

THE RIGHT STUFF- Proper equipment speeds technical & tactical development

How come they aren't playing 'real' tennis? This is a question we sometimes get from parents entering the Grant Connell Tennis Centre (GCTC) U12 development programs. The question occurs because a quick look at the program reveals children using smaller racquets, transition balls, and playing on smaller courts.

Our answer? They *are* playing 'real' tennis. What they are doing is closer to the real game adults play, considering the size and strength of the children.

Think of it this way: What if you played a new game called "Big Tennis". The parameters of Big Tennis compared to regulation tennis are on the table below.

Big Tennis

Court		
Net height: 4 feet (122 cm)	Court length: 104 feet (31.5 m)	Court width: (singles): 36 feet (11 m)
Racquet		
Weight: 15 ounces (466.5 g)	Length: 36 inches (91.5 cm)	
Ball		
Bounce: Regular bounce to head height (rather than waist level)	Weight: Feels about the weight of a softball	

"Big Tennis" would be challenging to say the least. Would playing and practicing Big Tennis improve your play of regulation tennis, or would it hurt?

Your tactics would change dramatically because of the court size and ball bounce. Because of the larger, heavier racquet and high-bouncing but 'heavy' ball, your technique would also evolve into something quite different than the proper mechanics needed for regulation tennis. It would be a different game all together. That is why our answer is, "Our kids *are* playing real tennis". Why would we impede their development by subjecting them to Big Tennis (which is what we do when we put 5-11 year olds on full courts with regulation equipment)?

The preferred approach is called, "**Progressive Tennis**" and takes players through a systematic progression of scaled racquets, modified balls, and court sizes.

Known but not used

Scaled racquets and courts have been around for a while. Unfortunately, coaches (especially in North America) typically see it all as an optional novelty. What they fail to understand is that Progressive Tennis, is the norm in solid tennis countries like Spain, France, and Belgium. Players like Federer, Clijsters, Henin-Hardenne, and numerous others, all got their start with scaled down tennis.



Wilson has a full line of scaled balls, racquets and nets

Of course, there are players who learned tennis as children without this equipment however, that's not an endorsement of it being an effective process. Coaching professionalism demands we employ the methods that are of the maximum benefit to our students.

I am convinced, the vast majority of coaches not using the Progressive Tennis approach would, if they truly understood how good tactical and technical development requires this equipment. Many coaches and parents don't realize what level of proficiency U8 and U10 players are capable of. As a result, they become content with players just bumping the ball over the net with poor mechanics. They get drawn into improving quantity ("Look, little Johnny can rally 50 times!") and ignoring quality. Improper mechanics limit a player's future potential.

Here is an example of the technical benefits of scaled equipment. The photo sequences below compare the forehand rally technique of World #1 ranked player Kim Clijsters, and one of our GCTC U10 players:

Kim Clijsters rally forehand Comparison

In each photo, there are key points to observe:

1. Both arms engaged in preparing racquet and body together.
2. Kim 'loads' her legs, trunk, and body in a semi-open stance preparation with the racquet high
3. The 'linkage' she uses to 'uncoil' is critical. The legs drive the hip first and the racquet lays back and lags behind ready to 'whip' forward
4. At impact, she has a semi-western grip and her elbow is behind the grip. She employs a 'driving' topspin swing path.
5. She transfers her weight around, as well as forward, with a full 'shoulders around' finish.

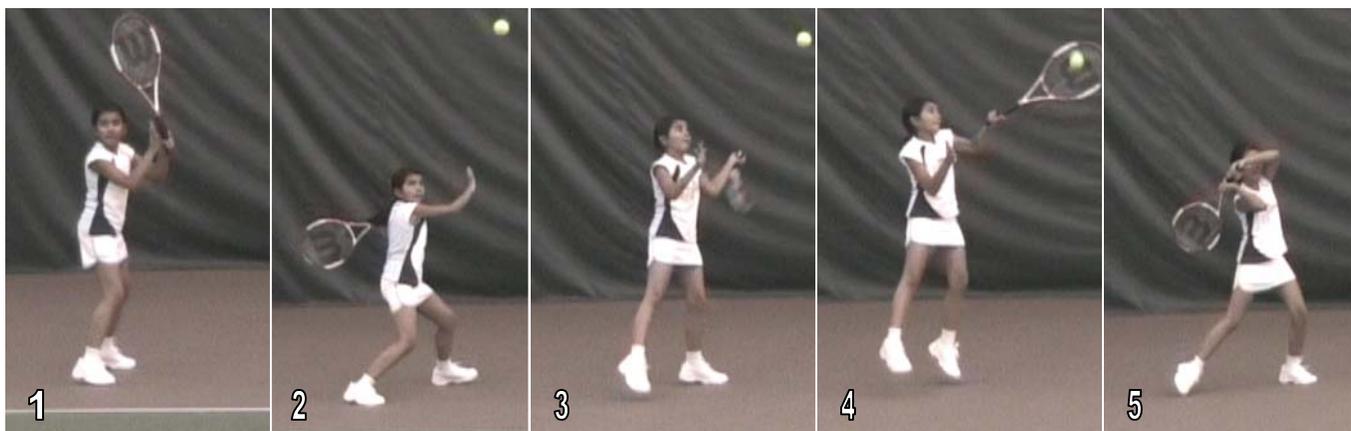
Clijsters photos courtesy of tennisonline.com



Even though she is left-handed, the GCTC player matches Kim's mechanics quite well. The only exception is that our player has more of a "western grip" which accounts for the elbow being lower in photo 3 & 4 (but we are working on that).

Using scaled equipment doesn't automatically make kids hit like Kim Clijsters (our player has obviously been trained with these mechanics). However, the proper equipment promotes and speeds up the development of these techniques.

In this second sequence, our player uses an adult racquet and regulation balls.



As a result, we can see the changes she is forced to make to adapt her technique:

1. Unlike the first sequence (where the typical bounce was lower), she immediately moves backwards to adjust to the bigger bounce. Notice already, her elbow drops to prop up the heavier racquet.
2. To get the bigger racquet moving, she must use a much bigger preparation. She also does not have a good body 'coil' since the ball is coming faster.
3. The faster bounce is forcing her to shift her weight backwards and her grip is even more exaggeratedly 'western' to keep the racquet vertical when impacting high.
4. With her weight shifted back, she can't uncoil her body and makes an, 'arm-only' stroke. She decelerates her racquet through the shot to 'block' the heavier, faster ball.
5. The final photo shows how she hasn't engaged her body well and doesn't rotate around at all.

The important thing to realize is, the two sequences of the GCTC player were within minutes of each other. **In other words, the regulation ball and adult racquet would cause incorrect repetition (even with a player who can do better).** Using regulation equipment would ingrain poor mechanics.

This is just one small example. Using the proper equipment speeds up the development of all the actions required, in all the situations of play. For example, we choose to show a baseline, forcing rally but, all the attacking actions on groundstrokes are especially handicapped when players don't use the scaled equipment. Serves also suffer. The ball weight and court distance encourage poor trajectories, wrong grips, 'pushing' actions and no acceleration. Volleys don't progress well with full-sized tennis either.

Tactical Development

Technique is not the only element hurt by inappropriate equipment. Good tactical development is also at stake. Here are a few tactical aspects affected by scale:

- **Style of Play Development:** Kids on a full-size court have far more ground to cover than if the court is scaled. The result, they tend to hit high arcing balls to give time to chase shots down. The style of play becomes very defensive. With Progressive Tennis, players can successfully explore all-court, counter-puncher, or net rushing styles. They even come to the net regularly (something rarely seen when kids use full-sized equipment and courts since it is far too difficult to cover the court).
- **Phase of Play Development:** With full-sized play, defense is the primary phase utilized. The other phases of play (attack, forcing, counter, and a proper neutral rally) are all too difficult to successfully execute. Scaled tennis allows all the phases to be developed.
- **Shot Selection Development:** Varying the ball is extremely difficult with regulation equipment and courts. Players get stuck hitting high arcs to the middle of the court. Angles, spins, drives and drops are all available with the scaled equipment (We know because players in our program do them).



The narrower sidelines in the 3/4 Court (18 Meter) set-up allows for net play

Why would a coach settle for a player who is just consistent when they could also have the ability to play and make decisions that are just like the ones they will use when they are older. When players are developed with Progressive Tennis, they look just like the pros when they play, just smaller!

The Push is on

Tennis Canada is making a renewed commitment to push the use of Progressive Tennis for developing players. U12 national Coach, Andre Labelle is criss-crossing the country to spread the message. Andre says: *“The Progressive Tennis equipment allows young players to improve their overall tennis skills more quickly. In all, it allows young players a more fun and successful tennis experience at every step.”*

Coaches and parents would do well to ensure children have the best development path possible by using the appropriate equipment. And, it is not only the children who can benefit. Introductory Adult programs can also capitalize on the advantages as well. At GCTC we successfully use the equipment for our beginner programs and league play.

The improper equipment may result in players learning motor patterns that need to be overhauled later, causing a ‘stumble’ in development that they may not recover from. At best, it slows down the development process. Having the right stuff is no longer just an option, it is a requirement for proper tactical and technical development.

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