

Tennis in Tahoe a challenge because of courts

By Kathryn Reed

Tennis is mostly a seasonal sport at Lake Tahoe because the lone indoor court is at Ridge Tahoe, which requires owning a time share there or being a guest to use that court at the top of Kingsbury Grade.

But the lack of indoor courts isn't because of lack of interest. Depending on the time and location it can be hard to get a court in Tahoe. Part of this has to do with the number of and access to public courts. So many of the courts are in subdivisions – like Tahoe Keys in South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Donner in Truckee.

Once upon a time the long-term facilities' map for Lake Tahoe Community College called for covered courts. Lake Tahoe Unified School District has talked about covering courts, as has Douglas County Parks and Recreation Department.



Sheryl Herschman plays on a USTA team at Zephyr Cove. Photo Copyright 2013 Carolyn E. Wright

Funding is the main hold up.

As the South Lake Tahoe-El Dorado County Recreation Facilities Master Plan comes together, tennis will be part of the discussion. What that will look like remains to be seen, but there will be opportunities for the public to voice its opinion.

When expanding and improving facilities and offerings are talked about, the idea of bringing in tournaments and groups from outside the area are always at the top of the list for why to do something.

When MontBleu casino in Stateline was Caesars Tahoe eons ago, professional tennis was played there on occasion.

In summer 2008, Incline Village Tennis Center was the site of an exhibition match between Justin Gimelstob, who was once in the top 50, and Paul Goldstein, a Stanford graduate once ranked No. 40.

Zephyr Cove's six courts, which are owned by Douglas County, are home to an annual tournament as well as four USTA teams this season. Tahoe Donner has USTA teams and tournaments, too.

Granlibakken in Tahoe City and Northstar in Truckee (the courts there are run by the homeowners association, not Vail Resorts) are private, but offer clinics to people not staying at the resorts.

Carel James, who divides her time between Florida and Lake Tahoe, said of Florida, "Many residential developments have tennis courts on the premises and will participate in league play, allowing other players from outside the development the opportunity to pay a fee to join their private courts. Being a part-time resident in Tahoe for the past eight years, I have seen a growing interest in tennis almost rivaling winter sports."

Public courts in the basin

The Tahoe Paradise courts are open to the public. Two of the three are playable and were resurfaced in the last few years.

“The courts are available on a first come, first serve basis at no cost. Generally speaking the courts are unlocked. The only time they may be locked is if there is a wedding ceremony being held,” El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago told *Lake Tahoe News*.

“The two courts are in great shape and usually empty. As far as I know, the only option for me to play in this town is on those two courts,” Brenda Stewart of South Lake Tahoe said of Tahoe Paradise. “(South Tahoe) Middle School is a terrifying/dangerous, crack-filled nightmare. I’m locked out of the Keys and I still can’t figure out how to play at the high school.”

The use of the six taxpayer-funded courts at South Tahoe High School is not easy to understand. Instead of going out for bid, the district has historically allowed the school’s tennis coach to use the courts for his personal use in the off-season.

Superintendent Jim Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News*, “What we usually do is work out where the money goes. (Coach Justin Clark is not paying a set fee) because it’s too volatile. We identify each year what we want to replace. This year it was windscreens. The district will pay for repaving.”

Tarwater said he has looked at Clark’s books and the most he’s made in a summer is about \$4,000.

“This is not a profit thing. That is not legal to do,” Tarwater said.

Clark told *Lake Tahoe News*, “If I break even every summer or pay myself a little, then I am happy. Also, I employ six kids for summer jobs and provide usually four scholarships to the tennis academy needy kids and about four work/play

opportunities where the kids work and get free tennis. After all that, there is enough to pay me little.”

Without a formal process in which someone can make money off public facilities, this becomes a gift of public funds.

This email was sent to Tarwater by *LTN*, “With Justin using so much court time for his private Tahoe Tennis Academy that makes good money and the district not making a dime from it, how does the district justify a private business that didn’t have to go through an RFP process making money off public courts?”

There was no reply.

The academy has between 10 and 50 players in it each week, according to Clark.

This is the 2013 STHS court time-fee schedule that was provided by Clark. Clark wants people to reserve a court 48 hours in advance online. But the district hasn’t set up the online scheduling platform.

“The online public facilities use scheduling portion of the software has not yet been tested. We are still building the final fee schedules/pieces in the software and hope to test in a controlled environment this summer,” LTUSD CFO Deb Yates told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We most likely will roll the software out to the school sites first, then determine when it will be ready for the live public.”

If Clark or one of his designees is not at the courts, the public is shut out because the courts are locked.

Douglas County puts out a request for proposal for a licensed tennis professional to run the six courts at Zephyr Cove. Rob Wheatley is in the middle of a multi-year contract that calls for him to pay the county a flat fee each year.



Suzy Allione serves during a match at Zephyr Cove. Photo Copyright 2013 Carolyn E. Wright

There was a time when the county took a percentage of gross receipts, but the time and paperwork involved made it not cost-effective.

Scott Morgan, who runs the county's parks department, said the courts are now self-supporting. About \$20,000 will be spent this summer to repair cracks.

If a player is not a member of the Zephyr Cove Tennis Club, then she is supposed to pay \$5 each time she steps on the court. The highest seasonal membership fee is \$70 for non-Nevada residents who aren't kids or seniors. The county approves all the fees Wheatley charges.

When Wheatley is not there, the courts are open and free to anyone, according to Morgan.

"In his contract he has to do a free youth clinic to grow the game," Morgan told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Other public courts around the Lake Tahoe area include:

- The Incline Village Tennis Center is part of the Incline Village General Improvement District. The 11 courts have a fee based on time of day and whether the player is an IVGID member. Reservations are encouraged. There are four pros on

staff.

- Two at the top of the tram at Squaw Valley. They are free to play on with the purchase of a tram ticket.
- Two courts at Kilner Park near Sunnyside. No fee, no reservations needed. The Tahoe City Public Utility District runs them.
- Four courts at North Tahoe High School are also run by TCPUD.