

The Games for Understanding (GFU) Teaching Approach in Tennis

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Introduction

Shelly Jones has just finished teaching a lesson on tennis to her class of 12-14 year olds. During the class she focused on teaching basic tennis skills (forehand, backhand, serve and volley). The majority of her instructional tasks were technique drills with some game play at the end of each session. During the matches at the end of her classes Shelly noticed that many of the students who performed quite well during the drills were not able to adapt their techniques to the demands of the subsequent tennis games.

The above scenario is quite common: young players unable to effectively execute many of the basic tennis skills during games because of a lack of understanding of the overall dynamics of game play. While skilled performance in sport relies on both motor skill execution and application of game knowledge (tactics and strategy) many teachers have traditionally used a technique model for tennis instruction.

The Technique Teaching Approach

The emphasis in this model is on students acquiring technical skills for game play.

The structure of the technique approach is as follows (Turner & Martinek, 1999):

1. Introductory activity: Explanation of the skill.
2. Demonstration of the skill.
3. Practice: Structured tennis drills designed to enhance skill acquisition. They are usually static drills, at first, before students attempt more dynamic practice tasks.
4. Feedback: During each class the teacher or coach provides feedback on technique to the students.
5. Game play occurs at the culmination of each lesson and the

teacher provides corrective-skill feedback at this time.

As an example, the following skills can be covered in a 10 lesson unit: footwork, forehand, backhand, lob, smash, forehand and backhand volley, drop shot and serve. Players could also participate in singles games (half court or full court) at the end of each lesson for the initial eight classes. For the final 2 lessons they could play doubles games at the end of their classes.

For over a century, physical education teachers and coaches have been using this model because it has intuitive appeal. The skills are broken down into small steps, and mastery of these skills is perceived as a way to achieve the larger learning goal of playing the game effectively. Unfortunately, in order to achieve the ultimate learning goal the student must be able to adapt the tennis skill he/she learned to a variety of game conditions and that also requires the performer to possess game knowledge and understanding. These two additional components are not emphasized in the technique approach to teaching tennis. However, research scholars have shown that game knowledge and understanding are easily attainable and change very rapidly during development (Thomas & Thomas, 1994).

The Knowledge Component

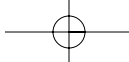
There are two kinds of knowledge, declarative and procedural, that are applicable to both learning and playing sport. A form of declarative knowledge would be the rules of tennis (factual information), where as electing to use a drop shot in the game context would be an example of

procedural knowledge (if this situation exists then do this action). Novice sport performers often lack both declarative and procedural knowledge and this is reflected by novice tennis players' inability to make appropriate decisions during game play.

Consider the following tennis example of a novice player receiving a short ball that lands in the service area. The novice player "concentrates on returning the short ball and moving back defensively to return the opponents next shot" (McPherson & Thomas, 1989, p. 192). A player with better game understanding in the same situation would "hit an approach shot down the line, follow the ball to the net, hit an offensive volley, and set up for a put away volley" (McPherson & Thomas, 1989, p. 192).

Research has suggested that declarative knowledge, or factual information, is a precursor to procedural knowledge (McPherson & Thomas, 1989). One approach to teaching sports that advocates introducing children to mini game situations early in the instructional process thereby facilitating the development of declarative and procedural knowledge and tactical decision-making, is "Games for Understanding" (Turner & Martinek, 1995).





The Games-Based Teaching Approach

The Games-Based Approach (GBA) focuses on the tactical problems of game play.

The structure of the approach can be summarised as follows (Turner, Allison & Pissanos, 2001):

1. Introduction: A mini game (modified tennis game) is introduced initially at the start of each lesson along with a description of the basic rules of this game.
 - The goal is to encourage tactical thinking (what to do in specific game situations).
 - The rules provide shape to the game and determine the range of tactics and skills that are required for successful performance.
 - The game is used as a point of reference to assist players in learning to make appropriate decisions in light of tactical awareness.
2. Selection of tactical responses: Students learn how to match game conditions with the selection of appropriate tactical responses.
 - The teacher and students will

investigate the tactical problem and potential solutions.

3. Skill practices: The students will recognise the need for learning specific skills via game-related practices to solve their tactical problems.
 - Skills, like volleying and smashing, are subsequently taught once students see the need for these in the context of their games.
 - Skillful performance is thus viewed in the context of the learner and the game.
4. Game play: Following game-related practices, students will return to game play to apply their skills. (p. 40)

An outline of the contents for 10 lessons using the GBA (modified from the unit design of Griffin, Mitchell, & Oslin, 1997) is provided below:

Research on the Games-Based Approach

In recent years researchers have examined the efficacy of a GBA to sports instruction. However, there has been little tennis specific research conducted with the GBA.

Tennis teachers and coaches need to be provided with research-based information pertaining to the effectiveness of the GBA and Technique Approach in order that they can provide the optimal tennis learning experiences for their students.

Conclusion

The GBA has found considerable support among physical education practitioners in Europe and the United States (Griffin, Mitchell & Oslin, 1997; Turner, 2001). Governing bodies, in various sports, are also beginning to recognise the potential of a GBA. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) has adopted a similar GBA to introduce young players to tennis via mini-tennis. The importance of understanding the precise benefits of a GBA are highlighted by the ITF School Tennis Initiative (STI) to introduce mini-tennis to as many elementary school students as possible each year across the world. Similarly to reinforce the effectiveness and appropriateness of the GBA as a vehicle for the introduction of tennis, the ITF is actively supporting GBA research efforts.

References

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Lesson	Tactical Problem	Lesson Focus/Objective
1	Setting up to attack by creating space on opponent's court	Court awareness/Creating space using ground stroke (forehand)
2	Setting up to attack by creating space on opponent's court	Court awareness/Creating space using ground stroke (backhand)
3	Setting up to attack the net - depth	Getting to the net/Approach shot
4	Winning the point	Using the approach shot and volley
5	Setting up to attack by creating space on opponent's court	Starting the point on attack/Use flat serve to put opponent on defense
6	Setting up to attack by creating space on opponent's court	Ground stroke variations/Cross court and down the line or lob
7	Winning the point/Defending against an attack	Using the volley or smash to win the point/Returning the smash
8	Winning the point/Defending against an attack	The attacking drop shot/Returning the drop shot
9	Attacking as a pair	Side-to-side offence (doubles)
10	Attacking as a pair when serving	Setting up a winning volley (doubles)

