

Breaking the Chain

New and creative alternatives to tennis court fencing are challenging the old chain-link enclosures.

By [Andrew R. Lavallee](#)

In the past, fencing for tennis courts has tended to be a bit overlooked; court builders frequently haven't seemed to look much beyond the use of chain link. However, designers and contractors have for years been experimenting with ways to get away from the same old institutional look. The tennis public, though, is still not aware of the range of possibilities that are available.

Recently, some product introductions and creative design ideas have begun to spring up across the country, giving rise to new and exciting alternatives to the same old boxy chain-link enclosure. Here are some ideas to consider the next time you renovate or build new.

Fencing Design Basics

It is helpful to keep in mind that the role of fencing is to keep tennis balls on the court. Except in areas where there are problems of frequent vandalism, it is rare that full-court containment is actually required. Boxing in a court with a 10-foot tall "cage" all the way around isn't really necessary. Here are some ways to tweak the usual chain-link enclosure into something more exciting:

- **Varying fence heights:** Fence heights often are over-designed. For hard courts, a 10-foot fence is recommended. For clay, fast-dry, and sand-filled turf courts, an 8-foot height fence is recommended since there is significantly less ball bounce with these surfaces. Reducing fence heights makes a court feel more open and comfortable, while also saving money.
- **Opening up the sides:** Generally, full-height fencing at the ends of the court (behind the baselines) and up the sides from the back of the court to a point approximately 8 to 10 feet in front of the baseline is adequate to keep most balls on the court. The remainder of the side fencing can be as low as 3 or 4 feet to contain rolling balls. Whether the fence is 10-feet high or 15-feet high, or whether the fence is full height all around the court or not, there will always be a few balls that stray off the court; you cannot plan sensible fencing to keep every ball on the court. Instead the focus should be on providing functional fencing that still preserves a light, open feel for both players and spectators.
- **Cutting the corners:** Another way to escape the feeling of the "cage" is to utilize cut corners, sometimes referred to as "California" corners. These are designed such that the rectangular corners of a court are cut back at 45 degrees between 7 and 10 feet from what would be the rectangular intersection of the side and end fences. The angled corners make a court appear less bulky, they provide opportunities to introduce landscaping at the court edges, and they help direct the ball back to the players at the baseline area, and they can save up to 200 square feet of surface construction costs.

Dressing Up Basic Chain Link

If you still feel the need to go with chain link, that's OK. Here are some ways to improve the look of your fence:

- **Add color:** Chain link comes in a variety of colors other than black or green. Other colors may blend better with a court's surroundings. Avoid lighter colors as they can make it hard to see the ball in play.
- **Tweak the details:** Using square posts, wood framing, or transition panels that bridge from high to low fencing can make a fence look like it has been customized to your facility, giving a more distinctive architectural character.
- **Use in-fill materials:** The use of wood lattice to disguise the chain link from the outside of the court or the incorporation of one of the new woven products like Permahedge can make the chain link seem to disappear.



Alternative Materials

All of the same ideas about varying fence heights—layout, degree of enclosure, color and detailing—apply to non-chain link fencing as well. There are numerous kinds of materials that can be used for court fencing. The only real requirement is that the fences keep a tennis ball from passing through. An opening narrower than 1¾ inches in width will serve this purpose.

As long as the fence material can withstand the repeated impacts of tennis balls without suffering permanent deformation or structural failure, the fence will be more than adequate. Of course, it is also important to consider wind loading with the structural design of any fence.

In general, there are two basic types of tennis court fencing: “hard” fencing and “soft” fencing. Hard fences are usually made up of rigid materials such as metal, while soft fences are usually made of fabric-like materials. Both hard and soft fences are available in a wide variety of colors.

Hard Fences

- **Welded wire:** This type of fence is made up of heavy-duty wire that is welded together in a square or rectangular grid mesh. The grid patterns available have a contemporary look

that escape the tired look of chain link. The welded wire forms a self-supporting panel that does not require top or bottom rails, making it look lighter than chain link. Welded wire fence is also much more resistant to bending and impact deformation than chain link fence due to its sturdier construction.


- **Steel bar:** This type contains narrow steel bars and heavy-duty wire welded together into a grid pattern. Like welded wire fence, steel bar fences are assembled from self-supporting panels that do not require rail supports. Steel bar fences are even more durable than welded wire, allowing for narrower posts, reducing the bulky appearance of the fence.

Soft Fences

- **Wood frame and windscreen:** This fence uses windscreen stretched between wood posts and rails without any metal fabric or mesh. The windscreen itself forms the fence enclosure. This is a very interesting and affordable fence type that lends itself to easy repairs and fits into a more rustic setting. Be sure to use windscreen that allows for some open wind flow.
- **Post and fabric mesh:** This type of fence uses ultra-violet stabilized nylon or polypropylene cord netting that is stretched along a system of wood or metal posts with top and bottom cabling. It is flexible and very light in appearance and has been used for years at golf course driving ranges and at baseball stadiums. It is also remarkably affordable. The mesh can be drawn back like curtains to allow for easy access and open views when the courts are not in use.

With a little creativity, it is possible to break away from the ubiquitous use of the chain link box. Changing the layout, tweaking a few of the details or using fencing material other than chain link is an easy way to re-energize the look of your courts and make the game more inviting.

About the Author

[Andrew R. Lavalley](#) , ASLA, is a Senior Associate at Mathews Nielsen Landscape Architects, PC located in New York City.

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