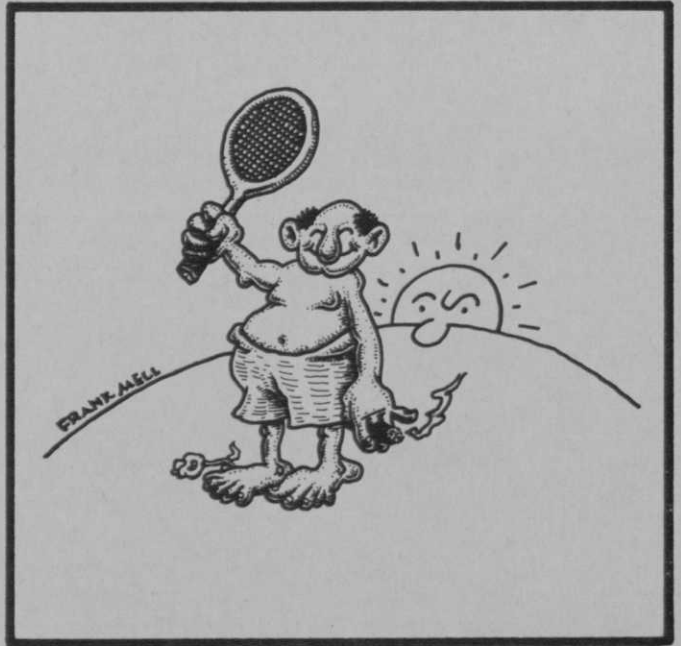
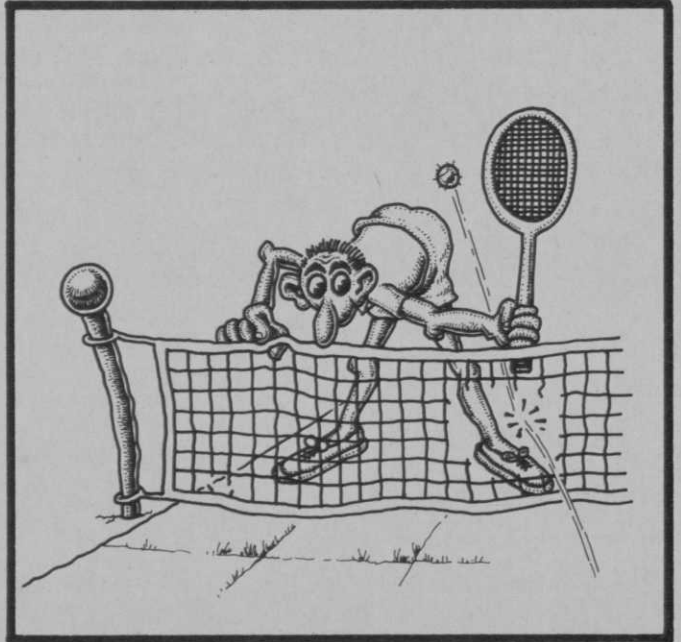
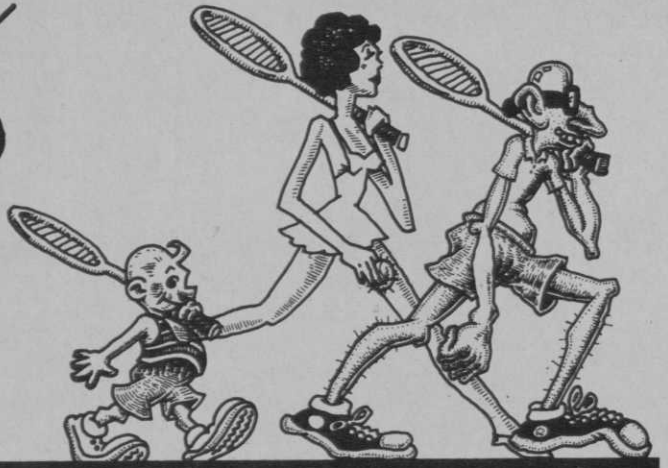


Clubs turning to Love



The tennis boom is on, and club managers have been caught off guard by the resurgence. But building courts can be expensive, unless a sound financial program is worked out

By Joe Doan

Nobody really has a good explanation for it. Not more than five years ago, if a club had courts, probably half the membership wasn't aware of it. The teenagers around the club made some use of them, but at the first trickle of sweat, their allegiance was transferred to the swimming pool. In 1965 or 1966 the only adults around the club who played tennis were the skinny little eccentrics: the ones who wore the boxer shorts that were too big for them and ringed their foreheads with sweat bands. They did well if they constituted 3 per cent of the membership.

Now, flip the calendar. Bring it up to 1968. Suddenly, tennis is invented, discovered, or in the case of country clubs, conjured. For reasons that club managers, at least, can't explain there is a great declaration in favor of this newly-unearthed, sweaty pastime that includes one out of four members. At some clubs, it's more like 50 per cent. Kids swarm over the club's two or three courts. Torn weathered nets, which haven't intercepted a tennis ball in years, have to be quickly replaced. The old chickenwire backdrops have to go. There are a few hundred complaints about the lumps and ridges in the long neglected playing surfaces.

"Excuse me for using the word 'incredible,'" says one club manager, "but that's what it was. All of a sudden 70 or 80 people in a membership of 250 decide they want tennis. We were totally unprepared for it except that there were some courts out there."

This manager has no sure explanation for the instant popularity of tennis. A small part of it may be due, he believes, to people reading about and getting to occasionally see the professional tour. But Rod Laver and Arthur Ashe certainly aren't firing imaginations the way Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus did about a decade ago. So the manager isn't sure that

the tennis professionals are making much of an impact. One thing he suggests is that so many barnlike, indoor tennis structures have been built in recent years that the game is now a year-round sport, and people want to continue to play it at their clubs through the summer. Finally, there is a new attitude among a large percentage of people. They are bored with being spectators or playing sedentary games and so they are looking for something with action. Tennis gives it to them. At the same time, it renews their lease on good health.

The action-health factor, the manager concludes, probably is the compelling reason why so many people have gone back to playing tennis or are taking it up.

Tennis facilities at country clubs aren't new, by any means, it's just that people are finding out that they are there. The 1969 Directory of Information, published by the Chicago District Golf Assn., shows that at the conclusion of the 1968 season, 38 out of 91 clubs in the Chicago area had tennis courts. Reliable estimates now put this number at close to 50, because in the last three years membership demand has led to the installation of tennis facilities at several clubs that didn't have them before. The CDGA's Directory is no longer being compiled, so up-to-date information isn't available from this source. However, a survey made this spring by GOLFDOM confirms that there is definitely a tennis building boom going on, not only in the Chicago area but around the country.

This is confirmed by the C.R. Peterson Company of Elk Grove, Ill., which has been in the court construction business for 40 years and has installed hundreds of tennis facilities throughout the United States as well as in the Caribbean and Hawaii. In 1970 the Peterson firm put in more than 100 courts at private clubs (golf

and tennis) as well as numerous installations for universities, schools and municipalities. In spite of the recession, the company did a record volume and at the moment has a backlog that will carry it through September. Several of its competitors are in the same happy predicament. Of the 100 or so private club courts Peterson installed, 30 were in the Chicago area and most were for country clubs.

Individual courts range in price from around \$8,000 to \$15,000. This includes chain-link fence backstops, from 10 to 12 feet high, 60 feet long at both ends of the court, and four wings extending about 30 feet. A complete backstop runs about \$1,500. Har Tru or Har-Court (Peterson calls its equivalent Petco) surfaces, which are most popular, run about \$6,500 per court. This type is a mixture of hot or cold liquid asphalt with subsoil installed over an eight-inch stone base, with drainage around the court perimeter.

Slightly more expensive is the GrassTex installation. It, too, is laid over a stone or macadam, water bond base. GrassTex, which is laid on with rollers, is a one-fourth-inch cane fiber and is practically indestructible if properly maintained. It costs around \$7,000 per court.

A third choice is the Astro-Turf type installation, most adaptable to old courts. However, there is no great rush to install Astro-Turf because it costs anywhere from \$11,000 to \$14,000 per court.

The old clay court, still a sentimental favorite with men who build tennis facilities, is almost extinct. The reason is that it is almost impossible now to find blue clay that isn't permeated with shale. In the winter the imbedded shale works its way to the surface. After it is removed, it takes a tricky topdressing operation to restore the court's finish.

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Love

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According to C.R. Peterson II, most of the old clay courts have disappeared, victims of asphalt or cement overlays. They have been sacrificed to make maintenance easier. A cement base, though, is no bargain. It is difficult to construct a cement court with cooling air gaps, as can be done with asphalt, and the blister toll is forbidding. Cement courts are probably cheaper to construct originally, but this is a case in which any savings cannot conscientiously be justified.

In 1969 the Chicago District's club administration committee made a detailed study of three member clubs' tennis costs and programs and came up with some interesting figures covering a four-court installation at Evanston CC. A 200 by 120-foot site was set aside for the Evanston courts. The total cost was \$40,000, including fencing and an automatic sprinkling system for cooling and cleaning. The total investment was perhaps \$5,000 higher than would be normally expected because an unusual amount of tree removal and grading work was required. The installation project took 90 days. The dimensions cited above are considered to be standard for a four-court layout, although some clubs are exceeding them slightly in anticipation of eventually putting in lights. As far as is known, there is only one lighted court setup in the Chicago District.

To pay for its courts, Evanston originally planned to sell \$500, 7 per cent interest bonds to members. The bonds were fully subscribed, but in the meantime so much interest was generated in the tennis construction project that a different method of financing was adopted. Initiation fees were increased, and \$350 of each of these fees diverted to pay for the courts. In addition, dues were increased \$20 a month and a portion of the money realized from the increase was used to help defray the cost of the tennis installation.

According to the club managers, more women play tennis at country clubs than men, but there aren't any head counts to substantiate this. At Cress Creek in Naperville, golf widows were liberated when two courts were built for them in 1970 and a woman professional hired to run the tennis program. Some teenagers used the courts there, but a male with a raquet is a rarity. A majority of players are in the 20 to 40 age group,

but enough fiftyish and older players are to be seen cavorting on the courts to challenge the adage that golf alone is a game of a lifetime. Octagenarians in tennis attire are not an altogether uncommon sight at many clubs. The heaviest traffic, though, is among teenagers. At practically all clubs where there is a tennis professional, great emphasis is put on the junior program.

About two out of three clubs have tennis professionals. They rank considerably below the golf professional in the pecking order. Not more than one out of four has a tennis shop. Generally, the tennis professional is employed from June 1st through Labor Day, is paid a salary of \$500 a month plus meals, according to the CDGA special report, and earns some money from giving lessons. He probably doesn't begin to rival his golf counterpart in the merchandising game, though, because from an equipment and apparel standpoint, tennis isn't the same lucrative business that golf is. The fact that so few tennis masters have shops doesn't help, either. At only three out of 20 clubs surveyed by GOLFDOM does a tennis professional sell through a golf shop. At two clubs the golf professional handles tennis goods as a convenience for the court players. Actually, there are very few out and out tennis professionals who are employed by the clubs. Most of them are university students or high school or college tennis coaches who moonlight during the summer.

At almost every club it is almost certain that the tennis operation is run at a loss. It is similar to the pool, in this respect. Those clubs that do charge for tennis, and they are in the minority, usually restrict the tab to \$50 for an individual membership and \$100 for a family. Guest fees, which give all day playing privileges, rarely exceed \$3.50. A tennis membership, as such, is rare. However, one high dues club in the Northern suburbs charges tennis members 60 per cent of its regular membership fees. Another club in the same area pegs the tennis fee at \$75 over its social membership dues.

Hinsdale CC, which has maintained first-class tennis accommodations for its members since the end of World War II, extends tennis privileges to its social members without making any extra charge. The reason it does this is that golf mem-

berships usually aren't available until five years after a person joins the club, and something beyond clubhouse amenities are thus made available. Flossmoor, which will have tennis for the first time in 1971, was undecided on a tennis fee at the time GOLFDOM was making its survey. But the feeling among club officials there is that the tennis players shouldn't get an altogether free ride.

This feeling generally prevails among club members. They concede, of course, that capital and maintenance outlays for tennis are very minimal compared with golf, but still a tennis program can't be run for nothing. At most clubs, in addition to the initial investment in courts and the tennis professional's salary, a full-time maintenance man is employed through the summer to water the playing surfaces, keep them rolled, keep the area cleaned up and occasionally do emergency repair work. Amortization and salaries on a four-court spread, for example, run to about \$18,000 annually. One manager has pointed out that the resurgence of tennis has been so sudden and recent that most clubs aren't aware that the court operation is an expensive one and should be underwritten by some kind of dues or fees structure.

Because the comeback of tennis at country clubs is so recent, there hasn't been any strong movement to start interclub competition. Most of the rivalry is intraclub. The challenge board, which covers singles and doubles, is a popular everyday agency for players who want to try to climb the ladder to supremacy. Most club tournaments are played in August and September, but the season is interspersed with a variety of special events and one-day tournaments. At Hinsdale, where tennis has become entrenched, it is necessary to set aside one day a week as Ladies' Day.

Although interclub play hasn't begun to take hold, a half dozen Northside clubs have been playing in a tennis league for many years in competition with three outside tennis clubs. The golf clubs involved are Exmoor, Glenview, Skokie, Indian Hill, Northmoor and Lake Shore. They play a round robin schedule that starts in mid-June and is concluded in mid-August, with competition being spread over four divisions of players.

Although tennis has come on stronger in the last two or three years

than at any time in the past, and far more money is being spent today in installing facilities than ever before, the country clubs have had other court booms in years gone by. As C.R. Peterson has pointed out, the booms seem to be part of a near 15-year cycle. Back in the mid-twenties when Bill Tilden was at his peak and most sports-minded people were talking about tennis, quite a few were built by country clubs. Fifteen years later there was another revival and this one carried through the War years, largely because golf went off to war. Around 1955, when President Eisenhower had his celebrated heart at-

tack, people suddenly became conscious of the need for the brisk exercise that tennis can give, and one of the results was that clubs once again expanded their court facilities.

The present resurgence perhaps can't be tied to any particular person or happening. Probably as has been stated earlier in the article it's a kind of spontaneous thing. People aren't as sedentary as we are led to believe. They want action, they want a game in which moving around involves more than just walking. They've suddenly discovered that tennis gives it to them and so they are flocking onto the courts. □



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