

Introduction

Clay is a generic term used to describe a playing surface that has a clay-like natural material look and feel about it. A number of international tournaments are played on clay surfaces and the surface is popular in Europe. In varying areas of Australia some clay type courts are known by differing names, for example in Queensland many are known as Ant Bed, whilst in Victoria predominantly the courts are En Tout Cas. Recently, there has been the introduction of a clay surface designed and constructed similarly to the European clay courts.

What is it made of?

The playing surface is made from a layer of material with cohesive properties, not unlike slightly moist natural clay; it can be made from a combination of natural and or synthetic materials. The surface course of clay can be either found in its natural state or as a mixed, crushed, screened, blended product. Materials used can be local gravel or crushed ceramic material, screened to appropriate size and mixed, or a fully synthetic mixture.

Construction considerations

Whilst the court is permeable to remove excess surface water, the court is constructed with a slight gradient to further help with surface water run-off. The court requires regular watering to maintain its optimum playing surface. Some form of irrigation is essential including hosing down between play and a sprinkler system, the latter could include an automatic timer system.

The court perimeter is usually surrounded by a retaining curb to contain the surface material. If trees are in the vicinity of the court perimeter, some consideration needs to be given to combating tree root penetration. It may not be a problem initially, but trees often grow and spread their roots. Tree root intrusion below a clay court can have a significant impact on the court surface.

How does it perform?

As with any court surface type there are varying qualities available, from local competition to top quality international standard. It is difficult to generalise about the playing characteristics of clay court surfaces as a single type of surface, due to the number of variations available in the market place. Playing characteristics vary according to type of product, its age and condition.

Indicative playing characteristics are:

- Slow ball speed,
- Medium to high ball bounce,
- Uniform trueness of bounce,
- Top spin,
- Slice,
- Firm footing with ability to slide,
- Have medium to soft shock absorption qualities.

How is it looked after?

Whilst all court surfaces require some degree of maintenance, clay surfaces generally require a higher level of maintenance. Maintenance is vital if the surface is to remain aesthetically pleasing, consistent in play, permeable and long lasting.

Maintenance procedures are designed to ensure that:

- The playing surface is kept clean,
- The playing surface remains consistent to give a true and predictable game,
- Free drainage of surface water,
- Looks attractive and well kept at all times.

These objectives are achieved by:

- Removal of surface plant debris and rubbish,
- Pulling a broom or drag mat over the surface between play,
- Keeping the surface moist by watering,
- Rolling periodically, especially after prolonged rain,
- Patching small wear depressions,
- Having surface damage repaired.

With clay courts it is essential that an ongoing maintenance regime is adhered to, to ensure the playing surface and the longevity of the court. Inadequate maintenance will significantly reduce the life of a clay playing surface. By the very nature of the

surface material there is a tendency for compaction, wear and wind erosion; therefore part of the ongoing maintenance regime includes the rejuvenation of the surface by spreading new material to the affected areas, watering and rolling it. Some of this rejuvenation can be carried out by the court owner. Areas of heavy use (such as the baseline area) may require rebuilding once or twice over the service life of the court.

Method of replacement

Providing the court drainage and foundation layers are in good condition, the surface can be scarified and new surface material spread, watered and rolled. Alternately it may be necessary to undertake remedial work on the foundation layers. It is probable that during the life of the court the lines will need to be replaced a number of times.

Lifecycle costs

This type of court can be economical to install. But will require considerable maintenance with associated costs. Court owners need to be aware that clay surfaces, as with any surface, do not last forever. They do have a finite life, which is dependent, in part, on their frequency of use and on how well they are maintained. There are significant ongoing maintenance costs however some of these costs can be reduced by volunteer workers. Also there is a need for periodic maintenance and possible repair costs. Ultimately there is the cost of rebuilding the clay surface.

It is essential that court owners understand the ongoing costs (annual, periodic, replacement) and make provision for the future expenses including the ultimate replacement of their court surface.

FAQs

What is the lifespan of a clay surface?

The life is dependent on a number of factors including, but not limited to, the maintenance regime and the usage of the court. Both have a significant and direct impact on the lifespan of the court. A well maintained clay court can last for 10 to 20 years or longer.

How do they handle after rain?

One of the advantages of a clay court is that they are permeable, and can be played on soon after rain. This of course is dependent on the surface and how it has been maintained. People need to be aware that playing on a waterlogged court can damage the surface.

Tennis Australia seems very interested in this surface?

Clay is used for more international tournaments than any other surface and hence Tennis Australia is keen for emerging players to develop their games on this surface.

Information Sheet

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