

Bow Br k Club

CLAY COURT MAINTENANCE TIPS By New England Tennis Courts, Inc.

The two most important factors when determining a maintenance program for a clay surface is how much top dressing is available and secondly, if there is there too much or too little moisture present.

PROBLEM: Too much surfacing material in areas where ridges and uneven piles are building up above the court surface. Excess buildup results in dead and/or uneven bounces, and in the case of coarse top dressing, can create slippery conditions underfoot.

SOLUTION: Drag brush the court length and crosswise lowering the brush handle as heavy deposits are encountered to collect excess and raising the handle to unload material outside the playing area. Take a hoe, lute or square flat shovel and scrape excess into piles and collect for later use. Often, during the season material will build up along the net line and peripheral fence lines being carried and dropped by the wind or from brushing the court in one particular pattern.

PROBLEM: Too little surfacing material. Bare spots and thin areas where the clay base is exposed are usually lighter in color (bleached) and can also cause uneven footing and bad bounces. Wind and/or rain erosion, heavy play or simply improper application during spring reconditioning can be the causes. A dry tennis court will lose considerably more fine surfacing material during wind storms than a moist court.

SOLUTION: Any bare or lightly top-dressed areas should be scratched (hand scarified) with a steel tennis court rake which will loosen the clay subsurface and allow the new fine surfacing a better chance at adhering to the clay base. After a liberal amount of red or green surfacing has been applied to the dampened court surface it should be rolled with a hand or power roller followed by a light covering of coarse red or green. The coarse material helps keep the fine particles in place and provides continuity in the playing surface with the rest of the court.

MOISTURE PROBLEMS: The physical properties of clay resemble those of a sponge; when over saturated, it will exude water and be mushy, while dehydrated, it will crumble into powder. Like a sponge, clay works best between the two extremes, having some moisture present.

Bow Br k Club

CLAY COURT MAINTENANCE TIPS **By New England Tennis Courts, Inc.** (continued)

SOFT WET SURFACE: Use the thumb test to identify a surface too wet to play on. Press the pad of your thumb firmly into the court surface. It should not impress more than 1/4". Footprints will damage the court and balls will bounce low if played on. Reasons for soft courts include over watering, heavy rainfall, courts not graded properly to drain off excess surface water, frost still present in the ground, a high water table relative to the finish surface grade, or the lack of a porous gravel layer (6" minimum) underneath the 3" - 4" layer of surface clay.

SOLUTION: Tennis courts are in a highly saturated state in early spring and require extra rolling to squeeze out water pockets caused by frost action during the winter. Start with a light roller (no water in the drums). Roll the court lengthwise, crosswise and diagonally and then progressively add roller weight. If after a day or two of dry weather and rolling the soft conditions persist, a deeper base of gravel may need to be installed or a proper drainage system installed around the outside perimeter of the court. Also be aware of turf build up around the perimeter fence line as this condition will impede lateral surface drainage.

DRY SURFACE: Clay surfacing will dehydrate after prolonged dry periods and especially during the hot sunny months of June and July. The courts become light colored and a plume of dust will rise if you stamp your foot down on the court. These dust bowl conditions should be avoided because the danger of rapid disintegration and erosion of the clay surface. Dry clay loses its adhesion characteristics and will crumble into powder easily. For this reason **NEVER** roll a dry tennis court!

SOLUTION: It is best to have a water system available with 6 to 8 sprinkler heads per court. It can be automated or operated manually to determine the ideal watering duration. Water during the evening or early morning, enough to saturate the surface but stopped before large puddles form. Watering any dry areas by hand with a hose can also be effective. If watering is not a possibility, calcium or magnesium chloride can be used with some added benefits. One application of 200 - 400 pounds can last up to three weeks. It also helps kill weeds on the court surface. It should be applied in the evening for the flakes to have time to completely dissolve. Be sure to sweep the tapes after application to prevent them from staining.

Bow Br k Club

CLAY COURT MAINTENANCE TIPS **By New England Tennis Courts, Inc.** (continued)

PROBLEM: Excessive weed growth can be an irritating and unsightly problem on clay courts.

SOLUTION: In environmentally sensitive areas it is best to cover the courts (at least the perimeter areas) with black poly plastic mulch. This is laid out in the fall and rolled up in the spring. An added benefit is that it helps conserve the top dressing. The down side is that it is somewhat labor intensive to cover the plastic with old tires or boards to keep it from blowing away during the winter months. Organic biodegradable weed killers are now being brought out on the market. Their effectiveness is still in question. Granular chemical weed deterrents are very effective and remain on the application area whereas liquid weed killers can run off and cause problems outside of the court area.

PROBLEM: Uneven playing surface, divots and depressions.

SOLUTION: Dragging the court length and crosswise can take out small surface irregularities. Divots and heel marks should be groomed out with a steel rake or lute and then rolled. After a heavy rain is a good time to roll courts and will help to flatten and firm the surface. For larger depressions the area should be identified and scribed out, cleaned of top dressing, plugged with clay patch, scarified and leveled, top dressed and rolled.

SOME NOTES ON LANDSCAPING: A thoughtful landscaping plan can bring a lot more enjoyment to your tennis courts as well as save money. Dark green backgrounds provide the best visual backdrop for playing. This can be in the form of wind screening or planting hedges of pine, fir or hemlock outside the court perimeter. Besides providing a contrasting background for tennis balls, a backdrop will create a wind break which reduces the effects of wind, conserve top dressing, provide some shade to keep the courts cooler, and although the needles from trees need to be cleaned off in the spring their acidity acts as a weed deterrent.