

Blind Tennis: Coaches' perspectives on an Australian-based program

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ABSTRACT

We generally think of Melbourne Park as the home of the Australian Open. Few would be aware that it is also home throughout the year to a program that attracts a loyal group of blind and vision impaired players. This program joins a growing number of national and international tennis programs that are breaking down long standing barriers for individuals who are blind or vision impaired (Lin, 2004). Reversing what was previously considered impossible, tennis is no longer only played by players with sight. It is now a fully inclusive sport that can also be enjoyed by persons who are blind or vision impaired. This paper reviews the Melbourne Park Blind Tennis program that is truly remarkable in terms of the benefits it affords all participants.

Key words: vision impaired, inclusive sport, coaches

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INTRODUCTION

Background to Blind Tennis

It started with a dream and became a reality for Miyoshi Takei, the founder of Blind Tennis. As recalled by Takei, a 16 year old Japanese teenager who lost his sight at the age of 18 months, "I have an elder and two younger brothers; we grew up playing soccer, baseball and other sports. I obviously had great difficulty with baseball because I could not see the ball. It was frustrating. I worked on designing a ball that made noise so I could hear it instead of seeing it. But I was attracted to the sound of hitting a ball with a racket, playing tennis. People who play tennis know the pleasant sound 'Paccoon'. I thought 'I can play tennis if I can hear the sound of the ball.' In 1984, I went to a high school for the blind and researched a tennis ball specifically for the blind. I thought 'I can play tennis if I can hear the sound of the ball'... I wanted to play a sport like able-bodied did. I wanted to play a game WITH able-bodied. I wanted to play tennis on the same court with them. The only thing I needed was a ball which emitted a sound" (Takei, 2007, p.1).

History now records that the first sound-adapted tennis ball was designed by Takei in 1984 and the first Japanese national tournament for the blind was conducted by Takei in 1990 (Matsui, 2014). Takei himself was an outstanding competitor, winning 16 national titles before his death in a train accident at the age of 42 in 2011.

Blind Tennis at Melbourne Park

The Japanese Blind Tennis programs provided the inspiration for Ray Fitz-Gerald (then President of Tennis Seniors Victoria, Australia) to approach Maurice Gleeson (President of Blind Sports Victoria) and Tennis Victoria (a member association of Tennis Australia) in 2008 to develop a program specifically designed to engage people who are blind and vision impaired. Initially the program was conducted on outdoor courts at the Kooyong Lawn Tennis Club. The program subsequently moved to indoor courts at Melbourne Park to eliminate disruptive inclement weather and background traffic and train noises.

From its humble beginnings, the Melbourne Park Blind Tennis program is now conducted weekly with 24 sessions over 4 semesters each year. To date over 60 male and female players (aged 18-70 years) have attended the 2-hour program with approximately 10 players regularly attending each week. Similar to other Blind Tennis programs (Bullock, 2007), elements of the game are modified depending on the skill level of the player(s). Modifications can include the adoption of :

- A smaller court area
- A lower net
- A variety of sound-adapted foam balls and large coloured soft balls
- A shorter racquet.

layers are allowed up to three bounces, depending on the degree of their visual impairment and the server must say 'ready' and the receiver must say 'yes' followed by the server saying 'play' before a point begins. The format of the sessions includes both singles and doubles with a number of possible combinations of pairings (i.e., coach and a player who is vision impaired hitting against another coach and a player who is blind or vision impaired).

The purpose of the program is to provide a fun and safe opportunity for participants to learn and play the game. The program is supported by a small team of qualified coaches and other volunteers. Volunteers are recruited from the general public and two major universities. They assist in organising and managing the equipment and also collecting stray or missed balls to avoid 'down-time' for players. Prior to their involvement in the program, volunteers attend an introductory training session conducted by a staff member from Blind Sports Victoria. This session focuses on 'best practice' and effective communication strategies for guiding individuals who are blind or have low vision. No prior coaching experience is required of volunteers but rather a willingness to learn and be passionately engaged in the program!

A short video clip of the program can be found at:

<https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/media-and-resources/video-gallery/picsar-friends-for-fitness>.



COACHES' PERSPECTIVES ON THE MELBOURNE PARK PROGRAM

Recently a number of the coaches were asked to give their thoughts about various aspects of the program. Below is a summary of their key responses.

Critical considerations for coaching players who are blind or vision impaired

- Ensure the venue and court areas are accessible and safe "without clutter and obstacles that could be tripped over". Providing an appropriate area for players' guide dogs is essential
- Assist in the recruiting of volunteers for the sessions (one volunteer and one coach per player generally works well)
- No two players are the same so take the time to get to know each player and why he/she wants to learn and play the game
- Focus on a player's abilities, keenness and commitment to learn new skills
- Be respectful in all communications with a player ("treat the players as you would want to be treated" and "speak directly to the player")
- In consultation with a player, set targets to be achieved then monitor the progress as well as giving constructive feedback and encouragement at all times
- Make the session fun and take appropriate breaks for conversation, rest and socialising
- Minimise background noise to enable players to focus on hearing the ball bounce/be hit and on your voice
- Give accurate directions using 'the clock face' from a player's perspective (e.g., "move left or right at 10 o'clock" versus "move over there")
- Seek player feedback, comments and/or suggestions prior to, during and after the sessions
- Oversee the transportation arrangements for players to and from the indoor centre

How to make the sessions fun for players

- Assign player to groups/pairs of similar abilities
- Keep it moving' with a variety of games and activities
- Play tie-breaks or count continuous hits over the net for those who want to compete
- Factor in time to socialise and mix with other players and volunteers over a drink or rest in the adjoining lounge area
- Lead by example and enjoy the coaching

Why the program is important to coaches

- There is tremendous satisfaction in helping people who are blind or vision impaired to be physically active and enjoy their tennis
- It is an opportunity to give something back to the game
- It is great fun to interact socially with the players and other volunteers
- It is a valuable and rewarding learning experience that further develops the teaching skills of the coach

What the players get out of the program

The program provides an opportunity for players to:

- Have fun
- Be physically active and improve their fitness levels
- Learn new skills and improve their game
- Socially interact with other players, coaches and volunteers
- Be part of the tennis community and play at a first class tennis venue
- Build on an interest in tennis and sport
- Gain confidence in their abilities and build self-esteem
- Establish and foster a valuable support network

CONCLUSIONS

Traditionally sport (including tennis) has been the domain of the sighted (Vose et al., 2011). Sight loss or vision impairment was frequently cited as a reason for individuals being physically inactive or unable to play sport. Indeed, tennis was a game many blind or vision impaired individuals thought they would never play. All that has now changed with a new approach/philosophy that espouses tennis as an inclusive sport for all, if modifications to the game are made and individuals are willing 'to have a go'. The Melbourne Park Blind Tennis program is an example of what can be achieved. It also enriches the lives of coaches, players and volunteers. The benefits far extend beyond simply learning the game. As reported by a player in a similar UK based program, "I felt the world opening up to me again" (Battarel, 2014, p.243). In this review coaches provide insight into and clues for providing respectful, engaging and fun tennis sessions for people who are blind and vision impaired – not that these insights and clues are necessarily different when coaching other populations of players. Rather, they remind all coaches of the fundamental principles essential to being an outstanding ambassador of our great game of tennis

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