

BALL MACHINES ON THE MARKET
2019 GUIDE TO BALL MACHINES



Using a ball machine makes a group lesson seem like a private lesson, because the teaching pro is freed up and able to stand next to the players.

But industry data shows that, while we bring about 4 million players into the game annually, we are also losing more than 4 million players a year. In the past few years, we've lost almost a million more players than we've brought in. Research also shows that racquet sales between 2008 and 2016 are down 50 percent, and pros are telling me their lesson revenues have decreased.

Technology is a key to better retention, and the ball machine was one of the first non-traditional pieces of technology to be used in tennis. Today's ball machines continue to improve and capitalize on cutting-edge tech; they can even run off of apps on your phone. (See the chart on pages 24-27 for ball machines currently on the market.)

A Threat to Pros?

Many pros, however, say their members are too traditional, or don't like ball machines. Ultimately, though, this failure to embrace technology falls on the pros. At trade shows I attend, the No. 1 response from pros to new technology is, "Are you trying to replace us?"

The majority of pros seem threatened by ball machines because they feel if the player is hitting off the machine, it is taking away potential revenue from their lesson programs. Pros are very up front that they would never teach with a ball machine.

The unfortunate thing about this attitude is that with students, the pro will go right out and feed a timid ball from the net—a ball that the player would rarely if ever receive in a match, especially from that distance, which is

TEACHING TOOLS

Embracing Technology

For teaching pros, ball machines are a profitable way to help players improve.

BY STAN OLEY

The tennis industry is fortunate to have a lot of technology at its disposal, including smartphone apps, video, wearables and ball machines. The problem is, most pros don't use them.

I'm on the road more than 125 days a year. Based on what I have seen around

the country, as well as discussions with students and pros in my travels, I'd estimate that less than 5 percent of tennis pros nationwide take advantage of any technology, including video or ball machines.

If the industry was on fire with participation growth and solid retention, none of this would matter much.

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critical to the player's ball-recognition skills. ("Ball recognition" is the player's ability to judge the ball in flight and receive it in the appropriate strike-zone for their intended outgoing shot.) Many pros spend the majority of lessons soft-tossing balls to the player. The overuse of these feeding techniques prevents the student from developing ball-recognition and decision-making skills, which ultimately affects the learning experience of the player.

This lack of technology use goes all the way to professional-level players and industry executives. Industry leaders frequently have meetings on the future of technology in our industry, yet ball machines aren't on their radar. How is this possible?

Caring for Students

Then there is the care factor. While I've been on the road, I polled club

members about why they thought the industry was such a leaky bucket in terms of retention. Their response was that pros don't take lessons seriously, and don't care if players get better. The members felt that pros just wanted them leaving lessons feeling good, not necessarily being better.

When I told pros about the members' responses, a common reply was along the lines of, "I'm supposed to lose sleep because my 3.5 team lost? Not going to happen!" Members complained that pros did not attend their team matches, although players were required to take clinics to be part of the team. These clinics resulted in standard drills, rather than working on what the team failed to do during their match play.

To accentuate that, I also asked pros if they approach each day with lesson plans. Less than 10 percent replied that they did. Imagine if your doctor

approached your care in a similar way. Would you go back?

Another member complaint was that there is no player assessment. When you go to a fitness facility, you go through a complete goal-setting and assessment process. Players take lessons for long periods of time without ever knowing how much they have or have not improved. The only assessment is whether they are winning or losing their matches, which is not a fair assessment of a player's progress.

I don't think pros realize the culture of a club is created by the pro. I have been at clubs where ball machines were used heavily both in the lesson program as well as the post-lesson curriculum. At some point, that pro moves on, and a new pro takes over. When you visit that club a few years later, you have a hard time finding a ball machine. When you ask the new pro about the use of

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Not only is a ball machine a value-added member amenity, it makes a less experienced teaching pro more valuable by allowing the machine to handle the feeding.



ball machines, the pro responds, “The members really don’t use them here.” When you look around at the program, you see how much it has declined because of the lack of overall passion.

Ball Machine Revenue

What are some ways a ball machine can be an effective tool and source of revenue at a club? Let us count.

- Ball machine rentals average \$3,000 to \$5,000 of revenue a year, nationally.
- Post-lesson curriculum with a ball machine increases revenue and the player experience.
- Ball machines make video recording a student possible (and easy).
- Ball machine use allows for better

demonstration and pro/player relationship in private lessons.

- A group lesson with a ball machine—seems like a private lesson, because the pro is freed up and able to stand next to the players.
- For Cardio Tennis, a ball machine is a great—and safe—feeding solution.
- Using a ball machine allows for a better, more realistic playing environment for an advanced player.
- Using a ball machine means less wear and tear on teaching pros, keeping them healthy and on court longer.
- A ball machine makes a less experienced teaching pro more valuable by allowing the machine to feed balls.

- A ball machine is a value-added member amenity

If our industry retention numbers are going to improve quickly, something needs to change. The pros ultimately decide whether this change will occur, not whether an American pro-tour player makes it to No. 1.

Ultimately, your players want to get better, and we need to do everything in our power to help them, whether it is through improved technology or simply caring more. With ball machines, we can do both. ■

Stan Oley, the product marketing specialist for Playmate Ball Machines, was named Tennis Industry magazine’s 2017 Sales Rep of the Year. Playmate offers free player profile and assessment forms at playmatetennis.com.