

Tennis iCoach is the International Tennis Federation's official coaching platform. Access expert coaching from around the world on technique, tactics, biomechanics, psychology, sports medicine and methodology.
www.tennisicoach.com

[GIRLS VERSUS BOYS]

TAILORING TUITION

How physiological and mental differences between boys and girls can affect tactics and coaching methods in tennis

“Men’s tennis and women’s tennis are almost two separate sports,” Serena Williams says. “If I was to play Andy Murray I would lose 6-0 6-0 in five to six minutes, maybe 10 minutes.”

But after 18 Grand Slam singles titles and more than 200 weeks spent at the top of the world rankings, Williams’ view is decidedly more modest than when she was a teenager. In 1998, when she was just 16, Williams took on the world No.203 Germany’s Karsten Braasch in Melbourne after she and sister Venus claimed they could beat any male player ranked outside the top 200. Braasch, who claimed his training regime “consisted of a leisurely round of golf in the morning followed by a couple of shandies” saw off Serena 6-1 before beating Venus 6-2.

“It was extremely hard,” said 16-year-old Serena who was ranked No.53 in the world at the time. “I didn’t know it would be that hard.”

No matter how many weights she lifted, Serena was fighting a losing battle against nature. Technical, tactical, physical and mental differences exist between male and female players. Even if girls get the same training as boys, differences will emerge throughout their development.

“OVER THE PAST 12 YEARS, THE AVERAGE FIRST SERVE SPEED FOR MEN IS 25 KILOMETRES AN HOUR FASTER THAN FOR WOMEN”

At a physiological level, a typical male player will have 40% muscle mass and 20% fat tissue, while a female player has less muscle (36%) and more fat tissues (30%) as a percentage of overall body composition. By the age of 30, female adults on average possess 50% less muscle mass than males. While resistance exercise and weight training will help a female boost their muscle mass, lower levels of testosterone in the body mean the degree of hypertrophy (muscle enlargement) is smaller.

Anatomical differences between boys and girls become more pronounced during puberty. For girls, the onset of puberty is on average two years before boys and so they mature physically earlier. Often girls are taller than boys, and in many cases physically more developed, from the age of 10 to early teens.

Back in 1993, Williams was 11 when she took on a 10-year-old Andy Roddick in Florida. While the scoreline is

up for debate (Williams claims she won 6-1; Roddick insists it was 6-4), a more physically mature Serena won.

Females can expect to achieve their maximum physical performance from around 15 or 16, while for males it is not until they are 18 or even 20 that they are physically strong enough to compete on the senior tour. While Williams made her professional debut in 1995, aged 14, Roddick did not make his ATP debut until 2000, when he was 17. He won his first Grand Slam title in 2003 aged 21; Williams won her first a couple of weeks before her 18th birthday.

Due to the anatomical differences between men and women, a female’s groundstroke tends to have less topspin. With greater arm and shoulder strength, a male player is able to brush up and across the ball on contact. The ability to hit topspin affects game styles, strategy and tactics. To hit hard, females, who generally hit flatter, stand further up the court, enabling them to hit the ball earlier and use the speed of the oncoming ball to create pace.

With the serve playing a less dominant role in women’s tennis, the return game is arguably more important. Recent research by Australian statistics professor Rod Cross, based on Grand Slam performances over the past 12 years, the average first serve speed for men was 25 kilometres an hour faster than women, and 17kph on second serve. At pro level, men win about 80% of service games, while women win 65%.

As power in the female game increases, the pace and importance of the serve for females grows, but with a break of serve roughly every three games at professional level, the return of serve is one of the most important shots. Coaches working with females often prioritise the return of serve. In particular they look at how to improve the neutralising return off a first serve and an offensive return on a second serve.

There are more than just physical differences between men and women; there are psychological differences that affect competition and how players respond to coaching. Even at a young age, boys are typically more competitive and will seek out active games and competition, while girls tend to value personal improvement over winning. So female players are more likely to focus on task-oriented goals, while males focus on outcome and compare results and rankings with their rivals.

Coaches often adjust their approach when working with females; the way in which the coach delivers criticism and praise can influence the way a message is received. ■



"If I was to play Andy Murray I would lose 6-0 6-0 in five to six minutes!"

SERENA WILLIAMS



NICK'S COACHING NUGGETS

→ Nick Bollettieri, 83, who founded the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy (now IMG) in 1978, has coached 10 world No.1s including Andre Agassi, Martina Hingis and the Williams sisters

"When we work with the ten-and-unders, I'm laid back and complimentary and I treat the boys and girls the same. There's no yelling - I want to make sure they go home feeling happy so they come back. In my experience, girls are more emotional and you have to choose your words. You find that a lot of coaches will stand close to their female student as they hit balls with a hitting partner, while with guys the coach will stand across the net and shout. When I worked with Carling Bassett you could knock the hell out of her, she didn't care. But when you work with Serena Williams, Maria Sharapova, Martina Hingis and many of the other girls, you don't want to be yelling too much. Overall I find that girls do not practise with other girls. You can have five or six guys on one court, but any more than one girl showing up on court is not easy."

TIPS FOR TRAINING FEMALE PLAYERS

- Ensure that at least 50% of every ground stroke warm up is spent hitting from on or inside the baseline. Taking the ball early is something that should be done every day.
- Significantly increase the number of returns in your practice sessions for girls. Large parts of training should be spent on serve and return. Coaches that squeeze serve and return in at the end of a session are not training appropriately for the top levels of the female game.
- Set up drills that emphasise attacking and changing direction off the backhand side, especially if your player uses two hands. The extra strength from the second hand makes the two-handed backhand a key weapon.
- Females respond better to positive feedback rather than criticism, and prefer coaches who are empathetic and communicate openly.