

State of the Union Address 2016: Tennis Ball Recycling Goes Mainstream

Fort Williams Park in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, is most famously known as the home of the Portland Headlight, one of the most-photographed icons in New England. Less known is that Fort Williams Park is the epicenter of what is arguably the fast-growing trend in Sustainability- recycling tennis balls. Yes, Cape Elizabeth and fifteen surrounding communities form the highest concentration of community tennis ball recycling in the US today. Working together, these communities organized to purchase tennis ball recycling bins, promote the program, and commit school or parks and recreation staff to collect balls on a monthly basis. The result: a percentage of unwanted balls recycled that is higher than any other area in the US – and even the French (more about them later).

Why Tennis Balls Don't Get Recycled

So, in a country where its second nature to recycle everything that is not biodegradable, why is it a big deal that 16 communities came together to recycle tennis balls? Because today in America, fewer than a half a percent of the 125 million tennis balls sold each year are recycled. That means that more than 100 million tennis balls enter US landfills ever year, and these balls take years to decompose. Why does this happen? Well, most regular tennis players open a new can of balls for every match; they are willing to use those new balls next time while warming up- but after that, they are of little use. And, with an estimated 10 million regular players, that's generating a lot of tennis balls that are discarded every week. Sure, tennis balls are reused for dogs, for school desk legs, and for the bottom of elderly walkers, but there is only so much need for those applications.



Tennis balls have never been attractive as an input material for recycling because they require a separate grinding process; and that commitment is hard to justify in the face of what seems to be an unlimited supply of rubber from old automobile tires. So, most tennis players fill their bags with used balls, then transfer them to larger bags in the garage, before they eventually send them to the curb, and onto the local landfill. Tennis players would love to recycle; most of them just don't have a convenient option.

The History of Tennis Ball Recycling: the seeds of sustainability

But, some tennis balls are actually being recycled. The leaders in the world today are the French. Under the auspices of the French Tennis Federation, with sponsorship from the tennis industry and others, France collects and recycles an estimated 10% of its used balls annually. This program, called Operation Balle Jaune, began in 2009, and is now collecting over 1.5 million tennis balls annually. Those balls are being ground into granules and added to the resins used to make durable sports surfaces.

http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2j8cng_operation-balle-jaune-2015_sport

An early contributor to US tennis ball recycling efforts is Project Green Ball (PGB), a 501c (3) non-profit organization devoted to finding innovative means to recycle used tennis balls. So far PGB has collected over 254,000 balls from over 90 tennis facilities, clubs, schools and camps and hundreds of individuals. PGB recently facilitated the donation of an equestrian riding surface containing 100,000 dead tennis balls to a therapeutic riding program for people with disabilities.

The challenge for those promoting tennis ball recycling has always been an economic one. In addition to the material value issue, shipping tennis balls is relatively expensive: lots of air, and small quantities coming from lots of places. It's harder to do good when we have to reach into our pockets to do so.

Tennis Ball Recycling Today –poised for a takeoff

But, things are changing – and if Fort Williams Park is any indicator - 2016 could be the year that tennis ball recycling becomes mainstream in our industry. In August, 2015 Rebounder, a tennis industry veteran in supporting the reuse and recycling of tennis balls, announced a partnership with Advanced Polymer Technologies and Ace Surfaces to build and deploy new tennis courts that incorporate used tennis balls as a component in construction and resurfacing. These “green” tennis courts could generate the need for hundreds of thousands and then millions of used and unwanted tennis balls - while providing a story that has a wonderful “circle of life” vibe for the industry. Our used tennis balls become the seeds beneath our feet to grow new courts across America.



Courtside Tennis Ball Recycling – simple and low cost

So, what does courtside recycling look like? The Fort Williams courts in Cape Elizabeth look similar to ones across the country, with both a garbage can and a glass-and-bottles recycling bin nearby as you come off the courts. But, they have something more: an AD-IN Bin hanging from the court fence at eye-level – a convenient place for players to contribute balls that aren't going to be used again. Town staff empty the AD-IN Bin at regular intervals, and store balls until ready for shipping. Then it's simply a matter of downloading a pre-paid shipping label, sealing the box, and taking it to a nearby FedEx/Kinko location. From there the balls begin their journey to a second life as new tennis courts.



These early successes indicate that the key to a successful recycling program – and by extension the key to tennis ball recycling becoming as common as for bottles and cans nationwide – is convenience. Most of us are not going to schlep bags of balls from our garage to a recycling center. In order to achieve a national recycling percentage of 50%, we need to change behavior coming off the court: *in the bin, not in the bag*. This insight led Retour Tennis to design and manufacture the specialized recycling bin used by the sixteen Maine communities.

And, momentum is building. In early September the Cliff Drysdale Management group announced their commitment to begin collecting and recycling tennis balls. And, it's not just the larger organizations. According to Retour Tennis, more than 60 communities, from Great Neck, NY to Menlo Park, CA are now promoting and operating courtside tennis ball recycling. It's still a long way to get to the target of 50 million balls annually. But, then again, remember when we threw our bottles and cans away? The day probably isn't too far away when it will seem odd to come off a tennis court in America and not have a place to contribute those dead tennis balls. And that will be a good thing.

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