Regulating Pace

Players often classify tennis courts by their pace. The speed with which balls come off the surface, and the relative effect of ball spin after a bounce, produce courts which are rated as slow, medium or fast.

When the surface causes the ball to skid and the angle of the ball coming off the surface is lower than before the bounce, the surface is described as "fast." A surface on which the ball comes off at the same angle as before the bounce is described as "medium." A surface on which the ball comes off the surface at a higher angle after the bounce is described as "slow." Generally, the rougher the texture, the more the surface will grip the ball and the slower the surface will play.

Acrylic-coated hard courts are rated as medium to fast. However, the speed of these courts, which is determined by the amount, shape and size of the sand or rubber particles mixed with color coating, can be modified. Altitude also has an impact on the size of sand that may be required to achieve the desired pace. Specifying the grade and amount of aggregate material to achieve a specified pace is highly technical; for that reason, it is important to rely on an experienced tennis court builder or coatings manufacturer familiar with local conditions to mix sand and/or rubber with the coating material.

It is important to know that the pace of an acrylic-coated tennis court will change over time. The surface will be slower when new. As the courts age and weather, some of the texture will be worn away, especially in the areas of most frequent use, and the courts will become faster. When the pace of the court becomes too fast or too inconsistent, the courts should be re-coated.

When cushioning is added to a hard court, to a limited degree, the thickness and density of the cushioning affects the pace of the game, as well. Thicker and less dense cushioning absorbs ball energy, providing a slower, lower bounce. Less thick or denser cushioning provides a quicker, higher bounce.

Clay and fast dry courts generally produce medium to slow play. To some degree, the pace of these surfaces can be modified by maintenance practices. Rolling the courts compacts the material. The firmer a court is maintained, the faster it will play.

Grass and synthetic turf are considered fast since the ball skids low, giving a player less time to make the shot. As with clay and fast dry courts, the pace of these courts can be modified slightly by maintenance practices.

The ideal court speed is strictly a matter of player preference. Players with a strong serve and volley game usually prefer a medium to fast surface. Baseline players, or those playing strictly recreational or social tennis, often enjoy longer rallies and a shot placement/spin type of game. For them, a slow to medium court is recommended.