



Net Generation: A generation of innovation

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ABSTRACT

The status of youth sport in the USA has been in a gradual downturn over the past decade which has resulted in kids not getting the appropriate amount of physical activity. The USTA has recently created Net Generation, a new youth brand, to join other Sporting National Governing Bodies in attracting and retaining more youth and to get them playing sports for a lifetime. Net Generation was created with an American (Athletic) Development Model in mind that conforms to seven participatory principles.

Key words: physical activity, youth brand, Net Generation, sport sampling, early specialization

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INTRODUCTION

As a follow up to the Play and Stay Campaign special monographic article published last year that included a contribution from the United States Tennis Association (USTA) as well as a USTA presentation made at the ITF Participation Workshop in London, we would like the opportunity to share insight into our recently created youth brand Net Generation (www.netgeneration.com). In keeping with a consistent drive to USTA's mission statement of promoting and developing the game of tennis, this article will provide a background on youth sports and move into what Net Generation is as well as how it is positioned as a youth brand within an American (Athletic) Development Model (ADM).

YOUTH SPORTS

Youth sports participation in the USA has changed from child driven, recreational free play for enjoyment to adult-focused, highly organized, and deliberate practice dedicated to sport specific skill development (Caine, D., Maffulli & Caine, C. 2008). An importance is placed on developing and reaching appropriate skill levels to excel at many levels of athletics (Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009; Malina, 2010). This evolution in youth sports may have developed as a result of society's increasing regard for successful athletes, who demand significant recognition and financial rewards for their

exploits. As a result, many children and adolescents participating in sports now have a desire to achieve elite levels (Vaeyens, Gullich, Warr, & Philippaerts 2009). A by-product of this desire to have more athletes move into a performance-oriented direction has been the transition of after school sports programs from physical activities focused on fun and run by volunteers to fully fledged businesses with objectives of producing athletes to earn rewards as a professional athlete or college sports scholarship.

The current state of sports participation in the USA is not a positive one, with participation rates dropping in all sports. Fewer than half of children ages 6 to 11 meet the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation for engaging in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week (Troiano et al., 2010). A common strategy to address this inactivity with youth is through sports activity, especially team sports, as children like playing in groups due to the social interaction. However, fewer kids these days are doing that, as the sports participation rates among preteens have been dropping. The Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) found that 37 percent of kids played team sports on a regular basis in 2018, down from 40 percent in 2013.

In research circles, the benefits of youth sports participation have never been understated and have been proven without question. Recently, there has been a push by researchers in the field of youth sport to promote sports sampling. The emphasis on sports sampling has many benefits as it relates to young age groups. after full maturity. Moreover, sports diversification at a

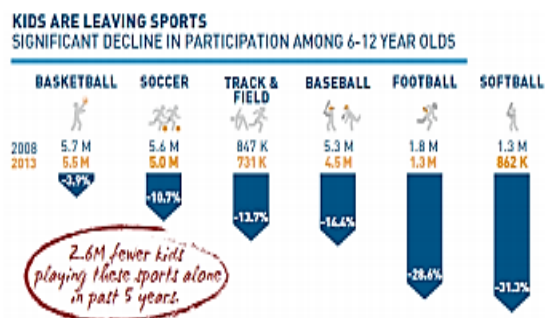


Figure 1. Number of kids leaving sport 6-12 years old (Aspen, 2015).

younger age shows to be positively linked to a longer sports career, a lifetime of physical activity, and an overall state of health and wellness (Cote, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009; LaPrade et al., 2016).

To ensure all kids have an opportunity to grow up fit and strong, sports stakeholders need to eliminate the barriers to sports participation (Aspen, 2013) which include:

- Lack of neighborhood recreation spaces
- Inadequate coaching
- Rising costs and exclusionary league and team policies
- Excessive time demands on families
- Safety concerns
- Cultural norms
- Too few sports options to accommodate the interests of all.



NET GENERATION

It is with the considerations mentioned above that the USTA has taken stock of where they are as a National Governing body involved in impacting youth through a sport. Through marketing and tennis product research, the solution was to develop a youth brand that could unite all tennis programming stakeholders and kids 5-18 years old under one umbrella. That youth brand is called Net Generation.

Net Generation is a celebration of a game where no one sits on the sidelines. Tennis is easy to learn and tailored for all ages and abilities, giving kids a game that will help them build friendships and learn skills they will use for life. Net Generation aims to connect tennis providers with players in a safe environment that focuses on engaging more kids in sports in order to get them playing for a lifetime. To achieve this, all providers are required to complete a Safe Play background screening that the USTA subsidizes. The USTA's willingness to pay for each Net Generation provider's Safe Play background screening demonstrates the importance of protecting our youth in sports in this day and age.

Net Generation's mission is to spread the love of tennis to a new generation by empowering those that will teach them. Coaches, organizers, and teachers can gain access to the expertise of the USTA as they work with leading experts worldwide to develop new play formats, curricula, and digital tools. Net Generation is innovating to reach a new generation and a new era of tennis.

NET GENERATION AS AN ADM

The guiding principles of Net Generation conform to an American (Athletic) Development Model (ADM) that is positioned as the aligning tool for all of USTA's stakeholders from a skill development and competition perspective to achieve its objectives of stemming early specialization, developing multi-sport athletes, and increasing physical activity in youth. As the USTA refines their Long-Term Athlete Development plan, ADM will form a critical component in how the USTA embraces core athlete development principles. The long-term goal is to allow American youth to utilize sport as a path toward an active and healthy lifestyle and to create opportunities to maximize their full potential. These key principles, tailored to the sport of tennis, include:

- Making tennis opportunities more accessible, local, and affordable;
- Providing developmentally appropriate activities that emphasize motor and foundational skills in training and then further developing these skills through competition;
- Cross-promoting with other sports (e.g., soccer, basketball, volleyball,) to facilitate multi-sport participation and athleticism;

- Delivering a fun, engaging, and progressively challenging atmosphere, centered around player and athlete outcomes rather than wins and losses;
- Providing high-quality coaching at all age levels;
- Giving parents the information needed to guide their child's development through tennis;
- Integrating physical education programs in the schools, recreational community programs, and elite competitive programs.

Through an objective of attracting and retaining more athletes and have them play tennis for a lifetime taking into consideration all playing levels a squaring of the pyramid is supported as per the one below created by the Aspen Play Institute (Aspen, 2015).

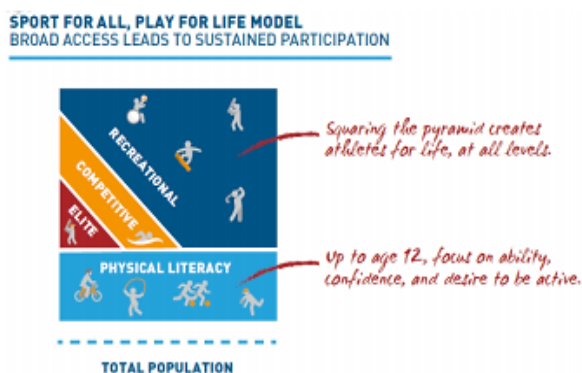


Figure 2. Squaring the pyramid (Aspen, 2015).

NET GENERATION AS A YOUTH BRAND

Four stages have been designed that follow the sport scientific growth and development stages of youth, with the first stage for 0-11 year olds, then pathways of recreational (stage 2: 12-18, stage 3: 18+, stage 4: age for life) and performance (stage 2: Girls 11-13, Boys 11-15, stage 3: Girls 12-16, Boys 15-20, stage 4: Girls 15+. Boys 18+). Under each stage, the constructs of Positive Youth Development of competence, confidence, connection, and character will be expanded upon in developing athlete centered outcomes (Vierimaa, Bruner, & Cote 2018). An additional construct, creativity, has been added in making sure programming is matching the wants and needs of the athlete.

Competence

Competence is defined as the physical, technical, and tactical development of the athlete. This is a combination of skill development (training) and competition.

Skill Development

Skill Development curricula have been developed for three providers: schools, community, and coaches.

Schools: Kindergarten-Grade 12 (8-10 lessons plans have been created for the following grades: K, 1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7-8, 9-12). All activities are designed using the red stage equipment as play will be taking place in a school gym or any flat surface. Turnkey lesson plans were created in conjunction with SHAPE (Society of Health and Physical Educators) to give everyone the tools to teach tennis.

Community: Red (1-3), Orange (1-2), Green (1-2), Yellow (1-2). Six practice and play plans have been created for each level that support a progression format.

Coaches: (Red 1-4), Orange (1-3), Green (1-2), Yellow (1-2). The certified coach practice and play plans were developed with the coach in mind. The curricula are comprehensive, competency based, collaborative, and convenient to use.

Competition

In order to build a strong connection between skill development (curricula) and competition, the USTA competition department is doing research and analysis of the competitive formats of individual and team events to help ensure that they serve their purpose as a transition from training/practice into competition while also developing skills and success.

Through recent research conducted by the University of Central Florida on behalf of the USTA, the objectives as we move forward from a competition point of view will be:

- A competitive pathway that is easy to find and register for that supports local play, is affordable, is a blend of rankings and ratings, and supports multi-sport participation
- Competitive events that are well-run and officiated
- Better trained coaches to help with participation in the competition
- Developing a rating tool that facilitates participation
- Youth progression that is based on skill development
- A team competition pathway for all skill levels.
- Promotion of more local competition play

Confidence

In building confidence and success for players playing tennis, Net Generation curriculum has been designed with a primary focus on developmentally appropriate activities. A significant component of achieving this goal is the use of modified equipment. This strategy is in line with the findings of the research conducted by the ITF of the 10th year anniversaries of the Play and Stay Campaign (Buszard, Farrow, & Westerbeek 2017) that supports the use of modified equipment that aligns more with developmental age and not chronological age.

Coaches Workshops

In trying to build the confidence of each provider in providing success and confidence with the athletes (school teachers, community, and coaches), non-certification training opportunities are delivered to help them better understand the curricula and how to facilitate the best delivery of engagement and enjoyment. Each provider group is offered a workshop that utilizes experiential learning and showcases relevant activities for each level as well as how to coach, manage, and organize practices.

Connection

The ability to find cohesion in the sporting triangle (players, parents, and coaches) is a desire for any sporting organization. According to Vierimaa et al., (2018) connection is the most important construct of Positive Youth Development.

Under the ADM for each stage, the relevant resources for both parent and coach will be produced with the objective to make that experience for each player the best possible and to conform to athlete-centered outcomes.

A Net Generation app has also been produced to provide the opportunity for a coach to connect to their players in a digital platform. The app includes the following:

- Ability to connect consumers with providers
- Progress Portfolio
- Digital Journal
- Skill Level Assessments
- Skill Challenges
- Take Home Practice
- Check-Ins

Character

Within all curricula, a character component has been built in that includes a word of the day and, in some curricula, a pledge. A straightforward way of delivery has been presented throughout the curricula. Understanding of the word of the day are presented as questions that the coaches can use to start the conversation and create better understanding of that word of the day.

Creativity

Under Net Generation, a consistent strategy will be adhered to in identifying and replicating best practices and overall creativity in programming to achieve its guiding principles.

CONCLUSION

Although Net Generation is still in its infancy, the impact it has already provided in the US tennis community has been overwhelming.

Net Generation is an innovative youth brand that is looking to attract and retain more athletes to keep them playing for a lifetime. Net Generation is well positioned to provide the next generation of greats.

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