



# How to better introduce and retain recreational adult tennis players in tennis... the best sport for life, general health and fitness

Dave Miley

## ABSTRACT

This article outlines ways to effectively introduce and retain starter/recreational players in tennis. It outlines the scientifically proven health benefits of tennis and shows how the use of the slower balls to introduce starter adult players to the game will ensure that they can more easily rally successfully and have a beneficial workout akin to interval training as per the research presented. It states that because of the slower balls, it is now easier for coaches to adopt the game based approach methodology to introduce starter adults within an active and dynamic teaching environment. The article differentiates between "tennis competition" and "tennis play" and emphasises the importance for clubs and tennis venues to use ratings and userfriendly formats and scoring to effectively organise social "tennis play" for the recreational players and suggests that this could be positioned as a new global follow up programme to Tennis Xpress. By focusing on the concepts outlined, this can help coaches and tennis venues to retain more adult players in tennis by providing a successful, fun and positive start to the sport and by providing motivation for recreational players to continue playing and trying to improve their level.

**Key words:** Adult, tennis, participation; slower Balls; competition; ratings; Canada  
**Received:** 30 Jan 2016  
**Accepted:** 25 May 2017  
**Corresponding author:** Dave Miley.  
Email: [dave.miley9@gmail.com](mailto:dave.miley9@gmail.com)

## INTRODUCTION

Tennis is one of the best sports. However, current research shows participation in many of the most developed tennis nations facing challenges with significant declines in participation rates (USTA, FFT, KNLTB, ITF). This article outlines some effective ways to better attract and retain adults in tennis.

## BENEFITS OF TENNIS: WHAT SCIENCE SAYS.

There has been considerable research published that has outlined the proven benefits of playing tennis.

Dr Jack Groppe, Cofounder of Johnson & Johnson Human Performance Institute, in an article first published in 1998, outlined "34 Reasons to Play Tennis" and its favourable health and fitness effect even for recreational players.

Further studies, amplify the statements in Dr. Groppe's articles. Pluim et al (2007) showed that recreational players playing an hour of tennis, with similar level players, covered an average distance of 3.17 kilometres and had an average heart rate while playing of 149 beats per minute.

Further research concluded there was a positive association between regular tennis participation and improved aerobic fitness, a leaner body, a more favourable lipid profile, improved bone health and a reduced risk of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality (Pluim et al, 2009).

Kovacs et al (2016) concluded that regular tennis participation can improve aerobic capacity, lower resting heart rate and blood pressure, increase bone density, increase reaction time, improve strength and flexibility, lower body fat, lower cardiovascular risk and mortality risk.

Additional research tracked people participating in different sports over a twenty-year period concluding that if you played tennis or badminton three times per week, you would reduce your risk of heart disease by 56% (Oja et al, 2016).

There can be little doubt that playing tennis at the recreational level is great for Health and Fitness!



### EFFECTIVE PROMOTION OF TENNIS IS NOT ENOUGH!

Promotion of the proven benefits of tennis is very important, as is improved customer service, animation and passion from coaches. However, promotion and better customer service across the sport will not provide the solution to participation challenges if the tennis product that customers get in their first exposure to tennis does not motivate them to return.

There are many examples of well promoted National Association adult participation programmes which have been successful at attracting adults to try the game but with low associated retention rates such as happened with the well promoted USTA Tennis Welcome Centres programme in 2008. If the sport is so great, why are retention rates of adults often so low?

### SLOWER BALLS, SMALLER COURTS, EASY GAME!

Let's start by looking at how the introduction to kids has changed. I was involved with the ITF's very successful Tennis Play and Stay campaign, launched in 2007. The campaign, put together with the help of experts in tennis participation and in conjunction with the tennis industry and with support from the ATP and WTA Tours, led to the subsequent rule change mandating the use of slower balls in 10 and under competition. This changed the way coaches worldwide introduce tennis to young kids. If the competitions used the balls, the coaches had to use the balls in training. The obvious is often the greatest secret and today most coaches worldwide are using the slower

balls with modified courts and racquets making the game easier and more fun for kids (Reid and Farrow, 2010).



The slower balls have also allowed a change in teaching methodology by making it easier for coaches to change from an introductory teaching methodology, often heavy on technical instruction, relatively static teaching situations with little playing of the game to a Game Based Approach, where kids play the game or are given active game based tasks. Coaches then provide relevant instruction and use appropriate slower ball to differentiate the task to ensure success.

### TENNIS NEEDS TO COMPARE WELL TO OTHER SPORTS

Whilst the introduction of tennis to kids has changed dramatically, most coaches worldwide continue to introduce tennis to adults using the regular ball in a relatively static and often overly technical teaching environment.

By the age of 35-40 most people are stopping or reducing significantly their participation in other sports with many turning to tennis. However, the first tennis experience for adults often involves little, if any, time spent rallying, moving, playing the game and getting a workout. These adults are often coming from playing an active and dynamic sport involving a good workout and reasonable success and fun. Tennis needs to compare well with the active sport they come from!

The best and most addictive part of tennis is hitting the ball over the net; hitting the ball back; and then playing the point.....Serve, Rally and Score! This is what got most tennis players hooked and by giving starter players that "taste" of the best thing in tennis as soon as possible, there is more chance to retain them.

### THE SLOWER BALLS ARE NOT JUST FOR KIDS!

As part of the Tennis Play and Stay Campaign, Tennis Xpress was launched in 2012 encouraging coaches to use the slower

balls with starter adults. This starter programme which uses the slower balls in an active and dynamic teaching environment to introduce the game, has proven to be very effective at introducing tennis to adults (e.g. the successful LTA Tennis Xpress programme launched in 2013).

Adults today have shorter attention spans when learning something new and are used to achieving “success” quickly in their leisure activities. It’s vital that the experience for starter tennis players is not only active and fun but also one involving reasonable success from that first lesson.

I have never come across any starter adult that cannot rally with at least one of the slower red, orange or green balls. Using the slower balls ensures that starter players can rally with other starter players and guarantees more success, more rallies, more fun and a great workout. As per the research quoted, starter players rallying with the slower balls find themselves moving 1 or 2 metres in different direction to get to the ball with their heart rates quickly up above 140 beats per minute. They are doing interval training, whilst having fun at the same time.

Tennis Xpress has been successful but has yet to have the degree of impact globally that the 10 and under competition mandate had on the way coaches work with young kids. With no rule in place for coaches working with starter adults, extensive promotion is needed to change coach behaviour.

### APPROPRIATE PLAY/COMPETITION DRIVES THE SPORT

Once players are introduced to tennis and decide they want to continue in the sport, tennis faces another challenge to motivate them to stay in the game. It’s often said that “competition drives the sport”. I believe it’s more correct to say that “appropriate play/ competition drives the sport”.

There is a big difference to me between “play” and “competition”. The word “play” is associated with fun. “Competition” is more serious and can intimidate recreational players. “Tennis competition” results are usually recorded. In “tennis play” you keep score and play the game but the results are not recorded and so there is less pressure and more chance for fun.

Many tennis venues today are, in my opinion, driven too much by coaching. They are often good at organising coaching but usually provide competitive opportunities only for the small number of more advanced players. They are not very good at organising “play” opportunities for their recreational players. To effectively retain starter players in tennis, it’s important not only to introduce the game effectively, but also to adapt follow up “tennis play” to the needs and lifestyles of recreational players by organising user-friendly play opportunities in combination with the slower balls. Ideally the “play” should involve a social element where the participants get to meet and mix with other recreational players and be held at a time that suits the players concerned (ITF Tennis Xpress, what adults

want, 2012). Perhaps a new programme “Tennis Xpress Play” could be a follow up to Tennis Xpress?

The rules of tennis allow many different formats and scoring systems and these can be used effectively to better retain recreational players (Crespo and Miley, 1999). They also allow the use of the green ball, which now resembles a regular yellow ball, on the full court. The availability of this ball for adult recreational play is another challenge. The Tennis manufacturers and the national tennis federations need to work together effectively to not only promote the green ball but also to improve the availability in retail sports shops and tennis venues.

### RATINGS

The introduction and use of ratings for all recreational players can also be a very effective tool at the club/micro level. Once a player has been introduced to tennis and has progressed to playing with the green or regular yellow ball, they should be given a club rating to help them find similar level players to play with and to provide a pathway that motivates them to continue to play and improve.

### TENNIS CANADA-A GREAT EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE!

One of the few nations among the developed tennis nations that has seen significant increases in tennis participation is Canada (the number of Canadians playing tennis at least once increased from 5,055,000 in 2012 to 6,532,000 in 2016 (Charlton Strategic Research Inc, 2016).

### CONCLUSION

Tennis has proven to be one of the best, if not the best, sport for life and general health and fitness. Tools exist today to make the introduction of tennis to starter adult players more active and dynamic, providing reasonable success and a good workout in playing the game from the first lesson.

Coaches should use the slower balls and game based methodology to ensure an active, successful and fun introduction to the game. The tennis venue should provide, for the recreational adult players, user-friendly scoring and play formats in a friendly and social setting, using the green ball and in conjunction with ratings, to better retain players introduced.

If tennis venues and coaches worldwide focus on these important tools to attract and retain starter/recreational players and tennis continues to promote effectively the positive benefits of the sport, I believe there is no limit to the sports growth worldwide!

### REFERENCES

Charlton Strategic Research Inc. (2016). Tennis Canada Participation statistics.

Crespo, M., and Miley, D. (1999). ITF Competition Formats Manual. London. ITF Ltd

Farrow, D., & Reid, M. (2010). The effect of equipment scaling on the skill acquisition of beginning tennis players. *Journal of Sports Sciences*, 28(7), 723-732. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02640411003770238>

Fernandez-Fernandez, J., Sanz-Rivas, D., Sanchez-Muñoz, C., Pluim, B. M., Tiemessen, I., & Mendez-Villanueva, A. (2009). A comparison of the activity profile and physiological demands between advanced and recreational veteran tennis players. *The Journal of Strength & Conditioning Research*, 23(2), 604-610. <https://doi.org/10.1519/JSC.0b013e318194208a>

Groppel, J. (1998). Tennis for the Health of it. 34 Reasons to Play Tennis. USPTA.

ITF. (2000). Research Participation Surveys, 2000-2012.

ITF. (2010). Tennis 10s promotional leaflets and implementation manual.

ITF. (2010). Tennis Xpress promotional leaflets and implementation manual.

Kovacs M, Pluim B, Groppel J, Crespo M, Roetert P, Hainline B, Miller S, Reid M, Pestre B, De Vyllder M, Dunn N, Miley D, Jones T. (2016). Health Wellness and Cognitive Performance Benefits of Tennis. *Journal of Medicine and Science in Tennis*.

Oja, P., Kelly, P., Pedisic, Z., Titze, S., Bauman, A., Foster, C., ... & Stamatakis, E. (2016). Associations of specific types of sports and exercise with all-cause and cardiovascular-disease mortality: a cohort study of 80 306 British adults. *Br J Sports Med*, bjsports-2016. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2016-096822>

Pluim, B. M., Staal, J. B., Marks, B. L., Miller, S., & Miley, D. (2007). Health benefits of tennis. *British journal of sports medicine*.431. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjism.2006.034967>

Statistical research on participation in USA, Netherlands, and France, USTA, TIA Talking Points report, Sports Marketing Surveys, 2016; KNLTB, Membership figures and Mulier Institute report 2016; FFT membership figures and club participation report, 2016.

RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



Copyright (c) 2017 Dave Miley



This text is under a [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](#)

You are free to Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format - and Adapt the content - remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially under the following terms:

Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

[CC BY 4.0 license terms summary](#) [CC BY 4.0 license terms](#)