

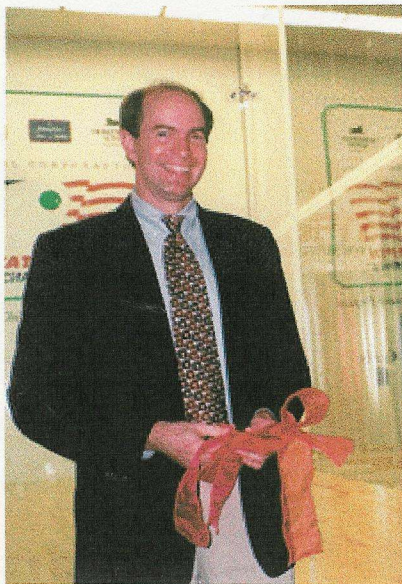
# RACQUETBALL Magazine ONLINE

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## PLEASED WITH HIS WORK

... a follow-up interview with Randy Stafford  
Builder of the first "made for TV" portable glass court ...



*Now that you can look back on the debut of the portable court, how do you think it performed?*

Reactions from the players were the best barometer. The pros indicated they really liked playing on the court because it played like a typical court. I was surprised they liked it as much as they did, it being their first time. The floor system was a little "soft feeling" for the players. I'm certain the floor system slowed the ball down slightly, but the players preferred the softer landings on dives and it was easier on knees during play. Many of the pros actually told me they wish all of their floors were built like this one.

*Do you have to make modifications for the next time it's set up?*

The only adjustment we'll make is to add additional lighting in the back part of the court. The court is different in that the backwalls and 16' of the sidewalls extend to only 10' in height. This is a modification we had to make due to the materials, and the players had agreed to it early on. We can't change it now, so it's something the players must deal with.

Occasionally a ball would be hit over the sidewall from a ceiling ball or a lob serve, but it didn't happen too often.

*How about the construction -- did the court go up and down as you anticipated?*

As with anything you build the first time around, it's going to be more difficult than expected. Luckily, we had constructed the court at another location several months prior to the tournament. We actually only built about half of the project, and that took about a month because of the fabrication that took place. It took us about seven and half days to construct the court at the Racquet Club, and primarily this was due to a lot of creative fabrication that was going on during the construction. The next time around, this fabrication will not have to be done, so we are hoping the construction time will take about four to five days.

The court came down in about two days, and was actually easier than we had anticipated. I do not anticipate the take down time happening any quicker than two days.

*Tell us a little bit about the materials that were used.*

First of all, the glass -- actually not conventional glass but acrylic provided by ICI Acrylics-Lucite. It's an ideal material this application because it is lighter than glass and does not break, nor is it as dangerous to handle as regular tempered glass. We did lots of research on all of the products that went into the construction of this court. As you know, we were trying to build a made-for-television court, and we had to incorporate all of the knowledge of television and engineers in their respective areas to arrive at the best materials to use.

For instance, the lighting we chose was a special fluorescent lamp designed for television, which cost five times the normal price. And Lucite is perfectly clear, unlike tempered glass which normally has a greenish tint. We even went as far as to paint the steel support beams a certain color that was better for television.

The engineering for the acrylic was interesting because we actually had to hire an engineering research firm in England. They provided us with the calculations so we could determine the thickness and width of the acrylic, size of fins, and all of our bolt locations. Initially, we were thinking we would use 1/2" Lucite for the viewing panels, but once our research was completed we ended up using 3/4". Apparently, the impact of racquetball players hitting the walls is much greater than in squash, where they use a 1/2" panel. We had to go with the thicker acrylic to make certain the walls could handle the additional impact loads.

We could not use any silicone between the joints of the acrylic as the court had to be portable. Therefore, the bolt locations -- and there were literally hundreds within the glass fins and acrylic walls -- had to be placed exactly in the right positions to structurally tie the entire glasswall system together. We actually hand drilled all the bolt locations at the Racquet Club during the installation of the glass. We used special hardware from Ellis Pearson and received special drill bits from England so that our crews could drill the proper size holes.

We made one interesting observation after we completed the court. Because of the clarity, we were worried about players not being able to see the acrylic. We were afraid they might actually run up to the wall, and while stroking a ball, hit it so hard with their racquet, or misgauge their distance from the wall, that they could injure their arms. Nevertheless, the pros adjusted quickly and our concern didn't become an issue.

***How will the portable court be shipped, loaded and unloaded without damage?***

The court can be transported in one 40' trailer and weighs approximately 30,000 lbs. We had about 20 specially fabricated boxes built for all of the different materials. Many of the boxes are lined with carpet to protect the materials.

***Is the court structurally strong?***

Good question. We consulted structural engineers on every product used on the court. They gave us the calculations which incorporated both the impact loads and weights of the materials to insure the court to be structurally sound. I would have to say three fourths of the nine months spent constructing this court was spent working on the structural integrity of the walls with structural engineers. There was never a day that went by that we were not focused on the integrity of the court system. We know the most important part is the safety of the players and the spectators while the court is in use. Once this data had been compiled and built on sound engineering practices, the court could be built and the proper insurance policies could be written for the protection of everyone involved.

***If you were going to build it from scratch again -- would you do it any differently?***

During the entire process, we were trying to develop sort of a high tech platform on which the court would be constructed. However, that became so difficult we changed the concept and simply constructed a platform out of wood, which worked out for the best. This was really the only major problem we had during the development, and we are pleased with the platform which was actually constructed at the Racquet Club. I think what we ended up with a workable, portable court that can be used for many years.

***How important do you think the portable court is to the future of the sport?***

If someone can raise the needed amounts of sponsorship money and take this court on a tour to showcase racquetball to the masses outside of clubs, I think it will be very important to the future of the sport. This court enables spectators to view the game in a different way, in that the players and spectators are closer

and can interact together during play. Television viewing is now possible because cameras can be positioned all around the court with the ability to back away for long shots, which has never been done before. For instance, the court can be placed in an arena with stadium seating built around it and the cameras can back far enough away to get an entire view of the court from several angles. The clear Lucite, along with the special lighting, lets the court really stand out on its own and become a spectacle in itself.

After the tournament, local tennis players would come up to me and tell me the pros they watched were so exciting to view on the portable court that they could not believe their own eyes. These were non-racquetball players who actually wanted to come and view our sport and then letting me know how excited they were. It's been three months since the tournament, and I people around town still ask me when the court will be built again, since they want to make plans to watch the pros in action next time they play in Memphis. I think this court, with the proper promotion, will move our sport out of the clubs into other areas so people interested in watching sports will have the opportunity to view racquetball.

***You are in the business of building racquetball courts. How do you see the market?***

Since the mid eighties, there has been a substantial decline in the number of courts being built up until about 1992. Since that time, the number of courts being built has leveled off and has actually slightly increased. Racquetball is a definite part of our society, and will always be included in many athletic facilities that are still being built. For instance, we still see courts built in community centers, church facilities, apartment complex clubhouse, military bases, universities, and private homes. We don't see the ten and twenty court facility plans for athletic clubs that used to be the norm, but racquetball is still a part of every multi-faceted athletic club, and will be in the future.

***If you would look through a crystal ball and see the future of racquetball, what do you see and what would you like to see?***

We know this sport is here to stay. We would like to see the enthusiasm we experienced in the late 1970's and early 1980's return to the sport. We have been building courts for twenty-one years and this is the first time we have seen our entire industry galvanized together to try to promote racquetball. Everyone from the manufacturers to suppliers and the governing bodies, along with the pros, have teamed together to promote our sport. Because racquetball is so much fun to play and watch, I believe once it is presented properly to the masses, we'll see an increase in participation in our sport.

I have heard about, and would like to see, a major promotion using the portable court at Daytona Beach during spring break, or in shopping malls and on TV. I believe we need to reach colleges and universities to recruit players who will end up playing racquetball for a lifetime. I would like to see more public courts built where people can play racquetball at a lower cost. Manufacturers need to develop new clothing lines with ads to promote the sport of racquetball. Have you ever noticed people jogging with a smile on their faces, or doing aerobics and having fun? Racquetball is one of the few sports you can play in one hour, get a complete workout, and still enjoy every minute of it.

**About the author ...**

*Randy Stafford began playing racquetball at the age of 14 at a local athletic club and then began competing in college. He won the very first national intercollegiate doubles title in 1973 with partner David Bledsoe, representing the University of Tennessee -- the following year, he went on to win the national intercollegiate singles title, again for Tennessee. He later joined the pro tour and is still very competitive in racquetball. He graduated from Memphis State University with a major in finance and wrote a book on racquetball while a junior at Memphis State. Once out of college, Randy started The Court Company with his long term partner, Mike Mattingly, and together they have built over 3,200 courts since starting construction. Now, at age 42 Stafford is married with one child and continues to play competitively.*