



Galaxie Tennis: A case study

Bernard Pestre

French Tennis Federation

ABSTRACT

Tennis teaching, like all teaching, has evolved considerably since the 1970s, a time when it was not uncommon to see up to twenty players, children or adults, on the same tennis court in front of an instructor, “shadowing” tennis strokes without ever hitting a ball or playing rallies with a partner. Gradually, the idea that technique is only a means to an end, the game of tennis itself, has gained ground. Now, in most tennis schools around the world, one can see children “playing tennis” from the very first sessions. This goes hand in hand with the evolution of society and the “democratic”, individual-oriented, empathic and interactive teaching style (Reid, Crespo, 2009), which is now prevalent in sports teaching.

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Corresponding author:

Bernard Pestre. French Tennis Federation

Email: bpestre@fft.fr

INTRODUCTION

Origins of the “Galaxie” programme

In 2014, the French Tennis Federation (FFT) launched a brand-new tennis school programme called “Galaxie Tennis”. The goal of the programme is to retain children in clubs and encourage them to play competitive tennis, while its logo is an evocation of the game, the competition and the speed of the game.



Figure 1: Lou, Zoé, Arthur and Hugo are the four characters that represent the different age groups.

The concept is very similar to the ITF’s “Tennis Play and Stay” programme. In order to be aligned with the ITF, the FFT decided to keep the Red, Orange, Green and Yellow stages which give an indication of the child’s progress. All these elements are included in the teacher’s booklet (2014).

Two stages were added to ensure acquisition of the initial technicaltactical elements:

- The White stage • 8 m court; ball is rolled on the ground; no net.

- The Purple stage • 11 m court; game is played with “Le Petit Tennis” balls using court width; 0.5 m net height.

The next formats are identical to the “Tennis Play and Stay” ones:

- The Red stage • Game is played in the service boxes using felt or foam balls; net is lowered as much as possible (maximum height of 0.8 m).

- The Orange stage • Game is played on an 18 m court with orange balls; 0.8 m net height. It is worth noting that the FFT recommends - the use of the entire width of the singles court.

- The Green stage • Game is played on a 23.77 m court with green balls; standard net.

Each learning stage is characterised by tactical, technical and behavioural acquisitions.

These acquisitions are validated by the teacher during so-called “Game and Matches” days because game and opposition are the two factors that should serve as a guide to teachers’ technical contributions to children. Organised as part

of the tennis school programme, these “Game and Matches” one-day events are essential in many ways.

CHALLENGES

It's no secret that the FFT, like many other national tennis associations, has seen a decline in the number of its younger members for some years now. This situation can be explained by the following two factors:

- A low retention rate of youngsters in the tennis school programme: nationwide, only 63% of members aged 5-10 in 2015 renewed their membership in 2016. While some regions have a retention rate above 75%, others retain less than 45% of their members. Statistics relating to young girls are even more alarming than those relating to boys, since their retention is 10% lower.
- This decrease in membership renewals is no longer compensated by the recruitment of new youngsters. The “Galaxie Tennis” programme does not aim to solve all problems. However, we are convinced that retention of youngsters is inextricably linked to the progress they make and is therefore dependent on teaching quality. The “Galaxie Tennis” teaching philosophy is based on the appropriate use of the White, Purple, Red, Orange and Green courts. By “appropriate”, we mean that equipment (balls and racquets) must be adapted to each court type. Furthermore, it is essential to stick to the skills that need to be acquired.

These skills are assessed during the five “Game and Matches” days, which are dedicated to matchplay and assessment; these one-day events take place as part of the tennis school programme during regularly scheduled sessions with the participation of students from the same group.

OVERVIEW OF THE “GAME AND MATCHES” DAYS

- These events create a favourable environment for the introduction of children to competition. Depending on their level, they learn to recognise the difference between a ball that is “in” and a ball that is “out”, and then how to count points, play a tie-break, and so on. But the main purpose of these one day events is to give children the opportunity to play several short matches and compete with others.
- These days serve to highlight the skills acquired during the teaching cycle that just ended, and empower young players, encouraging them to keep improving. This way, the cycle (White, Purple, Red, Orange or Green) can be validated.
- They also enable children to be ranked according to national standards; these children can then take part in workshops organised with girls and boys of similar level or in official competitions, starting from the Orange stage.

- All children receive from their teacher a passport that they will keep throughout their “Galaxie” experience, from the White court to the Green court. The teacher fills in the passport by selecting the different skills acquired at the conclusion of each “Game and Matches” day. Every time a child progresses to the next stage, the person in charge at the club records this in the national tennis club management system.

Careful teaching, matchplay, skill assessment, and the passport system are key components of the programme. If the club strictly follows the “Galaxie” principles, children and their parents will join in. Several studies have shown that friendly competition, when introduced properly, is the best way to motivate children to pursue an activity. A fun and early introduction to matchplay makes the transition to competition smoother and easier for children. This is especially true with young girls who usually don't like comparing themselves to their friends (Marc Renoult, 2014).

Children advance to the next stage when the skills required in the current stage have been validated.

Below are examples of suggested match situations that help coaches validate if the necessary skills have been developed:

White stage

8 m COURT / White inflatable ball rolled on the floor/ Middle of the court is visible on the ground.

First to 3 goals / Maximum duration: 5 min.

Purple stage

11 m COURT / Purple “Le Petit Tennis” ball / Overhead first serve / Alternate serving.

First to 7 points / Maximum match duration: 9 min.

Red stage

12.8 m court (service boxes) / Red felt or foam ball.

Singles play – 2 courts side by side: 4 players on a half court / 2 umpires / 1 tie-break / Maximum match duration: 10 min.

Doubles play – 1 court / 4 players / 1 umpire / 2 tie-breaks / At least 3 rotations / Minimum of 2 matches per team.

Orange stage

18 m court / Orange ball.

Singles play – First to 2 games: deciding point at deuce; tie-break at 1-1.

Maximum match duration: 15 min.

Doubles play – 1 court (no tramlines).

First to 2 games: deciding point at deuce; tie-break at 1-1. 3 rotations of 15 min. each.



Green stage

23.77 m COURT / Green ball.

Singles play – Players are responsible for making the calls / 1-set matches: first to 4 games / deciding point at deuce / tie-break at 3-3.

Doubles play – 1 court with no tramlines / players are responsible for making the calls / 2 sets of 4 games / deciding point at deuce / tie-break at 3-3.

At each stage, the tennis coach checks if the child has developed the necessary skills in the following four fields:

- Behaviour
- Rules and scoring
- Tactical elements
- Technical elements

CONCLUSION

Tennis development depends on the ability to retain children after they join a club. The atmosphere created by the club managers and the quality of the facilities will of course contribute to the fun those children will have spending long hours with friends, but the key to developing a long-lasting interest for the game will always be the feeling of improving and turning into a “real” tennis player. The early introduction to matchplay plays down the importance of competition. Playing many matches with friends from the same group and, later on, from the same tennis school, gives young players the

opportunity to see their progress and compete with others without feeling too much stress.

With the “Game and Matches” concept, it is possible to give relevance to continuous technical learning throughout the year. The more skilled children and those who are natural-born competitors quickly stand out from the others during those one-day events and eventually join training centres that suit their needs.

Other children, as we have noticed, understand the importance of what they learn and progress at their own pace playing a game style that is right for them.

Below are descriptions of the skills that children need to develop to advance to the next stage.

SEE ANNEX I

REFERENCES

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RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



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ANNEX I

	WHITE	PURPLE	RED	ORANGE	GREEN	
TRANSITION FROM ONE STAGE TO THE NEXT: CHILD DEMONSTRATES THAT HE IS ABLE TO... Note: Any skill acquired on a court must remain so on the next courts.						
BEHAVIOUR	Shake the opponent's (and umpire's) hand at the end of the match	Call balls "out" and the score aloud		Manage potential disputes with the opponent	Respect the opponent and maintain an appropriate behaviour at all times	
RULES AND SCORING	Wait for the other player to be ready before starting the point	Identify the difference between a ball that is "in" and a ball that is "out"	Play a tie-break	Count points in "game" mode	Apply the rules independently	
	Take turns starting points	Follow and remember the score				
TACTICAL ELEMENTS	Get in position at the start of the point	Hit several shots successively	Move the opponent around	Attack by playing faster	Use his best shot	
	Hit the ball to where the opponent is not		Make volleys	Defend by slowing down the game		
	Recover court position			Use different spins		
			Hit the 1 st serve with more speed			
			Be aggressive on the 2 nd shot			
			Get in position at the start of the point in singles			
	Get in position at the start of the point in doubles	Poach in doubles				
TECHNICAL ELEMENTS	Service	Adopt the right stance	Serve using the trophy position	Serve with slice	Hit slice or topspin 2 nd serves	
		Hit the ball overhead	Maintain balance			
	Baseline play	Hold the racquet at the end of the handle	Assume a ready position on the service return with the free hand on the throat of the racquet	Hold the racquet with both hands between shots	Assume a dynamic ready position with relaxed shoulders and arms	
		Hold the racquet with both hands at the start of the point				
		Play forehands and backhands using both sides of the racquet face	Hit the ball in front of the body on the forehand	Prepare the FH shot with the racquet head above the hand	Follow through the shot	
		Hit both one- and two-handed backhands	Hit the ball in front of the body on the backhand	Prepare the BH shot with the racquet head above the hand		
	Net play		Hit the ball in front	Hit the ball in front while moving forward		
	Footwork	Adjust to the incoming ball	Hit while maintaining stability	Remain dynamic between shots	Slide on clay	Accelerate / decelerate
					Recover balance / Be ready for the next shot	