

TennisIndustry

Your Serve

Club Concerns

For this avid rec player, indoor club closures, college program closures, and more are raising some questions about the future.

By Alex Kor

In the late 1960s and 1970s, our beloved sport was growing by leaps and bounds. American tennis players like Jimmy Connors, Chris Evert, Billie Jean King, John McEnroe, Arthur Ashe and Stan Smith paved the way for the incredible interest and expansion of tennis. More people were looking to play, more racquets and apparel were being sold, and more indoor tennis clubs were being built. Here in the mid-Atlantic, many of our tennis clubs were indeed built during this time.

In Baltimore, the centerpiece of the tennis community since 1966 has been the Cross Keys Tennis Club, hosting over 100 state and regional championships over the years, along with many great champions. But on Dec. 21, Cross Keys, the oldest indoor tennis facility in the city, closed its doors. As news spread, area tennis players (myself included) scrambled for an indoor alternative.

Unfortunately, insiders have told me two additional indoor clubs will close in 2016. Thus, within a year, our area will lose 25 indoor tennis courts. To make matters worse, in November, the University of Maryland–Baltimore County announced it will drop its men's and women's tennis programs after this school year—becoming one of many colleges and universities around the country to have dropped tennis. This of course reduces the number of student-athletes playing tennis, but it also reduces the number of employed tennis coaches, as well as

facilities available for play.

Is this trend the beginning of the end for tennis (as we know it)? Is this a reflection of a sport that cannot be sustained because there are few American tennis stars? Or, will these closures demand that a new model for tennis facilities be considered? Is there indeed a relationship between the demise of American tennis, more colleges terminating their tennis teams, and tennis clubs closing their doors? Many questions need to be answered.

One does not need to be a real estate mogul to appreciate that indoor tennis clubs are an inefficient way to make the best use of the square footage on a property—the revenue generated per court per hour is very limited. When a majority of these indoor clubs were started, the land surrounding the facilities was under-developed and relatively inexpensive. Over the years, the surrounding growth made these properties more lucrative.

Some clubs diversified (i.e. fitness centers, basketball courts, etc.) while still maintaining a tennis presence. But once the demand for the land exceeded the revenue generated, these facilities had no choice but to discontinue tennis.

One new tennis facility that has enjoyed considerable growth is the **Montgomery TennisPlex** in Boyds, Md. Opened three years ago, it has eight bubbled courts and four lighted outdoor courts—and now has plans for expansion. Why is this facility growing? MTP CEO Jack Schore identified three keys to success: strategic loca-

tion, quality staff and leadership, and a combination of public and private funding. He also emphasized that leasing the property is preferred (vs. ownership). From my vantage point, I'd add that the knowledge, experience and creativity Jack has displayed over his 30-year career is a driving force for the success at MTP.

As a resident of Washington, D.C. and now Baltimore since 2003, I know our area will not be entirely deprived of indoor tennis. However, I'm very concerned. We need to figure out how to motivate individuals, groups, corporations and communities to build new indoor tennis facilities—not only here in my area, but throughout the country.

I realize I may be preaching to the choir, but this tennis-playing podiatrist doesn't want his racquets collecting dust in the closet during the winter. ■

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