



# In Chicago, a Courtless Tennis Program for Countless Kids

BY CHRIS NICHOLSON

**S**ee that man in Chicagoland? The one with no tennis court but with a legion of children who owe their love of the game to him? That's Mark Miller. He's changed how tennis caters to youngsters in the Chicago area, and he's aiming to expand his catering business nationwide.

Miller's passion and business grew from an epiphany he had in the fall of 1996. He was watching his then-3-year-old daughter participate in a tennis clinic that used a shortened court. "That's when I came up with an idea," Miller remembers. "I said, 'I'm going to teach tennis to little kids, and I'm not going to use a tennis court.' "

The tactic, Miller says, is that by not limiting clinics to schools and neighborhoods with tennis facilities, tennis reaches a broader audience. "So I can expose literally thousands and thousands of kids to tennis because I don't use a tennis court," he says. "I go to a gymnasium, classroom or recreation room and use that facility."

Eight years later, Miller's Munchkin Program is a hit in Chicago. It has spread to 70 locations in 45 Chicagoland districts, and programs have opened in Indiana and Wisconsin. Munchkin Program—which also incorporates soccer, Nerf football, T-ball and other sports—has

seen plenty of press, too, having been covered by ABC News, NBC, CNN, the Chicago Tribune and national magazines.

"Mark is

a tennis entrepreneur—we need more Marks out there," says Jeff Giles, the director of community tennis development for the USTA's Midwest section. "He works out arrangements with schools and, more importantly, day-care centers, and sets up short-court tennis, takes balls and little nets, and takes the program right to the facility. And he's doing a great job. He's energetic, he's passionate, and he understands the social and psychological benefits that tennis can have to the youth in a community."

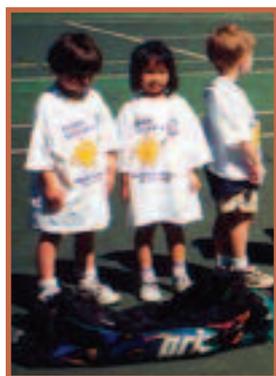
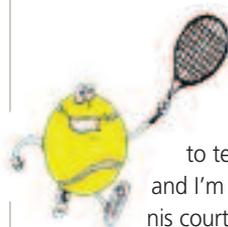
One of the keys of Miller's success is that he passes the responsibility of marketing onto the respective communities. This not only allows him to focus on teaching the children, but also reduces his overhead.

"The beauty of my business is I don't have to continually market it because the park districts do," Miller says. "I never touch registration, I never advertise."

Despite the success of the whole Munchkin Program, there's one aspect that's particularly close to Miller's heart. "I want to raise money to help underprivileged kids—kids with diabetes, with cancer, with any kind of disability whatsoever," Miller says. "My big passion is the Parents and Me program, where these parents spend quality time with their kids. I want to be in every park district imaginable doing this. We're trying to fight kids' obesity as well as promoting family togetherness through the game of tennis."

A future part of the program is a coloring book that will be handed out free to participants. The book will cover not only tennis, but also nutrition, exercise and self-esteem and will be paid for by a corporate sponsor.

With everything going so grand, what's next for the Munchkin Program? Expansion. Miller wants to see the program eventually go nationwide, through what he calls a "franchise with no fran-



chise fee." (Interested parties can get more information by visiting [www.munchkinprogram.com](http://www.munchkinprogram.com).)

"What I look for in my staff is they just have to be great with kids and be reliable, and I'll teach them the rest," Miller says. "I'll even take someone who doesn't know how to play tennis, because I have a step-by-step manual that tells them everything."

The growth might take a while, but if Miller's success in Chicago is any indication, it will be steady and sure. "We're just going step by step," Miller says. "Go to one state, go into another state, go into another state. We're really trying hard to grow the game of tennis through this." ▀

# WANT QUALITY?



## Are all tennis court surfaces the same?

Of course not.

## What makes a difference?

Several items can contribute to the results of a tennis court surfacing project:

- The products used
- Quantity of material used
- Dilution of product
- Number of coats
- Weather conditions
- Preparation
- Time between applications
- Competency of installation crew

These are just some of the things that control the quality of a tennis court surface.

It is not possible to get superior results using inferior materials. Beware of bargain prices. If you are quoted several prices for a project and most of the prices are close, but one contractor quotes an enormously lower price, watch out. It could be legitimate, but more than likely, this low ball price is for something worth a lot less than a first class job. We regularly see low prices that cannot be done without cheating of some sort. This could be as simple as over dilution of the materials used, application of less layers than agreed, not having proper insurance, or a combination of all the above.

The owner can contribute to poorer performing tennis court surfaces by pressing the contractor to work during weather conditions that are not suited for proper surfacing. Rushing can also reduce the quality of the preparation. Especially patching and scraping. It takes a certain amount of time to do things properly. Rushing can only force workmen to take shortcuts that could cause some failure down the line.

Nova Sports U.S.A. produces the finest acrylic tennis court surfacing materials available anywhere. We supply some of the best tennis contractors with these superior materials. If you are looking for a good tennis court surfacing installer, give us a call. Most likely we can refer you to a Certified Novacrylic Installer in your area.

*All-weather sport surfaces are all we do. We have to do it better.*

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