

Developing Junior Players Holistically

Many coaches have aspirations to develop junior players to a high level of tournament play. Many parents have the same aspiration. But what does it take to get players to a higher level? What is the plan? Is it just a matter of “hitting a million balls”?

Effective player development is not only a matter of *quantity* but *quality* as well. To improve the quality, there is both a *science* of player development (what skills to develop) and an *art* (the order they are developed) that makes the path easier. Most coaches and parents would agree that quality is important, the question is, “quality of what”?

The trap that many fall into is the narrow view that player development is only about technique. While technique is a critical component, it is not the only one. Missing others will only produce players who look good, but cannot play the game successfully. So what are the components a player needs?

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Internationally, the world’s top coaches agree on 4 main components that are required to develop the **complete** player:

- **Psychological**
- **Physical**
- **Tactical**
- **Technical**

Each of these have their own development path, traps to avoid, and methods. Developing all of the components in an integrated way is called the “Holistic” or “Global” approach. Every one is necessary and all are interconnected. A player does not play the game with only their technique. Even on seemingly purely technical issues, the other components may be involved. For example, take the common situation where a player is in the third set and sets up the point for an open court volley winner. Rather than putting the ball away, they ‘pop’ it into the middle of the court.

Although, technically it may be true the volley didn’t have enough racquet speed, the racquet angle was incorrect, and the path of the racquet was too level, but that may not be the whole story. They may have popped the ball up for emotional reasons (fear of failure or being overly excited about winning the point), or for mental reasons (too focused on the future and not on the volley). It may have been physical reasons (lack of endurance for the third set), or tactical reasons (couldn’t decide on the tactical option). A coach who sees the error as only technical and proceeds to practise volley technique over and over is missing the point.

I used to develop players with technique as the #1 priority. Although I had some good results, I have found over the years that it works best to bring all 4 components along as a package. At various points in their development other players may look better technically, but in the end the advantage will go to the complete player. The alternative is to let the non-technical components get developed at some later stage. But questions need to be addressed in the, “technical first” approach:

- *“When will the other components be addressed”?*
- *“Is it the most effective to learn these later”?*
- *“Do the players with the best technique always win the tournaments”?*

Typically, you can tell the coaches who develop players with a technical first approach because they keep commenting to their players, "I can't believe you lost when you look so much better than the opponent"! The coach then goes away deceiving themselves into thinking that technical superiority will translate into winning in the future.

The glitch is that, at every level of tennis competition, players are grouped with others of similar ability. Beginners don't compete against advanced players in tennis. People need to qualify to get into the various levels. In other words, the further up in tennis you go, the more you are with players who are technically able to hit the ball as well as you. So what will make the difference on who wins? Eventually, to be a champion, a player will have to demonstrate superiority in the other Holistic components. Even on the pro tour, the principle is the same. Do you think Pete Sampras is currently not winning because his *technique* has gotten worse? I am by no means implying that technique is not important, just that it is **one** of the components and not the only priority.

For some practical examples, let's look at some of the key things we use at Grant Connell Tennis Centre (The top rated Tennis Canada Tennis Development Centre in BC), to Holistically develop many of the province's top players.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT:

The great Jimmy Connors once said, "Tennis is 90% mental". Anyone who plays knows tennis is psychologically challenging. Even with psychological development, players can have the occasional 'meltdown'. The key is that they are being equipped with tools to handle all the demands the game will throw at them later. I have been very fortunate to learn about psychological development from experts in the field like Psychologists David Cox and Laura Farres. Coaches and parents must realize that psychological (and tactical) skills need to be trained just like technical skills. Just talking about them before or after a match is not training.

Here is an example of one psychological key we train and how we do it at GCTC:

-Controlling "arousal level": This is how excited or 'lackadaisical' a player is. It is easy to see when a player is too 'pumped-up' and is spraying balls all over the court. It is just as easy to see when a player is 'under-aroused' and cannot muster up any focus or intensity.

"Excitedness scale" drill: In this drill we make a 1-10 scale. "One" is totally under-aroused and "ten" is way too excited. First, a player remembers their best performance in a tournament and decides what is their optimal level (usually 4-6).

Points are played one at a time. After each point, a player rates their level. The goal is to start each point 'fresh' by resetting the ideal level, either by relaxing or "pumping-up".

- Strategies for relaxing include taking 1 or 2 long relaxation breaths, or keying in on feeling looseness in particular body parts (loose shoulder shrugs or spinning racquet, etc.). The goal is to transfer the loose feeling to all the other body parts.
- Strategies for "pumping-up" may include such things as bouncing up and down a few times (motion causes emotion) or using positive "mood" words ("Come-on", "Let's go", "Do-it", etc.)

TACTICAL DEVELOPMENT:

There is more and more research that points towards the superiority of learning tennis in a **Game-Based approach**. This is in contrast to the traditional, "technique first/tactics later" approach. In a Game-Based approach the enjoyment of playing tennis is maintained right from the beginning by re-creating playing situations adapted (or scaled-down in the case of 5-9 year olds) to the level of the players. As they play, the students learn they must accomplish certain tasks to be consistent or win more points. The coach leads the students to discover what to do (tactics) by placing them in situations that promote problem solving and decision-making.



Technical skills are then presented to implement solutions to the problems encountered in those situations. With such a direct link to playing tennis, the skills learned in lessons transfer easier to match play. In other words, people are taught how to **play tennis** rather than being taught just how to stroke. In my opinion, this is one of the most critical aspects of developing a player. The challenge is that a coach must have a systematic way to develop tactics. Here is an example of one of the tactical development systems we use at GCTC.

Each point can be broken down into the **Stages of a Point**: (adapted from Bollettieri 2001)

1. **Initiate**: How a player starts the point off the serve or return to create an advantage, or neutralize an opponent.
2. **Build**: Maneuvering the opponent with consistent rallies to construct an advantage
3. **Advantage**: Identifying the opportunity to take the advantage and making a shot that gains advantage. On the other side of the tactic, countering an opponent's advantage.
4. **Finish**: Winning the point with a put-away shot. On the other side of the tactic, defending against an opponent attacking.
5. **Stay-in**: This is the other side of both the Advantage stage and the Finish stage. In this stage, players defend against opponents or, try to counter by turning an advantage around.

A player must be trained in good decision-making in each of these stages to effectively construct points and *play smart*.

Here is one common example I see abused constantly at junior tournaments. It is the simple tactic of re-directing a crosscourt rally down-the-line when in the "Building" stage of a point. Good tactics involves trained decision-making. If a player doesn't take into account the difficulty of the shot they receive, they may choose a "low-percentage" time to go down-the-line. Going down-the-line on a difficult ball (even if the opponent is out of position on the other side of the court) means the player will get some spectacular points, but they will always miss more than they get (a good formula if you want to lose matches). A coach has no right to complain about their player "not playing smart" when they never train them tactically.

"Re-direct" drill: In this drill, the player must call out either "Cross" (I am going to hit a crosscourt) or "Line" (I am going to re-direct down-the-line) before the ball bounces on their side. By training to take into account the speed, depth and spin of the ball received, players learn to select the right time for an effective down-the-line. By having players call out the Cue words, the coach can see the quality and quickness of the decision made as well. Players must also recover to the appropriate position (to the left of centre for a right-hander hitting a crosscourt backhand. To the right of centre when they do a backhand down-the-line). Since the recovery for the down-the-line is further, it is important to train to recover quickly or give more time by increasing the trajectory of the shot. Not recovering before the opponent hits will mean the player is out of position after ever re-direction.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT:

A good athlete will always have an advantage. As much as athleticism is a matter of genetics, it is also very trainable. As the U12 Provincial Coach at the time, I was always impressed with current U14 National Champion and 2002 Orange Bowl U14 finalist, Philip Bester's early development in the physical component. His Father (Alec), didn't know much about tennis to begin with but set out to develop an **athlete**. This physical base has set the foundation for his future success as he continues to train at Bollettieri's in Florida.

A player needs to develop many physical qualities (e.g. endurance, speed, flexibility, strength, etc.) Some of the most critical qualities to develop are what's called the "ABC's" of athleticism. **Agility** (the ability to change direction quickly), **Balance**, **Coordination**, and **Speed**.

Coordination has been rated in studies by the German Tennis Federation as the #1 physical quality for long term success in tennis.

One of the most important things a coach (or parent) must do is to develop coordination in players starting out in tennis (especially 5-7 year old Mini-Tennis players). Coordination training builds a solid foundation for tennis much more effectively than sticking these young players at the baseline and feeding balls to them. Coordination training for tennis includes being able to maintain balance while judging where a ball is in space and reacting to it with the correct sequence of movements at the right time.

Here are some of the ways we train physically both off and on the court at GCTC. Our On-court training allows us to combine the physical with the technical:

Balance: Balance is critical to perform all the footwork and body work demanded in tennis.

On Court: One drill we use for on-court balance training is the "Balance Cap" drill. Since the head is a key element in balance, it is important that a player controls it. In this drill the player wears their cap loosely (so it could fall off easily). The goal is to move laterally (side to side) as well as up and back and keep the cap on by minimizing head movement. If the head jerks or turns, vision of the ball will worsen. On shots to the side, it is important to keep the cap pointed forward at the impact. A common mistake developing players make is to let their head look to the side on a wide ball. This will cause the impact point to be beside them rather than out front. Keep the head still and looking to an 'out front' impact point.

Off court: The main tool we use for physical development at GCTC is the 'Stability ball' (also called a Physio Ball or 'Swiss' Ball). This is one of our number one training tools since it has the advantage of developing strength, balance and an athlete's kinesthetic sense (awareness of what their muscles and joints are doing) at the same time! In the Summer 2002 issue of Match point, Carl Petersen outlined a number of excellent exercises using this ball in his column.

TECHNICAL DEVELOPMENT:

As mentioned previously, a "technique first" approach is not the most effective way to develop juniors. This is not to say that technique is not important. Without proper technique, a player is not set-up for future success. Good technique creates the following advantages:

- **Ability to perform tactics effectively (get the ball where it is supposed to go)**
- **Minimizes injury**
- **Doesn't waste energy**
- **Allows the ability to hit with full power at higher levels**

Technical development has evolved dramatically over the last two decades. In the past, the goal of instruction was to get players to execute the proper "form". This is how tennis was taught (and how we all taught it 20 years ago). The problem was that the game of tennis changed but the coaching of tennis did not. There are still examples out there of coaches continuing to teach 30 year old technique. This is about as effective as trying to win the Indy car race with a 30 year old car! Fortunately, for the players, this practise is dying out. In modern tennis many of the 'basics' have even been re-defined so players can achieve even more success faster.

Modern technique allows players to be more effective, win more points and lose less. It is no longer a matter of just 'looking proper' (who cares how nice your follow-through is if you can't win points with it?). The old technique faded away because of the many questions it could not answer. For example, think of the proper forehand players were taught in the past:

-Is that forehand the best 'form' when various champions hit the ball differently?

-How can technique be individualized if everyone must conform to the same 'form'?

-What is the proper forehand when it must change for the situation? Do you use the same technique if the ball is coming higher or lower? Faster or slower? For a wide ball or a short one? When attacking or defending? If the technique must change for all these situations, what is the proper form?

Modern technique is changing from teaching the old 'stroke models' to teaching students principles that can adapt for every situation. They learn the principles that are true for pro's as well as beginners that can be suited for their own individual gamestyle. Beware of coaches who create players in their own image!

For example, when it comes to footwork, coaches would have these debates about the proper 'form'. Should the player hit with an 'open stance' or a 'closed stance'. These kind of debates meant the coach's didn't understand the **situational** nature of tennis. To be fully successful, players must be able to hit from 'Open' stances, 'Semi-open', 'Neutral' (perpendicular to the net), 'Semi-closed' and 'Closed' as the situation demands. Developing players with 'one way' techniques hurt their ability to play the game. One only has to watch modern tennis and see that the best players must be able to do it all!

One of the big changes in how juniors are developed nowadays is the emphasis on giving them technique that will allow them to hit with full power when they are older. Players who can't generate pace are at a disadvantage in today's power game. This doesn't mean that they should be blasting balls inconsistently at every opportunity in a match. Picking the right time to use the power is part of playing the game. Picking the wrong time is not smart tactics. **The key is that their technique must allow them to hit full pace when required without becoming "wild" and inconsistent.** Most people can whack a ball out of the court with power, it's getting it in with power that's the challenge.

Modern 'power' technique requires a player to engage as many parts of their body as possible in a coordinated way. Sports science calls this biomechanics. If all the body segments contribute, players won't over use their arms. The result is controlled power rather than wild smacking.

Here is one example of how we train players technically to use their body more efficiently at GCTC:

Medicine ball training: Using a weighted medicine ball, the player re-creates the movement for a rally forehand from the baseline (this is not an attacking or counter-attacking action which would require a different movement). Since the ball is heavy, the player must use all their body to propel the ball (legs, hips, trunk, etc.) They then transfer the feelings of the medicine ball when hitting their forehand rally shot. Two handed backhands would be trained the same way however, one handed shots require a lighter ball and a different technique. The German Tennis Federation created a prescription for this type of 'weighted training'. One 'set' equals eight repetitions with the ball, then 8 with the racquet. Three sets are done three times. In 2-3 months the player will master all the movements. The great thing about this type of training is that it includes strength, balance and coordination along with the technique.

CONCLUSION:

Tennis is a multi-faceted game that requires a player to use everything they have. To develop all that is required, coaches should use the holistic approach and integrate the psychological, physical, tactical and technical components in their training. Fully equipping players for the demands of modern tennis involves much more than some technical instruction and hitting a million balls. It is a scientific process that is sequential and systematic. Anything less is a disservice to players learning the game.

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