

TEACHING METHODOLOGY FOR TENNIS

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1. TENNIS PLAYING AND TENNIS TEACHING

The general opinion of coaches and players is that the game of tennis has changed a lot during the last 20-25 years. In fact, if we compare the game of Borg, Gerulaitis, Vilas, Evert, Austin and others, to the game of Sampras, Agassi, Moya, Williams, some of the top male and female players of our time, we can conclude that the game has changed in almost all aspects.

However, when we have asked coaches about their impressions on whether or not the teaching of tennis has changed during the last 20-25 years, they generally report little or no changes. This seems to indicate that, although coaches think that the game has evolved different to the game of 20 years ago, the way of teaching it has remained the same during this period (Crespo, 1999).

This difference of perceptions is a good starting point to ask ourselves a key question for our job as tennis coaches: So... What and how do we teach?

2. LATEST CONCLUSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL TENNIS FEDERATION RESEARCH ON TENNIS WORLDWIDE

During 1997 and 1998, the ITF conducted a series of studies on tennis participation worldwide in order to have a better understanding of how tennis is played in the world. Which are the markets with a better future in Tennis? What is the general image of tennis? (ITF, 1997).

Results of these studies revealed good and bad news. Good news indicated that the developing countries, such as Morocco, showed a very interesting growth of the game. Bad news addressed the issue that the more mature markets were having problems and that tennis appears not to be a fun game to learn and play for the vast majority of youngsters interviewed (ITF, 1998).

These results can also lead us to ask ourselves why tennis has this image. It can be easily said that inner characteristics of the game of tennis and its differences with other sports and

activities have their influence.

However, this can help us to address the aspect of the responsibility and role of the coach in this situation. Sometimes, we have felt that coaches need to concentrate on the important aspects and consequences of the teaching process. Let's review them briefly.

3. GOALS OF THE TEACHING PROCESS

A common problem is that many tennis teachers teach in the same way that they were taught regardless whom they are teaching. This, of course, should be avoided (Thorpe, 1994).

In order to improve the image of the game and the satisfaction of its players it must be the goal of the coach to always want to teach tennis better. It can be assumed that if the coach teaches better tennis, the players will have a better image and consideration of the game.

What does it mean to teach the game of tennis better? We can say that it is achieving more satisfaction, enjoyment and performance both from the players/ and from the coach.

It is important to conclude that the main goal of the coach as per the teaching process is making tennis an easier and more fun game to play. This implies the coach thinking about what he or she is doing daily.

This also means a process of analysing what coaching and teaching has been all about during this recent period in which there have been major changes in the game but no changes in the teaching methods of it.

4. TEACHING METHODS

We can have a look at the characteristics of the old teaching methods and at the characteristics of the new teaching procedures applied in different sports.

The following charts summarise the characteristics of the old approach and the new approach to teaching tennis. Coaches can use it to progress in their use of more modern and effective teaching methods (see table I, II and III).

Teaching approaches	Overall scope	Type of sport	Contents	Presenting the information	The role of the coach
Old approach	Adapt the player to the sport	Closed skill sport (repetitive actions all with the same characteristics)	Based on teaching technique (models) and focusing on projection skills	Based on using only analytical (part) methods. All players go through the same stages	Based on using command styles
New approach	Adapt the sport to the player	Open skill sport (each stroke and movement is different from the previous one)	Based on teaching situations (tactics) and focusing on both projection and reception skills, and co-ordination	Based on mixing up analytical and global (whole) methods. Learning by watching and imitating. Individualised teaching	Based on using discovery styles
Conclusions	Mini-tennis: use of scaled down equipment	Perception, Decision making, Action and Feedback are crucial	Teaching open skills versus teaching closed skills	Use analytic methods for correction or to make regressions in teaching	More effective questioning, less ineffective telling

TABLE II				
Teaching approaches	The players	The learning process	Class organisation	Dealing with group & players
Old approach	All players learn the same way. The coach teaches everyone in the same way	No attention to the different stages of learning	Based on using line formation	All players in the group doing the same task at the same level of difficulty
New approach	Each player learns differently	The are different stages of learning that should be respected	Based on using buddy teaching, task assignment	Individualisation & inclusion. Adapt the task to the characteristics of each player
Conclusions	Understand kinesthetic, visual and auditory learners	Be aware of cognitive, repetitive and automatic stages of learning	More activity and independence, less control	Possibility of working individually within group lessons

TABLE III					
Teaching approaches	On court practice	Giving feedback	Working on technique	Working on tactics	Working for competition
Old approach	Drills and technical mastery	Coach very negative, always correcting the model (Diagnosis & Correction)	Only one model applied to all players	Only when players master technique, not before	Practice matches with no comments from the coach or from the player
New approach	Games based approach	Based on Analysis & Improvement of a given situation vs. Diagnosis & Correction (effective questioning/ problem solving/ develop strengths/ positive reinforcement)	Style as the interpretation of technique by the player	Ask first: What do you want to do? tactical goal (height, depth, direction, speed, etc.) Ask then: How are you going to do this? Technical goal	Make players think and develop a decision making process by giving options
Conclusions	Learning by playing the game	More positive approach, involve the player in the correction process	Respect the individual and the situation	Teach structures and situations, not models. Set game situations	Make the players apply the different options on court during practices

5. CONCLUSIONS

The traditional method of teaching tennis was for the coach to focus on the technique or production of the strokes. Precise models of the strokes were used by the coach to “show” the player how to play. Once the player had mastered the “model” techniques, the coach then focused on the tactics (i.e. implementing the techniques in a game situation).

In tennis teaching today, tennis is viewed as an open skill sport with each shot being hit differently. The player never plays the same shot twice! Each shot requires the player to go through the following process: Perception - Decision - Action - Feedback.

In today’s tennis, technique (the action) should be seen as a function of the correct biomechanical principles and as a means to implement tactics more efficiently. A player’s stroke technique should always depend on his tactical intention. Simply stated form (technique) should follow function (tactics).

There are many different ways to play the modern strokes and different situations to play from. Therefore, when players come to play the game, they should try to focus on the tactical intentions and the biomechanics, and see technique as a means of performing the tactic more effectively (Crespo & Miley, 1998).

These recommendations on new teaching methods have proven to be very effective at all levels of performance. In our opinion it is important that the coach uses these modern teaching techniques for better performance and satisfaction. Coaches should have in mind that it is never too late to change and to adapt to new methods.

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