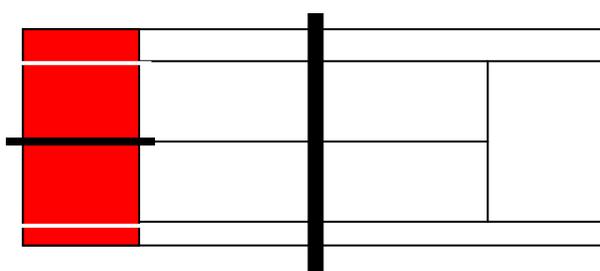


Progressive Tennis: Starting Players at ½ Court

The Progressive Tennis system of scale appropriate racquets, courts, balls, and competition, gives tremendous advantages for developing the technical and tactical foundations of tennis. This article will focus on developing 5-7 year olds on a ½ Court.

1/2 Court Tennis



Even though this article is in reference to ½ Court players, the same philosophy and methodology would be used with starter ¾ Court players (or a starter adult).

Before starting the development process, it is important for a coach to decide the methodology they intend to use. Why is this significant? Because, every path a coach takes has different consequences on the learner. Most coaches realize that the game has changed. This has led to the 'stuff' they coach being different (e.g. modern techniques). What is less known is the process of coaching has also evolved as the ways people learn and process information is researched.

Traditional tennis instruction started with the philosophy of 'teach the basic strokes'. The first lesson would start with an idealized model of the forehand that the coach demonstrated and everyone copied. The goal of the lesson was to conform students to the model of the stroke.

All the new information, coming from the best coaching practices, from the top tennis nations, point to another method that is far more effective (in contrast to the one described above). The **Game-based Approach** (GBA) comes at learning tennis from another angle. It is not about strokes, but rather connecting the tactics and techniques of play.

The philosophy is not *'teach the basic strokes'* but *'play the game'*, and help players learn the tactics and techniques to play more successfully (which includes strokes).

We will outline the basic steps beginning players would perform to learn tennis in a GBA and contrast that with a typical traditional lesson process.

Coordination is the Foundation

The rule for the best long-term development (that is the best perspective to have when developing a 5-7 year old player) is, *"develop and athlete first, a tennis player second"*. A solid foundation of coordination skills that include running, throwing, catching, jumping, etc. is invaluable for future success in tennis.

There is plenty of literature and videos on this kind of development. It should be included at the beginning of every child's training sessions. However, this article will focus on tactical/technical development.

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What are the First Steps in Learning to Rally?

In traditional coaching, the first step is to learn the forehand. **In a GBA, tactics come first, and the first tactic a player needs for success in tennis is to keep the ball in play consistently. Tennis is a game of errors.**

Traditional coaches would typically use basket feeding to introduce the forehand technique. In a GBA, players are most often in 'live ball' situations exchanging with each other. Basket feeding is used in a GBA but not for developing beginner rally skills.

A traditional coach might modify the feeding (feed by hand) to simplify the skill if the students were having trouble (the students would be on the baseline). As a further simplification, some coaches may place them on the service line (commonly however, they would still aim for sending their strokes to the opposite baseline).

The main points of emphasis would be the stroke techniques involved in performing the whole swing shape. The techniques would be 'chained' together in sequence (first preparation, contact, then follow-through).

By contrast in a GBA, the game would be scaled down to whatever level is required for the players to experience success. To develop the tactic of consistency, the first step in a GBA would be to learn to "Rally" (groundstroke exchange).

Skill Blocks for Rallying

To develop solid rally skills, the elements that improve play come in 3 main 'Skill Blocks'. The coach chooses which skills from each block are required to improve the player.

Block #1: Tracking Catching and Throwing Skills:

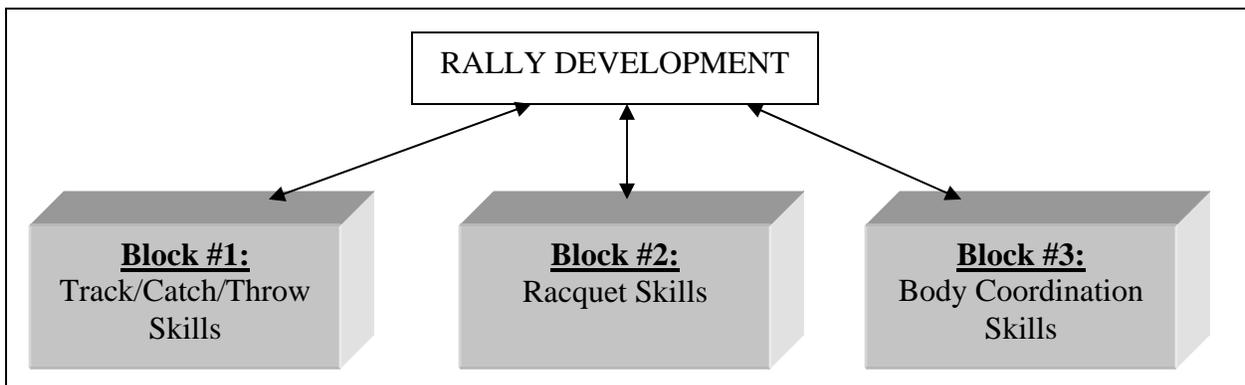
For improving perception, reception, and understanding how to feed the ball to a partner for future practice (If players learn to send the ball to each other, they dramatically increase the potential repetition for practice). Overhand throwing is also developed as a foundation for the serve.

Block #2: Racquet Skills:

For improving centering and creating a good impact point in relation to their body as well as having a stable racquet through the hitting zone and controlling the ball.

Block #3: Body Coordination Skills:

For improving the linkage of using the legs, body and arm together (Players typically start with an, 'arm-only' style of play).



An astute coach or parent may say, "Hold on, isn't there a missing block? Shouldn't footwork be a block as well?" The answer is, footwork isn't a separate skill development block. It is so important that it is in every block. All skills progress from 'static' (not much movement) to 'dynamic' (done with movement).

"Footwork is so important in tennis development, it is in every block!"

Self Rally to Develop Technique

The secret to rally development is to understand that a rally is an equation:

$$\mathbf{Br = Bs} \text{ (Ball Received equals Ball Sent)}$$

It is a neutral exchange. There is a reception and a projection that are both of equal importance.

The 'glitch' that occurs in traditional coaching is the inequality of the reception compared to the projection. Typically, the coach sends an easy to receive ball (sometimes being so accurate with their feed that they actually hit the player's racquet). The player, on the other hand, is encouraged to whack the ball anywhere into the court.



A humorous photo provided by some US friends

The challenge is, this inequality transfers poorly when the player goes into the 'real world' and tries to rally with partners. In reality, the starter players should develop their *reception* skills more than their *projection* to truly gain consistency.

To ease into learning how to rally, players need to exchange the ball in the lowest pressure and simplest situation available. This would be for a player to rally with themselves (Self-rally).

The task of self-rallying is used to help players learn how to organize themselves around the most important moment of any tennis shot, the **Impact Point**. Self-rally allows for easier development of:

- An 'ideal' Impact Point (waist level, slightly out front, comfortable distance from the body)
- Body position (sideways with a neutral stance is recommended for starter players)
- Adjustment steps to maneuver around to create the ideal Impact Point
- Racquet work to control the ball's height, direction and speed



Notice the technical fundamentals being demonstrated in this self-rally

A groundstroke self-rally drill would consist of the player continuously tapping the ball up after it bounces on the ground (usually sending it just above head level to anticipate the future skill of sending the ball up and over the net). Rather than 'chaining' the skill in sequence (preparation, hit, follow-through), the groundstroke skills (both FH & BH) would be 'shaped' from the impact point. (e.g. "Here is how you must adjust your feet to organize yourself around a good impact that is at waist level, slightly out front, and a comfortable distance from your body".)

The 'Accordion' Method of Skill Building

The Skill blocks build on each other however, coaches should avoid doing the first block completely then the next, then the next, etc. The goal is to have players engage in play quickly.

Coaches should 'flip-flop' back and forth between having players play the game (serve, rally, score or simply exchanging at the initial levels), improving skills by applying Skill Block activities, and return to playing. This going in and out from play, to practice, to play, is what I call the 'Accordion' method.



For example, in a training session for groundstrokes, players would be paired for rallying together. The coach would see the quality of their technique during their exchanges.

If they had difficulties with a stable, laid-back wrist (Racquet Skills Block #2), the coach would then gather the players for an exercise to improve that aspect of their technique (e.g. rolling the ball along the ground). After the exercise, they would return to exchanging and incorporate the improved technique.

Using this method speeds a players' progress by maintaining the fun of play. It also speeds learning by 'Chunking' skills into bit-sized pieces that are easily assimilated. Chunking is a way of sequencing skills in harmony with the way children learn. If a skill is learned, practiced a little, and then left (to do other things), the skill is like a seed that germinates in a child's body. This is more effective than spending a long period on one skill.

Conclusion

We have explored the first steps and practice activities required to get 5-7 year olds on a firm tennis foundation. This process is quite different from the traditional 'ball feeding' method coaches have commonly employed however, it is much more effective at developing rally fundamentals.

This information and more is on the New Tennis Canada ½ Court DVD available from:

www.acecoach.com

(Go to "Coaching Resources" on the left menu on the main page)