

The  Newsletter for Tennis Coaches

High-Performance Coaching

Coaching QuickStart Tennis for Long-Term Participation

by Kirk Anderson, USTA Director of Recreational Coaches and Programs

As QuickStart Tennis begins to have more impact on the way young children learn to play tennis, we took a close look at what we are doing right and what might trip us up in our goal to create more young tennis players than ever before. To do this we sought the advice of three experts, Dr. Bob Pangrazi, Dr. Dan Gould and Gary Avischious. These three individuals have spent a lifetime studying youth sports, youth coaching and child development. We asked them to look closely at QuickStart Tennis and share with us what we are doing well and how we can avoid some of the pitfalls from other sports that provide programs and coaching for kids at early ages.

We are very aware that organized youth sports in the United States do not have a good track record for retaining young athletes. Studies show that 70 percent of kids who participate in youth sports quit by the age of 13. Kids in sports that have younger starting ages have participation levels that peak even younger. Soccer participation peaks at age 7, baseball at age 8.

The top three reasons kids drop out of youth sports are:

1. It's not fun anymore;
2. Parental pressure to perform; and
3. Unmet coaching expectations.

Our experts were in complete agreement that starting kids and allowing them to learn to play on courts with equipment scaled to the size of the child was very beneficial. The advantages are:

1. The game, equipment and structure are age appropriate;
2. Kids are more likely to learn skills, feel competent or worthy, and stay motivated;
3. The scoring system and rules allow kids to play the game; and
4. They get a chance to be with other kids.

Keeping kids involved with tennis means that we have to look at participation through the eyes of a child. This "kid-centered" approach must be the cornerstone of how we teach and relate to kids. Great programs focus on meeting the needs of children and doing what is best for kids. We must teach kids first and tennis second.

Kids are not miniature adults, and adult coaching and competition models can do more

harm than good. Coaches and parents must take a long-term view of a child's development in tennis with the goal of keeping youngsters involved and motivated until the age of 12 or 13, when the later developers begin to catch up with the early developers.

What Works?

Much has been said about having fun, and we know that if tennis is not fun for kids, they will quickly find another activity. Fun is different for everyone, but universally we know a child is having fun if there is laughter and we see smiling faces, if they don't want to stop an activity, if time goes by quickly, and if there is a sense of accomplishment.

Keeping kids involved and motivated is our goal as coaches. Kids enjoy improving skills through repetition and refinement. They seek thrills and excitement. They like to be with their friends and make new friends. Kids like to succeed or win against teams of similar ability.

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Not only will this be the last newsletter of the year 2009, this also will be the last newsletter I edit, since I am leaving the USTA at the end of the year. I have had a great experience working for the USTA in a number of different capacities. However, I can clearly state that my true passion has always been in coaching education. I have enjoyed designing curricula, presenting lectures and workshops, and providing articles, newsletters and other written materials. Getting to know many of you and seeing the passion you have for coaches' education and continued learning has certainly made my job interesting and challenging. As I pursue future opportunities, I sure hope our paths will cross. Keep up the great work you do not only with your students, but also with your own continuing education.

Sincerely,

E. Paul Roetert, Ph.D.
*Managing Director,
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Coaching QuickStart Tennis for Long-Term Participation *continued from page 1*

Coaching Model

The traditional adult coaching model is competition based. Winning is success and the emphasis is on outcomes over skill development. There is a tendency to reinforce and encourage only the skilled performers. Many times our only frame of reference for a coaching model is what we see on the sidelines of college and professional sports on television.

As coaches of young and emerging players, we need to be prepared and educated on what really works for kids. Other youth sports coaches may not be the best models, and other sports don't have all the right answers simply because they have a greater participant base. Inexperienced coaches, while well intended, many times have detrimental effects on young athletes. A new breed of experienced and educated tennis coaches can lead a positive, new trend if we avoid the rationale provided by those using the adult model and citing these reasons:

- This is what other coaches are doing;
- I'm a good player and this is how I was taught;
- I'm coaching the way that parents expect me to coach;
- If we are going to win, this is what we have to do; and
- This is the way my high school or college coach treated me.

The kid-centered coaching model emphasizes repetition and refinement, and success is based on effort and learning new skills. Coaches need to provide experiences for those who need to learn and not just for the skilled early developers. The focus should be on effort and trying, not on results and performance.

Effective Coaching

Coaching kids is different from coaching adults. Kids respond better to minimal instruction (a quick demonstration is best) and maximum practice time. They do best in a positive environment while being taught one skill at a time.

Kids don't like to stand in line or even to take turns, but they do like high rates of repetition. They like activities that are challenging but not unrealistic. Kids respond well when your expectations are related to their behavior and effort, rather than their skill performance. Kids will model your patience, attitude and enthusiasm.

Coaching is about kids. With young children, it is motivating, entertaining, active, risk taking, energetic and sometimes even goofy. It's laughter, play, encouragement and compassion. It's setting and obtaining long-term goals of teaching kids to love our sport at a young age so they will select tennis as one of their favorite activities.

Perceived Competence and Love of the Game

Kids want to feel successful, and we, as coaches, want our young players to enjoy the sport of tennis. If children feel like they are improving, they will have a perceived competence of their ability to play tennis, and they will be motivated to practice and play more. Do whatever it takes to provide that word of encouragement.

The most important thing we can give kids is a love of the game. Benjamin Bloom, author of *Developing Talent in Young People*, noted that all high-performance kids had teachers or coaches who gave them a love for the game or a love for learning. Bloom indicated that the coach is one of the greatest sources of influence in the life of a child. Make it a positive and long-lasting influence on their character and on our great game of tennis.