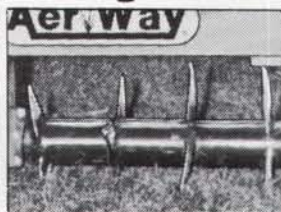
Six years ago, Sheridan received so many calls about court maintenance that he decided to train a crew and start a side business. "We maintain more than 20 courts in the area during the summer," he says. "We have the equipment and knowledge it takes to do the job right. Properly maintained courts play the way they were intended to play. More people would have grass and clay courts if there were someone to maintain them professionally."

It's obvious that Sheridan has an affinity for grass and clay courts. Perhaps it's because he and his father have invested so much of their lives in them. Or maybe it's the impression he gets from all the tennis stars he knows personally. He presents the challenge, "If you're a serious golfer, what type of course do you enjoy playing most? It's the same for tennis. That's important when you realize you can enjoy tennis throughout your life."

The chemistry of sportsturf management



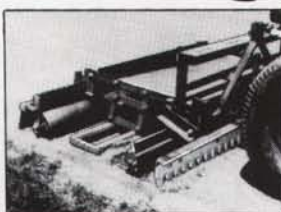
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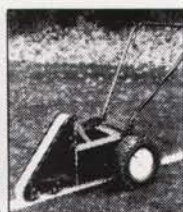
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