

# Tennis on the Rebound

**Resorts find sport is regaining popularity**



Rancho Valencia Resort's 17 tennis courts, along with instruction and atmosphere created by tennis pro John DeLille, attract about 40 percent of the resort's guests.

**A**s this issue goes to press, the U.S. Open is set to shatter attendance records. That comes as no surprise to Nancy Hunter, resident manager at Rancho Valencia Resort and Spa, which has been ranked as a top tennis resort by both *Gourmet* and *Tennis* magazines. "Our tennis program is in great demand," she says. "We've added more pros to accommodate families and other guests who want to work on their game in a beautiful resort atmosphere."

According to the Tennis Industry Association, tennis participation has grown by 30 percent since 2000, making it the fastest-growing traditional sport in the United States. "Tennis has staying power, positive role models, fun and fitness," says Jolyn de Boer, the group's executive director. "It's definitely gaining in the 'cool' factor. What other sport has women in their 80s and older running around in mini-skirts and fitted tank tops?"

With sales of tennis equipment up 20 percent and sales of youth racquets up 45 percent, new players are often looking to continue playing and refining their game while on vacation. To find out what tennis guests are looking for in a resort destination, *Resort and Recreation* checked in with three of the top-rated tennis resorts at [tennisresortonline.com](http://tennisresortonline.com) and a leading court builder.

## **Ace Instruction**

"The tennis staff is a critical factor," says Bob Greene, tennis pro at The Balsams Grand Resort in New Hampshire. "You need people who have exceptional interpersonal skills in addition to being great players."

Howard Moore, tennis program director at Saddlebrook Resort in Tampa, Fla., agrees. "Our staff is an integral part of our success; it's what keeps people coming back," he says. "We have a beautiful facility, but it's our staff that leaves a lasting impression. We want them to leave saying, 'Wow, that was the best instruction I've ever had.'"

Greene finds pros through job boards at the USPTA's Web site and doesn't rely on high-school students to supplement his teaching staff. "We have high-school students working in the pro shop, but I think it's even more important to have skilled instruction for beginners," he says. "We want someone who will make it fun but also help players develop their games."

Scott Gilmore, tennis pro at the WaterColor Inn and Resort in Santa Rosa Beach, Fla., says that resort tennis pros must create a welcoming environment. "We hand-deliver water and clean towels to the players," he says. "We have to be more service-oriented."

### Courting Guests

Of course, quality facilities are needed too. "When people take a vacation to play tennis, they want to play on the best courts," says Dave Moseley of Welch Tennis Courts of Sun City, Fla.

Saddlebrook, which also operates a tennis academy, has 45 courts, including grass, clay and hard courts. "Tennis enthusiasts enjoy the opportunity to try out different types of courts, especially the grass courts," Moore says.

Rancho Valencia has plexi-pave hard courts, and they're located at the center of the resort surrounded by lavish landscaping. "Guests can sit and watch tennis while they're having lunch," Hunter says. "The players feel like they're part of the atmosphere."

The mild San Diego weather is a huge advantage for Rancho Valencia, which rarely has to contend with high temperatures and never with snow. For resorts where the temperatures can soar, Moseley says clay courts can feel 20 degrees cooler. "It's amazing the difference it makes," he says. "They don't really cost any more to build."

Gilmore says clay courts are popular with guests, but they do require a lot of care. "You have to watch for dry spots," he says. WaterColor has five Har-Tru Hydro Courts, which is a brand of "green clay" surfacing material made of dark gray-green crushed stone. He says they require less maintenance than traditional red clay courts.

The grass courts at Saddlebrook require a daily mowing and wicking to absorb extra moisture, and they have to have markings applied. The clay courts must be maintained about three times a day. It's enough work to keep the maintenance staff at four or five employees.

Whatever the surface, the most important thing is to keep them maintained and looking sharp. "I always say the first job of a tennis pro is to pick up trash," Gilmore says. "A wad of newspaper blowing around can give a bad impression."

### The Total Package

Even tennis enthusiasts want a total resort experience, so tennis guests need other activities, too. "Our other amenities are on the same level as our tennis facilities," Hunter says. The resort has a championship croquet lawn, fitness center, bicycle rentals, and access to nearby private golf courses.

Packaging it right comes into play. At the Balsams, guests often come on a tennis plan that includes two meals a day, plus tennis instruction. Court time is included, along with several other resort activities, such as bicycle rental. "For a nice resort, we're very affordable," Greene says. "We get a great mix of people."

Tennis guests who enjoy the experience tend to come back. "I love to hear that our guests who have met here are calling each other to make sure they come at the same time next summer," Greene says. "People have a lot of choices, and the fact that they choose to come here again and again shows that this is a special experience." **R+R**

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