

New Cross Courts Get Kids Into The Swing

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"You guys ready to play some tennis?!" asked John Pirtel. Around 30 kids responded "Yeah!"

Pirtel, director of New Haven Youth Tennis and Education, and the young tennis enthusiasts had reason to be excited Tuesday morning. They were at Wilbur Cross High School, along with city officials and United States Tennis Association representatives, for the unveiling of a \$55,000 refurbishment of the school's tennis courts as part of the USTA's Olympus US Open Series Legacy Program.

Within a week the school should have 12 tennis courts, half designed specifically for children.

The ceremony was part of the run-up to the newly rechristened [New Haven Open at Yale](#), which begins Thursday. Besides the open itself, which is now a women's-only tournament, the week will also feature the U.S. Open National Playoff Championships, which brings back men's play as well as mixed doubles. According to tournament director Anne Worcester, no other U.S. tournament has mixed doubles save the U.S. Open. Singles winners at the Playoff Championships earn a place in US Open qualifying matches, while doubles winners earn a place in the US Open main draw. (New Haven Open tickets include admission to the championships.)

"I think it's going to be huge," Worcester said.



Mayor DeStefano courts the youth vote.

Wednesday's ceremony at Wilbur Cross featured words of thanks from sMayor John DeStefano and East Rock Alderman Justin Elicker, followed by a ceremonial line-painting and ribbon-cutting. The kids in the audience then got the opportunity to inaugurate some of the new courts with the swing of their rackets. (About half the courts were usable Wednesday.)

The ceremony also featured an appearance by two professional players, Blake Strode and Lena Litvak. They will return to New Haven for the Playoff Championships.

During the ceremony, USTA representative Virgil Christian told the crowd of children, who were from New Haven's youth tennis programs and JUNTA for Progressive Action, that the courts include places "for someone like you to play on." Six of the courts are designed for [10 and Under Tennis](#), a new form of the game being promoted by the USTA which features smaller rackets and courts, a lower net and a slower ball. The other six courts are full-sized but have lines painted on them for use in 10 and Under Tennis. Christian said this makes the game less intimidating for young children as well as tennis novices.

"I'll tell you a little secret: a lot of adults are digging this too," Christian said. ([Previous events for children](#) this summer have promoted the new model as well.)



The Legacy Program, which seeks to give back to communities which host U.S. Open events, was modeled after similar programs surrounding the Super Bowl and the National Basketball Association Finals, which "try to leave behind something," Christian said. The program was inaugurated three years ago in New Haven with the refurbishment of tennis courts at East Shore Park, creating New England's first permanent 10 and Under Tennis courts. Two years ago, the program targeted Edgewood Park.

This year's program has featured projects in Winston-Salem, N.C. as well as New Haven. The Wilbur Cross project was planned and completed quickly, Worcester said, to make sure the courts would be completed in time for the New Haven Open.

"The USTA is committed to investing in communities," and New Haven in particular has been "very supportive" of tennis, Christian said. "We're hoping to do this again and again."

Worcester said she has a wish list of sites for future reconstruction, starting with McClain Park, located at the corner of Ella Grasso Boulevard and Washington Avenue in the Hill. Worcester said she wants its one court to be expanded and refurbished.

Worcester said she suggested Wilbur Cross as a site for the Legacy Program because its courts are well-positioned to draw kids. Besides the high school itself, the neighborhood also holds two other schools, Worthington Hooker and East Rock, that don't have tennis programs.

"But they soon will," Worcester predicted.