



## Trashmagination Podcast #80 – Tennis Balls & Racquets

Welcome to Trashmagination, a podcast about reimagining trash. I'm Carla Brown.

Today we're going to talk about the creative reuse of tennis balls and racquets. This episode is inspired by my friend Marna. More than two years ago, we met for tacos and she brought two big bags of tennis balls. She rescued them from a nearby school when she saw them being thrown away. And right now, Wimbledon is happening, so I figured you might be thinking about tennis.

You might not think tennis balls are a big creative reuse problem, but each year, 325 million tennis balls are produced in the world<sup>1</sup>. One tournament results in thousands of balls heading to the trash. For example, Wimbledon produces 36,000 tennis balls each year. At Wimbledon, a wildlife group has been upcycling tennis balls. They have been making homes for the Eurasian harvest mouse [[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/1406612.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/1406612.stm)]. It's a very tiny mouse – the adults weigh only six grams. The Wildlife Trust drills a hole in each ball and attaches them to a pole that is about one meter or 3 feet off the ground. This provides habitat away from where humans will disturb them. That is the cutest tennis ball creative reuse option that I encountered while preparing this episode, but it's only the beginning!

So before we start drilling into tennis balls or cutting them up, let's start by talking about how you could get more bounces from your tennis balls. We know tennis balls are made from rubber covered in a wool or nylon shell<sup>2</sup>. Inside is pressurized air. Most tennis balls get tossed because the air inside has become depressurized. However, the rubber and outer shell are often still in great condition. One way to creatively reuse tennis balls is to repressurize them. There is a company called Reboundes which makes a machine that helps you to repressurize tennis balls. This is a great option for a tennis organization who produces enough dead tennis balls to make the investment worthwhile [<https://reboundes.com/about-us/recycle-tennis-balls/>].

The tennis balls that my friend Marna gave me seemed fine to my non-tennis-expert standards. My family has been playing with them for two years at our local courts. Just like at Wimbledon where they generate thousands of barely-used balls, I think this might happen a lot where tennis balls are used in a tournament and then tossed. So if you run a tennis tournament or tennis organization, I hope you will consider looking into Reboundes and reuse the balls more often. And after that, I hope you might give your less-than-perfect tennis balls to somebody who doesn't have such high standards so they can be played with until they truly lose their bounce.

At some point, the outer shell will need to be recycled. And since tennis balls are made from two very different materials – the rubber and the wool or nylon shell – it is difficult to recycle them. That's because recycling programs are not usually good at separating materials.

There are a few places where you can send your dead tennis balls. A youth-led organization called RecycleBalls, sponsored by Wilson Sporting Goods, started in Vermont in 2016 [<https://www.recycleballs.org/>]. It has collected more than 20 million tennis balls and has 120,000 collection stations around the United States. The program provides pre-paid shipping so it's free to mail them your tennis balls. They make something called GreenGold which is crumb rubber

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tennisballcourts.com/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/sportacademy/hi/sa/tennis/features/newsid\\_2997000/2997504.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/sportacademy/hi/sa/tennis/features/newsid_2997000/2997504.stm)

product that can be incorporated into other products. Sometimes it's used to make tennis courts. One court can be made with 10,000 tennis balls.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S46n0f9MLqg>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/ByTKH2yAogD/>

In the United Kingdom, there is an organization called Recycle Tennis Balls which collects balls to donate to dog charities as play toys [<http://recyclatennisballs.com/>].

So those are the options of you want to send your tennis balls for recycling. Next we'll talk about creative reuse ideas that you can do right in your own community. I sorted the ideas into four categories – physical training and therapy, games, crafts and furniture.

## **Tennis Balls for Physical Training and Therapy**

Let's start by talking about ways you can use tennis balls to help with physical training or physical therapy. To start, let me introduce you to someone named Mr. Mouth. Mr. Mouth is made by cutting a slit in a tennis ball and adding googly eyes. When you squeeze Mr. Mouth, his mouth opens up, and when you stop squeezing, his mouth closes tightly to hold objects. Mr. Mouth can be installed in your home to hold your keys, your mail, your scissors or a dish towel. Mr. Mouth looks a lot like a yellow emoji face, so you could add a red tongue or heart eyes to make a fun craft.

Some physical therapists and teachers make Mr. Mouth tennis balls to help students practice their fine motor skills. For example, students might roll some dice and feed Mr. Mouth that many beads

[<https://differentiatedkindergarten.com/17-ways-to-build-fine-motor-activities-into-your-curriculum/>].

Tennis balls can be a great tool for professionals working with those with sensory challenges. A speech language pathologist named Amy Maplethorpe made a tennis ball chair [<https://www.littlethings.com/tennis-ball-sensory-chairs/>]. She cut tennis balls in half and attached them to a chair – to both the seat and the backrest. This made a bumpy chair. Amy found this helped students to be more patient and better at following directions. To make the chair, she covered it with fabric and then hot glued the tennis ball halves to the fabric.

[<https://www.facebook.com/172071929663038/photos/a.176820609188170/663843470485879/?type=3&theater>]

Occupational therapists use tennis balls to help people grip slim objects. For example, you can put a paint brush through the center of a tennis ball. This helps people to hold the tennis ball who might have challenges gripping such a small stick [<http://www.wetcanvas.com/forums/showthread.php?p=8212473#post8212473>]. It might allow someone who has arthritis to get back into painting.

Some teachers put tennis balls on chair or table legs in their classrooms to reduce the scraping sound when students move furniture. I'll share a video in the show notes showing how to prepare tennis balls for classrooms using a safe technique. It uses something called a Forstner bit and a drill press. This teacher built a small square wooden jig to hold the tennis ball so it doesn't roll while you are drilling it [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjdD6nXekhl>].

Tennis balls can be a handy tool for swimmers training to improve their breast stroke

[<https://www.swimmingworldmagazine.com/news/swim-drill-of-the-week-tennis-ball-breaststroke/>]. The swimmer presses a tennis ball between their chin and chest while swimming. They also hold tennis balls in their hands to get the hands in the right position. I'll link to a training video that shows someone training in this way

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZPac2E8gN78>].

There is a type of performance art that originated in New Zealand called Poi – or P-O-I. It was originally designed to help Maori warriors build wrist strength. Today it involves rhythmically swinging two balls on the end of two short ropes, usually performed by women in a group. When you are learning how to do it, a great option is to make a simple poi from a tennis ball and a rope. I'll link to a tutorial video in the show notes made by the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawaii.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Hcq4h1j3F4>, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yk4R9SupBXg>

You probably have heard the tip about using a tennis ball for self-massage when you have a sore back. You put the tennis ball on the floor and then lay on top of it. You put the tennis ball in the exact spot where you are feeling pain and it provides a pressure point. I find tennis balls are not hard enough, and I tend to use a hockey or lacrosse ball instead, but if you are more sensitive, a tennis ball might be better. Attaching a series of tennis balls along a rope could make a great upcycled foam roller. I'll link to a site that suggest 9 great stretches you can do with a tennis ball [<https://www.sheknows.com/health-and-wellness/articles/1085668/tennis-ball-stretches/>].

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BxLOkWEhV2f/>

Some Pilates trainers use tennis balls cut in half as part of their routine. They might step on a half tennis ball as a foot massage. Or you can put it under your hands when you are doing exercises with your hands on the floor like push-ups - it provides a cushion. Since the ball is cut in half, it doesn't roll away.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cqqt4KGHuM>

## Tennis Ball Toy and Game Ideas

Now let's talk about simple toys and games you can make with upcycled tennis balls.

For many years, my son's Cub Scout troop had a carnival with game stations. My family always hosted a station called Bottoms Up. We put aluminum cans on 3 different platforms such as an upside down trash can or piece of wood. We put a tennis ball inside a long sock or panty hose leg and then attached it to the back of each Scout. The Scout would try to knock over the cans using only the tennis ball. We would time how long it took them to knock over 3 cans. This game always makes people laugh. It's fun to do whether you are a seven-year-old Scout or a grandfather. We have also seen this game done where the panty hose was attached to your head and you had to swing your head to knock down the cans [<http://sarahstewartholland.com/blog/ten-easy-outdoor-games/>].

Another game that I would like to make is called a ladder golf game [<https://www.diynetwork.com/how-to/skills-and-know-how/carpentry-and-woodworking/how-to-build-a-ladder-golf-game>]. Making the ladder would be a great woodworking project for a beginner woodworker and you could use scrap wood. You attach two tennis balls with a string to make something called a bolo. You stand some distance away from the ladder. You throw the tennis balls and they wrap around the rungs of the ladder. The goal is to wrap the bolo around each ladder rung, and each rung is assigned a different number of points. You play until someone collects enough points.

Tennis balls are of course a great way to play with dogs, although I read that it's safer to give your dog one ball at a time to avoid them choking. Many people make tug toys for their dogs by drilling a hole in a tennis ball and then attaching a climbing rope or other strong rope [[https://www.etsy.com/listing/580528160/tuff-twist-strongest-toy-we-make?ref=sold\\_out-9](https://www.etsy.com/listing/580528160/tuff-twist-strongest-toy-we-make?ref=sold_out-9)]. You could creatively reuse a t-shirt by cutting it into strips, braiding it into a very strong rope and then attaching it through your tennis ball [<https://www.puppyleaks.com/easy-diy-dog-toys/>].

I have mentioned the creative upcycler Danny Seo in many episodes before and of course he has an idea for tennis balls. In his 2011 book *Upcycling: Create Beautiful Things With The Stuff You Already Have*, he has a project where he drills holes in a bunch of tennis balls and then puts them on a long rope. He then hangs the rope up in his backyard in a big loop to make a cushy swing.

## Tennis Balls for Crafts

So now let's talk about ways to creatively reuse tennis balls into crafts. There is an Etsy shop called Asherjasper that specializes in making crafts from needle felted tennis balls [<https://www.etsy.com/shop/asherjasper>]. She uses tennis balls as the base shape and then makes adorable monsters and other creatures by sculpting wool around the tennis ball.

Mani Kordestani is an artist who lives close to me in northern Virginia. He makes change purses and phone cases from tennis balls [<https://www.manikord.com/>]. If you take apart a tennis ball, it is made from two long oval pieces. He manipulates those shapes to make his products [<https://www.instagram.com/manikord/>].

A popular craft for craft sales is bath bombs. Bath bombs are fizzy balls that you put in your bath to add bubbles and relaxing scents. You can cut a tennis ball in half to make just the right sized mold to make bath bombs

[\[https://mommysavers.com/how-to-make-homemade-bath-bombs/\]](https://mommysavers.com/how-to-make-homemade-bath-bombs/).

There are other crafts on my Pinterest board that mostly would be exciting to someone who is a huge tennis fan, like a tennis ball wreath or garland or holiday ornament. So if you love someone who loves tennis, head over there for ideas

[\[https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/balls/\]](https://www.pinterest.com/Trashmagination/balls/).

## Tennis Balls for Furniture

Every so often, people email me photos of chairs and dog beds made from tennis balls. I agree, they look super comfy. One designer who made a chair from tennis balls is Garth Britzman [\[https://garthbritzman.com/tennis-lounge/\]](https://garthbritzman.com/tennis-lounge/). He called his chair the “tennis lounge.” This is one of those creative reuse projects that makes we want to learn how to be a great welder because the balls are connected on long metal tubes that are welded into a cool chair shape.

Hugh Hayden used to make dog beds from tennis balls in a hexagon shape [\[https://inhabitat.com/hexagonal-dog-bed-made-from-recycled-tennis-balls/\]](https://inhabitat.com/hexagonal-dog-bed-made-from-recycled-tennis-balls/). It doesn't look like he sells them anymore.

William Holman has an Instructables tutorial online that shows how he made a wood chair padded with tennis balls [\[https://www.instructables.com/id/Tennis-Ball-Chair/\]](https://www.instructables.com/id/Tennis-Ball-Chair/). The balls are not glued to the chair but held in place by cutting holes in the wood that are the right size. He made this chair by recycling an old metal chair, removing the vinyl panels and replacing them with wood cut with 50 circles, each holding a tennis ball.

Tejo (Tay-Ho) Remy and Rene Veenhuizen (Veen-high-zen) made six benches from tennis balls [\[https://inhabitat.com/remyveenhuizens-tennis-ball-benches/\]](https://inhabitat.com/remyveenhuizens-tennis-ball-benches/) for a museum in the Netherlands (Museum Boijmans van Beuningen). They look like long tubes with branches sticking out [<http://www.remyveenhuizen.nl/>]. The armature of the benches looks like a series of metal circles.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BtNN5ZwF7aM/>, <https://www.instagram.com/p/qHdMI9yUoI/>

Tejo Remy - <https://www.instagram.com/tejoremy/>

## Tennis Ball Canisters Creative Reuse

Another tennis-related item that we need to upcycle is the plastic container that holds the tennis balls. I found a tutorial for making a bird feeder from a tennis ball canister [\[https://simpleandseasonal.com/upcycle-from-tennis-ball-can-to-bird-feeder/\]](https://simpleandseasonal.com/upcycle-from-tennis-ball-can-to-bird-feeder/). They are also the perfect size to hold cupcake liners. Some people put them in the water bottle holder on their bike for storing items.

## Tennis Racquet Creative Reuse

Next I'll share creative reuse ideas for tennis racquets. These ideas would apply to any kind of racquet of course such as badminton, racquetball or squash. Most of them involve older vintage-looking racquets made from wood.

Quite a few fiber artists do needlework on old racquets. It sounds a bit surprising at first but when you think about it, the round wooden racquets look similar to an embroidery hoop and they already have a nice gridded work surface for cross-stitching or other stitches. I'll link to tutorials by Sadie Seasongoods and The Gathered Home in the show notes if you would like to give this craft a try.

- Sadie Seasongoods cross-stitches - <https://www.sadieseasongoods.com/game-set-cross-stitch-vintage-wooden-tennis-racket-needlework/> - [https://www.instagram.com/sadieseasongoods/p/BrRHcxFF\\_Mn/](https://www.instagram.com/sadieseasongoods/p/BrRHcxFF_Mn/)
- The Gathered Home racquet needlepoint tutorial - <https://www.thegatheredhome.com/diy-tennis-racket-wall-hangings/>

The South African artist Danielle Clough (Cleff) has sewn a whole series of racquet embroideries [<https://www.danielleclough.com/portfolio-item/what-a-racket/>]. She takes a photograph and she'll paint an ink portrait based on the photograph. Then she will stitch the same image on the surface of a racquet with thick colorful thread. I'll link to an interview with Danielle in the show notes.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLKUJW76bJo>

Next if you love woodworking, there are a bunch of ways to creatively reuse tennis racquets to make tables, baskets or shelves. I saw a fence or trellis made from recycled tennis rackets – and not only the wooden kind. They just painted the whole thing white once they were done.

- Tennis racquet table - <http://vault.sierraclub.org/sierra/201211/repurpose-tennis-racket-table-DIY/default.aspx>
- Tennis award shelf - <http://www.gadgetsponge.com/posts/2012/3/11/upcycled-tennis-racquet-wall-trophy-awards-display-shelf.html>
- Tennis racquet basket - <https://www.virginiasweetpea.com/diy-vintage-tennis-racket-basket/>
- Tennis racquet table - <https://www.virginiasweetpea.com/make-vintage-tennis-racket-table>

The blog Crafting a Green World shows how to make a butterfly net from an old tennis racquet [<http://craftingagreenworld.com/2014/05/26/tennis-racket-butterfly-net/>].

The blog Garden Therapy shares an idea about beaded tennis racquets [<https://gardentherapy.ca/tennis-racket-garden-art/>]. This involves removing the strings from a wooden racquet and instead stringing colorful beads in that space. It looks nice if you use translucent beads and the sun shines through them in your garden.

## Artists Who Incorporate Tennis Balls and Racquets into Their Work

In each of my podcast episodes, I like to share practical creative reuse ideas with you and I also like to share examples of artists who have done installation pieces with this material.

Ana Soler Baena did an installation with 2,000 tennis balls in 2012 [<https://mymodernmet.com/ana-soler-causa-efecto/>]. The piece was called Causa-Efecto which means Cause and Effect. She hung the balls all around inside the Mustang Art Gallery in Spain. The balls look like they are frozen mid-bounce. The photos from this exhibition are so fun because you really can't see the strings hanging the balls from the ceiling. I'll share a video showing how she sewed a string onto every single one of those 2,000 tennis balls as part of the installation process.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NoK79YmbGao>

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BnqCOxpDnlb/>

In terms of tennis racquets, there is a large installation made from tennis racquets at the Washington Convention Center in Washington DC [<http://www.donaldlipski.net/new-gallery-60>]. I have seen it many times. It is by Donald Lipski and it is one of five sculptural pieces that he made there. The other sculptures feature guitars, bar stools, kayaks and bicycles.

[https://www.instagram.com/p/BvH868lj7- /](https://www.instagram.com/p/BvH868lj7-/)

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BSefaJDA1Yy/>

## Thank you!

Thank you for listening! Please let me know about anything you have made from tennis balls and racquets at [trashmagination@gmail.com](mailto:trashmagination@gmail.com). Until next time – may you see tennis balls and racquets as a source of art in your life!