



BY MARY HELEN SPRECHER

FIELD OF PLAY

GRASS-COURT VOLLEYBALL COULD BE YOUR PARK'S NEW BEST FRIEND





IT'S EASY TO HOST. It's affordable to maintain. There are plenty of potential players. And it's hot and growing and can bring a younger demographic into your park.

Sounds like a win/win (or maybe, with all those advantages, a win/win/win/win/win), right? It's grass-court volleyball, one of the latest trends. The sport has long been a fixture at the club level on college campuses and at picnics nationwide, but it's also big on the pro level; in fact, there is also an AVP Grass Tour (tagline: "Grass meets grit").

And it might just be your next big thing, particularly if you have a goal of starting some leagues that will run on evenings and weekends. Grass volleyball has the edgy vibe of beach volleyball, but without the need to build a special court and truck in sand. Those interested in playing will find it easy to make up a team since some formats use only two or three players per side—and a smaller court can mean less running and more action.



In fact, this couldn't be easier to implement. All you need is the knowledge and a few simple tools.

GRASS-COURT VOLLEYBALL 101

First, the basics. The court size varies depending on the number of players. Games for doubles (two players on each side of the net) and triples (three per side) are referred to as being played on the "short court," while games for quads (four players per side) and sixes (six players per side) are referred to as being played on the "big court."

According to the *AVP Grass Rulebook* (downloadable free from the organization's website), for doubles and triples, the court is 52 feet, 6 inches x 26 feet, 3 inches (16 meters x 8 meters). Need a refresher? Those are the dimensions for beach-volleyball courts. For quads and sixes, the court is 59 feet x 29-1/2 feet (18 meters x 9 meters). Need diagrams? Head for FIVB, where you can find rules for both arrangements, along with diagrams.

Net height is 8 feet (2.43 meters) for men's doubles, co-ed, quads, and junior boys (16U, 18U). The net height for women's doubles, junior boys (10U, 12U, 14U), and all junior girls' divisions is 7 feet, 4 inches (2.2 meters). Nets can be permanently installed or can be set up on a temporary basis.

Players can choose to play barefoot or with shoes that do not have hard/sharp plastic/metal spikes. (Soccer turf shoes or trail runners are acceptable, according to AVP).

MARKING THE COURT

Assuming you're working with an open area of natural grass, you'll need to delineate the playing space. You can do

this with chalk lines (the way many sports fields are marked); however, if you anticipate ongoing and frequent use, you will likely want to use spray paint.

Of course, the next question is this: What dimensions should be marked on park courts? The answer: You can't go wrong with a larger court. Creating more space for players is always good—particularly if there is pick-up play when organized games aren't going on.

AVP does not specify overhead clearance for grass courts; in indoor play, according to USA Volleyball, there needs to be at least 23 feet between the playing surface and any overhead structure. Check to make sure balls in flight will not hit trees, power lines, lights, or other impediments prior to marking out the courts.

Adequate clearances around courts should be designated since players will need to chase the ball; putting courts too close to one another, to spectator areas, or to other structures such as light poles, statuary, etc., may result in injuries. Contractors suggest erring on the side of caution when setting up courts. Even at a recreational level, more space is preferable.

MAINTAINING THE PLAYING AREA

As usual, play on grass courts is weather-dependent, and courts need to be mowed regularly in season. Depending upon foot traffic, play will need to be rotated to different areas of the park in order to give the grass time to rest. Communicate any new locations to players well in advance.

But maintaining grass courts is more than play and rest. Mowing, watering, fertilization, aeration, and other care will be needed. Here are some quick tips from the pros:

● Mowing secrets:

Resist the temptation to keep grass as short as possible, and guard against too-frequent mowing. Grass should never be lower than 2 or 3 inches in height. Cutting back any further stresses the grass and makes it more susceptible to disease; also, the grass takes longer to recover from foot traffic.

● Soil compaction:

Over time, the playing area will become noticeably harder underfoot. This is a symptom of soil compaction; in addition to creating a less-springy surface, compaction reduces water and air movement in the soil. Maintenance crews should address compaction with slicing and core aeration, along with sand topdressing. This approach will help reduce compaction and allow nutrients and air to better reach the grass.

● **Correct watering:** Another problem is overwatering fields. Particularly in the summer, when grass does not look its greenest, the assumption may be to just add water—only that's not always the answer. Grass that is not bright-green does not always need water; in fact, it may need less water—and more nutrients.

● **Fertilization:** Consulting with a sports-field contractor (or a local agronomist) can be vital for grass health. Skilled professionals understand the varieties of grass and the climate, and when given information about the use the field undergoes, they can develop a plan for the care and feeding of the playing area.

ORIENTATION OF COURTS

If play is to take place during early morning and/or late afternoon, it is essential to orient the courts to the sun to avoid—as much as possible—it doesn't get in players' eyes. Remember that, at these times, the sun is low and closest to the horizon.

If courts are to be used throughout the day, a true north-south orientation is recommended as the best compromise between the extremes of early-morning and late-afternoon solar angles. At midday, the sun is at its highest in the sky, and depending upon the sport, may be distracting to players who are generally facing the ball upwards, as they do in volleyball, as opposed to a sport like soccer, where the action is closer to the playing surface. Note that there is no one orientation that completely avoids the sun. If there is space for multiple courts, and if play takes place throughout the day, a variety of orientations might be better.

More information about the construction and care of



grass playing surfaces can be obtained from the American Sports Builders Association (www.sportsbuilders.org), the professional organization for designers, contractors, and suppliers in the sports facility-construction industry. The organization's book, *Sports Fields: A Construction and Maintenance Manual*, contains user-friendly but in-depth information that leads a reader through the

decision-making process, as well as design, construction, and maintenance. **PRB**

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