

A question often asked: “What happens to tennis ball waste?”

A tennis ball history and a bit of tennis waste recycling news...

History: balls of hair and fluff

Tennis has a long history that dates back as early as 1480. The very first games were known to be played at Royal courts all around Europe. At first, the game was played without a racket and players would use their hands.

It was around this time, that King Louis XI of France forbade the filling of tennis balls with chalk, sand, sawdust, or earth, and stated that they were to be made of quality materials: good leather, well-stuffed with wool. Tennis balls were often filled with animal hair (and sometimes even human hair). Of course, the ball bounced quite differently, and more than 500 years later, we wouldn't be able to imagine a tennis game with this type of leather tennis ball.

In the early 1870s lawn tennis arose in Britain, for which Victorian lawns laid out for croquet were often used. Though lawns were being trampled, up until the manufacturing of “real” tennis balls in 1870, tennis balls were indeed very earth friendly and biodegradable.

After Charles Goodyear invented vulcanized rubber, the Germans had been most successful in developing air-filled vulcanized rubber balls. Those air-filled balls became the early tennis balls and playing properties of the balls were improved by covering them with flannel stitched around the rubber 'core'. Not long after, chemicals generating pressurized gas were added prior to closing the tennis ball. This process was used for many years until the precision of the game demanded a higher degree of uniformity. Now it is usual to “compression mold” two separate 'half-shells' which are assembled to produce a 'core'.

The Yellow Ball, a fun fact

“Why is the yellow ball, the color yellow?”

Historically, tennis balls were either black or white in color, depending on the background color of the courts. With the introduction of color television, the ITF (in 1972) introduced bright yellow tennis balls into the “rules of tennis”, as research had shown these balls to be more visible to television viewers. Meanwhile Wimbledon continued to use the traditional white ball, but eventually adopted yellow balls in 1986 and the rest of us has been playing with yellow tennis balls ever since.

Tennis waste and Recycling

Each year, approximately 325 million tennis balls are produced, which contributes roughly 20,000 tons of waste in the form of rubber, plastic and metal that is not easily biodegradable. The problem with tennis waste is that its composites cannot be broken down manually into easily recycled parts.

- Before 1925, tennis balls were packaged in wrapped paper and paperboard boxes that morphed into cardboard tubes.
- In 1926, the Pennsylvania Rubber Company released a hermetically sealed pressurized metal tube that held three balls with a church key to open the top.
- Beginning in the 1980s, plastic (from recycled PET) cans with a full-top pull-tab metal seal and plastic lid fit three or four balls per can.

As you can imagine, with all these changes and growth, our waste problem also started growing. Until recently, tennis ball recycling didn't exist, but fortunately nowadays, tennis balls CAN be recycled! Ball cans, tennis rackets, string, grips and of course, tennis balls!

The West Vancouver Tennis Club is part of a recycling program that reduces tennis ball waste. The initiative, set up in 2021, is called “the Re-Bounce project” and I am happy to let you know that most of our tennis ball waste is being converted into energy! (For more information see www.urbanimpact.com). Of course, we are all aware that recycling is important for the planet and the future of our children. For this reason, please recycle your tennis balls at the tennis club!