



# Growing a bigger participation base: the LTA's Tennis For Kids programme

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LTA: La sede oficial del tenis en Gran Bretaña

## ABSTRACT

This article outlines the LTA's Tennis For Kids Programme, which was launched after Great Britain's Davis Cup victory in 2015. Since then, the initiative has seen over 35,000 new children take up tennis and 15,000 continue to play. This article discusses the approach to coach training, lesson plans and also considers more cost-effective approaches for rolling out a similar initiative to get more people playing more often.

**Key words:** Participation, initiative, Tennis For Kids, Beginner tennis

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## INTRODUCTION

At the heart of the LTA's strategic plan is their mission; 'Get more people playing tennis more often'. With many sports in the UK in decline (Sport England, 2017), there is a real need for governing bodies to demonstrate the benefits of their sport and roll out initiatives that capture those benefits with a view to growing a bigger participation base.

Recent research has highlighted numerous health benefits associated with tennis. Specifically, people who choose to play tennis appear to have improved aerobic fitness, a lower body fat percentage, a more favourable lipid profile, a reduced risk for developing cardiovascular disease, and improved bone health (Pluim et al., 2007). More recent research has also suggested that tennis players live longer through the associated health benefits.

Research by the LTA has shown that in order to create lifelong participants, it is critical that the individual initiates tennis at a young age, preferably before the age of 10 to significantly increase the likelihood of lifelong participation. Very few adults learn to play tennis from scratch, and therefore tennis has to be learned at a young age for there to be any chance of retaining or winning back adults later in life (LTA, 2016). By acquiring the tennis skills when young, people have the foundation to stay in or return to the game whenever they choose. Indeed, critical windows for coordination development

occur throughout childhood (Sackey-Addo, Perez & Crespo, 2016), further re-enforcing the need for children to begin playing tennis (and other sports) at an early age.

## THE TENNIS FOR KIDS CAMPAIGN

The Davis Cup victory in November 2015 by Great Britain created an opportunity to inspire the next generation of players in the UK. From this opportunity, the Tennis For Kids campaign was created. The campaign was a large scale participation initiative to get 10,000 new children playing tennis for the first time in order to design and build a lasting Davis Cup legacy. Those 10,000 children, new to tennis, would receive six hours of free coaching across a six week course from qualified coaches. Participants who were aged between 5 and 8 years old would also receive a free racket upon completion of the course.

## TENNIS FOR KIDS CAMPAIGN: KEY STEPS

1. Coach application: All LTA accredited coaches were invited to apply to be part of the 'Tennis For Kids' campaign by submitting a video outlining why they wanted to be involved. Over 900 coaches applied in year one with 875 attending one of the 16 coach training days held across the UK.



Image 1. Coaches trying out exercises from the six week course, as part of the official coach training days.

2. Coach training: Coaches were required to attend a four hour training day workshop which covered the 6 week on-court lesson plans, how to manage bookings for the course, and how to promote their courses locally. A team of mentors to inspire and share their expertise at the training days was recruited, including Davis Cup Captain Leon Smith, former British number 1 players Annabel Croft, Anne Keothavong & Greg Rusedski. The training days were incredibly successful with a real sense of energy and excitement coupled with a collective purpose to seize the moment post Davis Cup.



Image 2. The booking website for parents to find their local Tennis For Kids session.

3. Coach delivery: Coaches, working with their venues, set-up courses at any point in the year between April and September to deliver the six weeks of lessons. Courses were advertised and booked online via ClubSpark – an online booking engine. At the training days the coaches were briefed off court about the delivery requirements, which included how to take bookings online. Having a website for bookings allowed the LTA to effectively

promote and market the campaign with a national media launch all directing parents to one place online.

4. Conversion: Coaches and venues worked together to ensure that parents were given an incentive to continue playing tennis beyond the six week course. Offers included half price club membership or percentage discounts on the standard programme running at the venue.

## THE 6 WEEK LESSON PLANS

A panel of experienced coaches developed a set of lesson plans. The purpose of the sessions were to develop sound athletic and tennis fundamentals, including 'send and receive' skills, throwing, catching and general coordination development. The objective of the course was to guide beginner children to be able to serve, rally and score by the end of the six weeks. Within the lessons, emphasis on large group organisation was also given to ensure sessions had maximum involvement and looked like tennis.



Image 3. The lesson plan structure for the six week course.

## RESULTS FROM THE CAMPAIGN

In year one, the target was to recruit 10,000 new boys and girls and retain 10%. This was exceeded with 13,250 kids booking on to a course and 43% signing up to a coaching programme after the course or joining a club membership. As a result of the huge success in 2016 the LTA committed to the campaign in 2017 and doubled the target to 20,000 children receiving a free 6 week course and a free racket. From a promotional perspective, a national launch saw '#TennisForKids' trending 7th on twitter and within 2 weeks of the launch the target of 20,000 bookings had been achieved. At the time of writing this article 22,200 kids are booked on to a course with thousands more on waiting lists.

In year 2 the objective is to see an increase in retention (up to 50%) after the courses. To help achieve this coaches and clubs must work together to agree a strong follow on offer on either coaching programme or membership. To help target the parents of the kids booking on to courses the LTA provided

Tennis Xpress support packs (adult rackets and green balls) to circa 500 coaches – which was well received by coaches and parents.

### IMPLEMENTING A TENNIS FOR KIDS CAMPAIGN WITH LIMITED RESOURCE

Tennis For Kids contains a number of key elements that help secure the programme's success. However, one or more of the elements can be scaled back or made more financially feasible for nations with limited resource. Below are a number of recommendations:

- Venues can provide the free racket and equipment instead of the national association – this will create a bond with the venue and potentially increase conversion after the course, whilst dramatically reducing costs for the governing body
- Instead of a centralised online booking engine, venues can take phone bookings to remove the cost of building an online booking platform. The National Association website should simply list the venues that are taking part and provide contact details
- Start small – with 10 key clubs taking part, 100 new children can begin playing tennis. Once the high conversion rates are known, it is likely more venues will buy into the initiative for year 2.

### CONCLUSION

Tennis For Kids was an initiative that addressed grass roots participation by capitalising on the success at the top end of the game. Through close collaboration with the coaching workforce, a new generation of children experienced tennis under expert guidance of qualified coaches. It is hoped that the campaign will continue to inject a new wave of children into tennis each year, to ensure lifelong participants in the game.

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