

GROWING THE GAME

Tennis, for Everyone

Player retention, coaching, education, access to courts: USTA CEO Lew Sherr talks about his organization's new mission—and much more.

> On the heels of four consecutive years of tennis participation growth in the United States, the USTA has revised its longstanding mission statement, “To promote and develop the growth of tennis,” to a more purpose-driven directive: “Growing tennis to inspire healthier people and communities everywhere.”

That small tweak in language represents a larger change in thinking at the USTA, with its mission now precisely focused on promoting tennis as the ultimate sport for health and wellness.

Recently, USTA Executive Director and CEO Lew Sherr addressed the thinking behind the new mission statement and the short- and long-term goals for the USTA in its efforts to strengthen the sport in the U.S., and enhance more lives through tennis.

Q: Is the USTA's revised mission statement more than just a tweak?

Sherr: I'd say you could characterize that tweak as our “One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” moment. What we are fundamentally doing is reimagining the purpose of the organization and focusing on health and wellness. It's why we exist. [This new mission statement] addresses why we get up every morning to do the work we

do. We are the caretakers of an unmatched sport which has been proven to improve individual health and strengthen communities. In the past, we tended to speak about ourselves in a way that felt more like, “We like tennis. We think you should like tennis, too.” This new statement is more inspirational, more purpose-driven.

Q: So, it's not just what the USTA does, but why it does it.

Sherr: Exactly. We believe that creating a more purpose-led mission will inspire the workforce, inspire the volunteer corps, inspire providers, and inspire anyone who has anything to do with the sport. I think it reinforces why tennis matters in our country and in our society. And the values that go hand-in-hand with that mission—wellness, inclusion, community—are also underpinnings of why what we do matters. Tennis changes lives and enhances communities—it's our job to share it with as many people as possible.

Q: The most obvious addition to the new mission statement is the word “healthier.” Do you feel the USTA needs to do a better job of promoting tennis as the healthiest sport?

Sherr: Yes—we need to promote tennis as the world's healthiest sport. That is not USTA branding; that is a fact about tennis. We've got the longevity data from several different sources that proves that. If we look at the data around why people play tennis, it starts with health. And so, wherever and whenever we can promote the health benefits of tennis, we want to do so. That means we are, in effect, a wellness organization.

Q: Talk more about that.

Sherr: If you think about our mission—growing tennis to inspire healthier people and communities everywhere—we see our sport as a means to achieving improved health and longevity. If you think about what we do and who we are, we are helping to deliver that ideal to the public, which is not dissimilar from other health and wellness-focused organizations. We're promoting tennis as the world's healthiest sport. We're not the industry association. We're not trying to stimulate construction, ball sales, racquet sales. We know tennis is a way to inspire healthier people and strengthen communities. And it's our responsibility to get that word out and make our sport more accessible and more fun for more people so that they can enjoy its life-enhancing benefits.

Q: One of the goals that you've set is for the U.S. to be the most popular tennis-playing nation in the world by



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2035. How did you arrive at that goal, and why is that important?

Sherr: I'll take a step back and say that we, for the first time, developed a multi-year growth strategy for participation in our sport. We've had lots of growth strategies for the US Open, but we've never had a defined growth strategy for participation. And the goal that we have set for ourselves—and it's quite bold—is to become the most popular tennis-playing nation in the world by 2035. What that means is we would have to get 10 percent of the U.S. population playing tennis, and 10 percent of the U.S. population in 2035 projects out to about 35 million players. [The most recent industry data, from year-end 2023, shows that 23.8 million Americans play tennis.]



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That's what's behind it. And then we've identified three pillars of that growth strategy: player retention, coaching and facilities. All of those things are vitally important, but player retention tops that list. We need to do a better job at not just getting people into the sport, but retaining them. Better coaching, more facilities—and more *accessible* facilities—will help make that possible.

Q: That said, tennis has seen a consistent increase in participation across each of the last four years.

Sherr: That's true, and we're thrilled with that. But last year, organically, we got 4.8 million new players into the sport, but then 98 percent of them leave. The difficulty is not getting people into the sport, it's keeping them. Casting a wider net is not the answer. If we brought more people in for the first time, it would just exacerbate the court issues we've seen across the last 10 years. So, we're not going to put resources against bringing people in. We're going to focus our resources around delivering better experiences for those who do come in.

Q: Specifically, toward improving coaching and enhancing access to facilities?

Sherr: Those two things are certainly at the top of the list. Look, we need more and better coaches in the country at all levels to deliver more positive experiences for players of every age and ability. Because coaching is so important to the player experience, the USTA needs to get more directly involved in the delivery and the recruitment of new coaches.

Also, we need more courts and better utilization of the courts that we have. That can mean putting lights on courts that don't have them to extend play opportunities; putting bubbles on courts that don't have them to extend the season. It may mean construction of new courts, and it will also mean taking advantage of short courts and 44-foot courts that are being built for pickleball, that could also be used for a variant of tennis for beginners. If we can use those to create a pathway for tennis, that works to our advantage as well. If I owned a pickleball facility, why wouldn't I want to give tennis lessons there too? It just creates a better business for me.

So it's a mix of building new, spurring development, protecting what we have, but then also getting much better at maximizing utilization of courts where they do exist. All of that is part of what we're endeavoring to do.

Q: What is the importance of partnerships in making all of this happen?

Sherr: Partnerships are critically important. We don't

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have tentacles out into every court in America or the ability to communicate with every player in America. And so partnerships with PTR and USPTA will be immensely important. We're looking at ways to further those partnerships. We also need to strengthen partnerships with CTAs, Parks and Recs, and anyone who can help to deliver better experiences for players, more play opportunities, and help extend our reach.

Having said that, we have resources that no one else in tennis has—primarily financial. And we intend to deploy those resources to support player retention, recruit more coaches, better train coaches, and spur, protect and support facility growth.

Q: Tell us more about the USTA's interest in getting more involved in the coaching aspect of the game.

Sherr: What I've told everybody is we are going to control our own destiny in the coaching space. It's too important to the growth of the game. And we have resources that we can bring to bear in support of coaching, to bring in more coaches of color, to elevate or enhance the training experiences and educational opportunities for coaches, and offer business advisory services for coaches who are running facilities. We can ensure that more coaches are Safe Play certified. We want—we *need*—to make sure that tennis is delivered in the most efficient, impactful way.

Q: You talked about the importance of partnerships within the industry overall. Let's talk a little bit about partnerships within the USTA's 17 sections around the country, and how important that is to getting things done.

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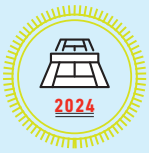
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Sherr: You've heard me since day one—we are and will be a bottom-up driven organization as it relates to our mission. The sections are our partners on the ground who are driving the growth of the sport.

Anything we do related to growing participation in a region is going to be done in partnership with our sections and with their leadership, because no one knows better than our sections what it will take to grow the sport in their respective communities. No two sections are alike. They all have different challenges and opportunities. And our job is to provide them with the resources so that they can successfully do the things that work for the local environment.

Q: What do you see as the largest challenges to becoming the most popular tennis-playing country by 2035?

Sherr: Well, again, our largest challenge is to make sure

that when people do come into tennis, they have a good experience, and that the sport delivers what it is they are looking for. That could be Tennis on Campus from a social aspect. That could be Cardio Tennis for someone who is focused on their fitness. We know that tennis is not a “one size fits all” sport.

We also know that tennis, much like golf, is a sport that you need to learn before you can play. There's a level of competency that's required before you get to the fun, and that is one of the reasons that people drop out. But playing on a smaller court, with shorter racquets and lower-compression balls, allows us to condense that learning curve and get both adults and kids to the fun faster.

Q: With so much focus on community tennis, is the USTA's involvement in professional tennis altered in any way? Will there be less focus on the pro game?

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Sherr: No, we remain fully committed to supporting and elevating professional tennis here in America, particularly when it comes to providing a clear path for our next generation of stars to unlock their full potential. We've had extraordinary success around the US Open, and we expect that to continue. And we're looking at investments that will allow us to continue that growth, both in terms of programming and the facility itself.

The US Open is the economic engine that drives this organization. It's also our best platform to promote the game. And together with the other Grand Slams, we're working to figure out how we can help elevate all of professional tennis in a way that will engage more fans around the world, create better economic opportunities for players and more sustainable business models for tournament owners, and unlock the growth that we know exists in our sport.

Q: What makes you confident the USTA can succeed in its newly stated mission?

Sherr: The USTA's greatest strength is the partnership that exists between sections and national. There are very few governing bodies that have the kind of resources that we do at the local level—17 sections, each with a professional staff that in total is probably larger than the professional staff at the national office. And then you layer in the volunteer and staff dynamic, both at the national and section levels, which gives us resources, expertise, manpower that truly is unmatched.

We do a phenomenal job driving the economics of our organization to support the sport, and our USTA Foundation does an incredible job providing access and opportunities for underserved youth. I truly believe we have the team that can make our goals a reality. And I am confident that we will. ■



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