

When is My Child

Going To Play “Real” Tennis?

By Craig Gordon



If I had a dollar for every time I was asked, “Hey coach... why isn’t my kid hitting more balls?” or “When is my kid going to start playing “real” tennis,” I would be a millionaire.

I heard a crazy stat last week saying 78% of tennis parents never played competitive tennis? So, where do these parents get their information? How does one know if their young tennis player is getting what he or she needs to succeed? Most don’t, so let’s see if I can shed some light on this sometimes delicate issue.

The first activities you will most likely see in your child’s beginning tennis classes revolve around “athletic development.” This is what I call the A, B, C and T (Agility, Balance, Coordination and Throwing) of tennis. These are the core components to becoming a high-level tennis player and the training starts now. To make this FUN, you will see the kids emulating animals (bear walks, flapping their arms like eagles and hummingbirds), running obstacle courses, jumping, skipping, shuffling and other “crazy” activities. You will also see kids throwing balls over curtains and fences, balancing like flamingos and playing games like “Red Rover” and “What Time is it Mr. Fox?” I think I have more fun than the kids.

Yes, I know it can look “silly,” but we are teaching your son or daughter the necessary athletic components to succeed as a tennis player. We just do it in a FUN way to make sure you kids LOVE being on the tennis court.

One of my favorite lines from coaches I talk to in all sports is that “we are not getting the athletes.” Surprise ... the cat is out of the bag. We have to develop these athletes. These “silly games” are forming the skills needed to be an athlete who can excel in any sport, not just tennis.

Next you will see some basic ball control and racket skill drills. Young tennis players rolling balls, balancing the ball on the racket, bump up/bump downs and so on. You will also see the coaches use teaching aids such as bean bags, cones, balloons and beach balls. I know that it doesn’t look much like tennis, but can you imagine trying to hit the ball over the net as a 5 year old and not being able to bump it up to yourself? This is teaching progressions 101. If you want to learn to juggle, you do not start with four balls.

In the next part of the lesson series, usually the coach will work on receiving skills. What does catching incoming tennis balls in a cone on the side of your body have to do with playing tennis? The answer is EVERYTHING. Tennis is an open-skilled sport which means the player is constantly adapting to the oncoming shot. The player must decide where to move and what shot to hit every time



his or her opponent sends a ball their way. NOW we are teaching tennis as an open-skilled sport. The “old” way of teaching tennis was as a closed-skill sport with kids standing in lines and the ball fed directly into their strike zone. This is more like T-ball than tennis as it only works on the ability of a player to send the ball back over the net. Honestly, teaching groundstrokes is one of the easier tasks of a tennis coach. Teaching players to track and move to the ball, while positioning your body correctly and sending the ball back is an art form and it is starting now!

Finally, you will see the coach and kids start to get into the basics of playing the game. Simple things such as how to win or lose a point, where to stand and how to keep score are integral to your child success on the tennis court. After all, the goal is for your child is to play tennis as quickly as possible, but it does not happen overnight. Just like other sports, it takes years and plenty of practice to refine one’s skills.

The way we teach IOU Tennis is the biggest change to our game since the first metal racket was introduced in 1967. Tennis, in my humble opinion, is the hardest, yet most rewarding, game in the world. Think about it, name another sport that requires running, hitting, performing movement patterns and working your body both aerobically and anaerobically? Yet, tennis is a sport you can play until you are 90 years old.

As most of you know, tennis in the United States has been sliding down the professional ranks since the glory days of Sampras, Agassi and Courier and the dominance of the Williams’ sisters. Ever stop to think why? I believe this is happening because the game has become more athletic and our days of feeding balls to kids have caught up with us (European countries adopted open-skill teaching many years ago). For this trend to change, we must focus on athletic development and receiving skills, but how do we do that? A well-run 10 and Under Tennis program that incorporates everything mentioned above, including the silly games and colored balls, will develop the next great USA Tennis champion.

Parents, I have one last request. If 78% of you have not played competitive tennis, sign up for a beginning tennis class or dust off your old Prince Pro from the back of the closet. Get out and play some practice matches, leagues and tournaments. Take your son or daughter to the court and play some red, orange or green ball tennis and see first-hand just how wonderful those balls are for beginning tennis players of all ages. The only true way for you to truly wrap your mind around everything tennis has to offer is to experience it for yourself. See you on the courts!