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"Small steps to make big changes in tennis"

By Alan Trubow



Kids ask for autographs from Andy Roddick at Horseshoe Bay Resort on Thursday, when the No. 3-ranked player promoted youth tennis. *Photo by Brian K. Diggs*

WHAT IS THE STATE of tennis in America?

"I don't want to hear that question in 20 years," said Austin's Andy Roddick, the No. 3-ranked tennis player in the world, who reached the quarterfinals of Wimbledon earlier this month. "We fight the battle here in the states that tennis isn't the first, second or third sport that kids go to. If we can get kids interested in tennis at a young age and get them out there, get them to love tennis and stick to tennis, that will only help."

So Roddick was at Horseshoe Bay Resort, opening the nation's first mini tennis courts, directed at getting children between ages 5 and 10 to embrace the sport.



Andy Roddick and Michelle Stallard attend the announcement of the new USTA pilot program Project 36/60 at the Horseshoe Bay Resort Thursday afternoon. Project 36/60 focuses on scaling tennis down to a size that better fits the abilities of young players. *Photo by Brian K. Diggs*

The three courts are 60 feet long, as opposed to a regulation 78 feet, and are the beginning of the United States Tennis Association's Project 36/60.

Through the program, children start on courts as small as 36 feet long before moving up to the larger courts.

Making things smaller and simpler is not new to youth sports. Basketball has lower hoops, soccer has smaller fields, baseball has T-ball.

Project 36/60 is trying to make tennis more enjoyable for children by altering court size, net height, and ball speed and weight.

"Hopefully courts this size will help kids gravitate toward tennis at an earlier age," Roddick said. "It will make it a little bit easier to use the skills that are needed to play tennis without battling the size issues. Maybe it will be a little bit more fun for them, and they will think they're doing well."

Roddick, the 2003 U.S. Open champion and a two-time Wimbledon finalist (2004, 2005), didn't have trouble falling in love with tennis as a kid.

His parents pushed him; he succeeded.

And he had players to follow like Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi, who mentored Roddick when he was 16.

Now Roddick and James Blake are trying to catch up to Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

"It's tough. American tennis fans have been spoiled in the best possible way since tennis began," Roddick said. "What Americans don't understand is the globalization of tennis. It's the first or second sport in every other country,

"We've got to get it that way here and compete with the bigger sports. That's the challenge we face."

Roddick knows he has to do his part.

"The other part is, I have to win more tournaments. Success breeds success," he said. "I'm trying, but what Federer's done has been one of the most impressive runs in tennis history. It's fun to watch, but it would be more fun to participate."

Participate is exactly what the mini courts will allow kids to do.

"Some bigger courts are hard to hit good shots," said 6-year-old Itari Roddick, Andy's niece, who was on hand Thursday. "The small courts help me play with my friends."