

How to Market Your Ball Machine

By Joe Dinoffer, USPTA/PTR Master Professional

PART ONE: OVERVIEW

Ball machines are generally one of the most underused assets at pickleball events and facilities. While the benefits of ball machine use are broadly understood, only a small percentage of coaches and players use them to their potential. An active assortment of ball machine programs at a facility can provide a dynamic range of fun and energizing opportunities to players. It can even generate income to pay for itself!

Ball Machine Selling Points to Players:

1. **EFFICIENT USE OF TIME** – Hit up to 4 times as many balls as regular play.
2. **FLEXIBLE** – Use alone, with a practice partner, or bring your whole family.
3. **SCHEDULING IS EASY** – The machine is always ready to play!
4. **FASTER IMPROVEMENT** – Practice efficiently.
5. **FITNESS** – Provides a great aerobic workout.
6. **GROOVE YOUR GAME** – The best way to groove a specific shot.
7. **MIXED ABILITIES** – Have fun practicing with a friend of a different playing level.

Benefits of Ball Machines to Coaches:

1. **HELP YOUR STUDENTS** – The consistent feeds allow groove and improve shots faster.
2. **PERSONAL CONTACT** – Coaches can be closer to students vs. shouting across the net.
3. **SAVES COACH'S ENERGY** – Saves energy so he/she can offer more energetic instruction.
4. **SOLVES UNEVEN NUMBERS** – Helps coach run group work-outs with uneven # of players.

We surveyed dozens of pickleball players of all levels concerning ball machine use in lessons and workouts. The overwhelming majority wanted ball machines as part of almost every practice session. Of course, ball machines are an investment. The most basic two uses of ball machines is to incorporate them into lessons and renting your machine to players for regular practice, but there is much more that you can do to use your ball machine to enhance your overall program!

20 WINNING IDEAS – More bang for the “bucks” you invest in your machine:

1. **Ball Machine Fund Raising** – If you want to raise money for a top-flight ball machine in advance of purchasing it, here's a winning idea. Prominently post a picture of the new machine

describing all the bells and whistles. Then offer to pre-sell blocks of time at substantial discounts for 6 or 12 months during certain times of the day. Many clubs and facilities have raised the entire cost of their new machine with this simple concept.

2. **Weekly Ball Machine Clinics** – To generate excitement about ball machine use, schedule a weekly drop-in ball machine drill session. It's a great way to introduce players to the benefits of training with ball machines. But be careful, you may find this weekly session becoming so popular that you have to purchase several extra machines!
3. **Monthly Ball Machine Clinics** – Each month, promote and educate members about the use of ball machines. Put ball machine drills in the club newsletter and on the bulletin board. During this free (or low cost) monthly event, let each player have a few minutes to hit some balls and see how the machine feels. Have a little target competition and give away a few free half-hour or hour ball machine passes.
4. **Ball Machine Mini-Lessons** – It happens all the time. A recreational player rents the machine and ends up enthusiastically getting a great workout, but practicing the wrong technique! How about promoting a 10-15 minute "Mini-Lesson" at a nominal cost for the beginning of their one-hour ball machine rental? The benefits are tremendous: The coaches can develop relationships with more players, lesson revenues go up and, most important, it is a unique service that really helps players improve!
5. **High-Visibility Court for Ball Machines** – This little trick works wonders to generate increased ball machine interest. Instead of setting up your ball machine on a back, low-visibility court, how about putting it up front, on the most highly visible court of your facility? Not only will this generating increased on-looker interest, but it also allows your staff to notice and quickly respond whenever a user needs help.
6. **Use Videos to Generate Ball Machine Interest** – Almost every facility has a public area where players congregate or at least pass through. In this lounge or pro shop area, try playing various pickleball video clips to generate and increase interest in a specific program. Just remember to put a sign by the screen with a catchy phrase like: *"Ball Machines are the No. 1 training partners in the world. Contact the front desk to arrange a convenient time for both of you!"*
7. **New Member Perk** – If you work at a facility charging initiation fees and dues, offer a ball machine perk to new members. In addition to the typical 30-minute introductory lesson, how about a one-month or three-month pass for ball machine use. But remember, it's not enough to hand new members a piece of paper, call them to set up a time for their first ball machine session to make it a real customer-driven first experience.
8. **Rent 10 Times, Get 11th Free** – This basic but consistently winning promotional idea can easily be adjusted to all situations. For ball machine rentals, simply promote that a certain amount of rentals entitles the player to one more free of charge! Options to this would include the reverse: Take 10 lessons and receive a ball machine rental free. Just use a little creativity and the interest you can generate will be significant.

9. **Team Rentals** – If you play at a tennis club that has pickleball courts, chances are there are ladies teams, men’s teams, junior teams, and so on. The attraction of these teams is the fun that comes from group interaction. How about extending that fun to pickleball ball machine rentals with a group rental program. For example, have a league tennis team rental price which would allow any member or combination of members to rent the pickleball machine to give pickleball a try. It’s a guaranteed winner that’s sure to generate enthusiasm along with additional income.
10. **Ball Machine Raffles** – Radio promotions use this concept all the time, such as the sixth caller receives a trip to Hawaii. Well, forget Hawaii, but how about promoting that the sixth person to sign up for a clinic or event in a certain month gets a free ball machine pass. This versatile promotional idea puts added pop into any program.
11. **Lesson Packages** – Package a ball machine rental with a lesson or to simply encourage students to spend 30 minutes practicing on a machine within 24 hours after taking each lesson. This generates additional revenue plus helps everyone improve. To make this work, regularly incorporate ball machines into lessons and posted lesson curriculums. Once students use the machine a few times, offer additional ball machine practice sessions at a discounted price.
12. **Multi-Colored Balls** – Offer to mix colored balls into your ball machine with regular white or yellow pickleball balls. Explain this drill concept to your members during all ball machine sessions. It’s simple, colorful, effective, and fun! The idea is that when a multi-colored ball comes out of the machine the player has to hit those balls in a certain direction and when the yellow ball comes out they have to hit it in a different direction. This could obviously also be geared towards spin selection, arc selection, variations of power, and even shot selection such as drop shots and lobs.
13. **Balls Hit Club** - A little friendly competition is good for everyone. So why not set up a “Balls Hit Club” in order to tap into that competitive attitude! The average player hits about 900 balls in an hour-long rental. Keep track of the hours each player puts in with the ball machine and then establish categories such as “The 10,000 Balls Hit Club,” and so on. Just promote it with player photos on your bulletin board. Not only will this allow players to do a little bragging about who is ready for upcoming matches and who is not, but it will also help them improve faster!
14. **Target Training** – Keep them coming back for more by helping them get the most out of their time on the court with a ball machine. Set up targets in order to make practice more fun and at the same time more productive. The use of ropes, throw down lines, groups of cones, or air targets will enable players to readily see their improvement both in accuracy and consistency. Show how to use these targets in your ball machine clinics and make the targets available to ball machine users. Providing additional services such as this will help keep your ball machine program running at full capacity.
15. **Shared Revenue** – The coach or teaching professional is the most important link between the players and the ball machine. Because of this connection it is often up to the instructor to help promote the machine through the various lesson programs offered. If players are not taught to practice with the ball machine, their ball machine use will be minimal. In order to ensure the success of a ball machine program, it is important that revenues generated by the rental of the

ball machine be shared with the teaching professionals. This will not only encourage the instructors to promote the machine in each of their lessons, but will also stimulate them to create new drills and practice methods for the machine outside their own lesson programs.

16. **Presentation** – One of the best ways to ensure that the players who use your ball machine today will continue to use it in the future is to make sure the machine is maintained and presented as professionally as possible. This means not only keeping the machine operating properly, but also having it prepared and ready to go as soon as a player walks onto the court. The hopper should be loaded with good balls, the extension cord plugged in (or battery fully charged), and the remote control accessible. These small steps will help the customer get the most out of their rental and keep them coming back for more.
17. **The Right Machine** – The best way for an entertainer to captivate an audience is to simply keep them from getting bored. Likewise, the best way to maintain the broadest customer base is to offer a machine with a broad range of features. Yes, a simple machine might cost less to start, but it may actually end up costing more in the long run because of its limitations. We suggest getting a model with as many features as possible. Simply put: Invest in a better machine to start with, and you'll end up with better revenues and more participation.
18. **Beat the Machine** – At a club party or special event, put your machine on your highest visibility court and play “Beat the Machine.” Just divide players into A, B, and C groups. Create 3 target areas, appropriately challenging for each level. Have each person hit 10 balls. Offer prizes if they hit 8 out of 10 in the target for their level of play. Have them pay \$10 to enter and give them a gift certificate in the pro shop for \$20 if they win. But, here's the way you can guarantee that a lot of people sign up for the challenge. Even if they lose, give them a gift certificate for \$10 in the shop. This way, everyone wins and since you have double mark-ups on most pro shop items, there is no risk on your part either.
19. **Multi-Sport Skill Building** – Did you know that ball machines are commonly used by baseball and football coaches to train their athletes? This fact should inspire you to use your machine more often with your junior program with and without racquets! Here's a unique idea to get your creative juices flowing. Have doubles teams (adults will like this also!) hold an open towel. Set the machine to shoot a lob as high as possible. Have the young players try to catch the ball in the towel. This exercise promotes teamwork, ball judgment, movement and coordination.
20. **Bells and Whistles** – Make the machine part of special events, such as birthday parties, tournaments, or tennis carnivals. Set up targets, give out prizes. Get your players and members used to seeing the fun of ball machines. Without a doubt, the result will be increased ball machine use.