



The modern approach to mini-tennis

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ABSTRACT

This article makes a detailed presentation of the fundamental principles underlying the modern approach to mini-tennis according to the Italian Tennis Federation. The article starts with a consideration on the didactic situation in mini-tennis, followed by a central part which deals with didactic principles that create favourable conditions to structure an optimal learning experience. These fundamental didactic principles are: multi-laterality, multi-form, gradual progression, learning specificity and learn while playing.

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INTRODUCTION

The didactic situation in mini-tennis

Mini-tennis methodology intends to modify the didactic approach of the past concerning the relative importance of the elements that make up what is called the "didactic situation". These elements are: the student, the atmosphere, the teacher and the exercises.

The student, and not the coach (as it used to be), is the central didactic figure and, thus, the real protagonist of the teaching-learning phase. On the other hand, the atmosphere must be adapted to favour learning and, therefore, the climate must be encouraging and agreeable. The typical statement "you get better at school if you feel fine" can also be adapted to a sporting environment. The coach should, in a practical way, adopt the objective of meeting the fundamental needs of the child (i.e. the need to play, to move, the need for simplicity, the need to be loved, etc.). And exercises should be organised in a varied way to meet the demands of the students, modifying the playing practice.

THE DIDACTIC PRINCIPLES OF TENNIS

Some didactic principles have been defined in mini-tennis which, if correctly applied, create favourable conditions to structure an optimal learning experience. These fundamental didactic principles are: multi-laterality, multi-form, gradual progression, learning specificity and learning while playing.



Multi-laterality

This term expresses the didactic proposal which deals with several competency areas at the same time. These are mental, motor, tactical and technical areas. These tasks influence reciprocally, so, the coach should pay special attention to make sure the didactic proposal is not exclusively constrained to the technical aspects, and lays emphasis on the importance of other areas to favour the tennis player balanced growth.

By way of practical example, the introductory phase of the lesson should create the conditions for the students to be available for the learning process (mental area), by means of a good emotional atmosphere. The activation phase will include coordination activities which will state the premises for the optimal progressive learning of the different skills (motor area). In the central phase, the coach will propose activities related to the tactical objectives at the competency level of the students (tactical area), providing relevant indications to guarantee the acquisition of different technical skills (technical area). In the final phase of the lesson, by means of games, and playing activities (Introduction of competitive aspects), it will be possible to guarantee a combination of the different areas considered. It is important to mention that in each of the phases in the lesson it is key to include all areas. For example, in the central part of the tactical activity, part of the activities related to the acquisition of technical skills must be connected to the tactical objectives as well. These activities should be active, fun (to activate a good level of perceived self-efficacy) and must favour the development of the coordination capabilities.

Multi-form

The activities to meet the objectives set for the sessions should always be included in a different way, if possible. Multi-form is two-fold: on the one hand, the idea is to meet the demands of the child who is constantly looking for new experiences, but at the same time, has a limited concentration capability during a long period doing the same exercise over and over again, so, variation is a fundamental requirement for fun. On the other hand, continuous changes of the exercises also aim at experimenting different motor experiences, even trying to reach the same objective, thus, enlarging the motor skills of the person.

The requirement for a multiform proposal is a written plan which the coach can organise the activities with, avoiding stereotyped and repetitive activities. Therefore, the competent coach places the child at the centre of the didactic situation, knowing that there is a contrast between what can be more

comfortable for him as an adult (repeating the same exercises), and what the child likes (to vary the activities as much as possible). We must remember that the didactic principle of multi-form should always be integrated with the specificity, the adaptation and the relevance of each exercise. It is worth noting that the variability of the didactic proposal should not only include different exercises, but it should also try to include more technical skills in the lesson, combining everything as much as possible to produce playing actions.

Gradual progression

The degree of difficulty of the exercises must always consider the cognitive and motor level of the students. Adapting contents and consolidating skills are a fundamental premise for the correct application of this didactic principle.

As a practical example, the coach is in front of the student hand-feeding balls, for the latter to make the technical swing adopted before. Then, the coach will move a little further, facing the student and will continue hand feeding, making the execution simpler.

The technical skill may progress in a global way or use the analytic method according to the competency level of the students. Finally, the coach goes to the other side of the court, facing the student, close to the net, and throws the ball with his racket. Then, the coach interacts with the student, working the technical skill in a rally (it is ideal for the coach to adapt the rhythm of his strokes to the playing level of the student, so as to give him the opportunity to visualise the ball, organise temporarily and improve the execution "timing". The students should be able to progressively apply the skills in the dynamic phase, moving correctly towards the direction, trajectory and speed of the incoming ball.

Specificity of learning

This principle states that skills are generally acquired in a global way, and when applied to the real game situations, they favour optimal learning experiences. An important consequence of this principle is skill learning by means of a didactic interactive proposal. In fact, when setting the conditions in which the student will be able to get the skills during the rally phase, it will be possible to make an important impact on the following factors:

1. Activation of the "positive emotion-positive past images-repetition of the experience" virtuous circle.
2. Development of coordination capabilities.
3. Tactical learning of the game strategy.
4. Technical skill learning of game situations similar to those in which the students will progressively handle the matches.

Learn while playing

Learning and fun should always be considered in a circle. Thus, when the ludic part plays a fundamental role in making the students interested in learning, competency acquisition ("knowing how to do") is guaranteed when there is constant fun during the activity. As to the practical examples, for instance, some students in the training phase, play matches without having the didactic competency to assure a successful experience. These matches are not likely to be fun. On the contrary, if the students learn the different skills in an adapted way, they will understand the relationship between fun and positive results. This is an important condition to activate a level or perceived self-efficacy (including the mental area), indispensable in case you want to continue playing tennis in future years.

CONCLUSION

Figure 1 sums up the contents of the different didactic areas that develop during the mini-tennis stage.



Figure 1. The contents of the different didactic areas that develop in the mini-tennis stage.

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