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The contribution of tennis to motor literacy from 4 to 6 years of age

Josep Campos-Rius[a] & Martín Rocca[b]

[a]Ramon Llull University, Barcelona. Spain. [b]Tennis Club Girona, Girona, Spain.

ABSTRACT

Tennis contributes to the motor literacy of its practitioners from the early stages of training. The adaptation of equipment, space and methodology should allow the athlete to learn in a simple way and close to their skills that are in the process of progressive development. General and specific coordination play a relevant role in all this process as they will allow the athlete a greater and better ability to adapt and resolve new learning situations, and this can be facilitated with multisport practices. We must also consider the social and emotional aspects that accompany any process of improvement in tennis, respecting the rhythms and learning styles of each athlete.

Key words: motor literacy, mini-tennis, sports initiation.

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Corresponding author: Josep Campos. Email: josepcr@blanquerna.edu

INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the initiation to tennis in the stages of four to six years. This is a stage of child development in which the development of coordination skills begins, the lateralization process and the body scheme is assimilated.

We start from the reference of the publication of the book "Tennis Base - Mini Players" (Rocca & Campos-Rius, 2020), which brings together methodological orientations of tennis in the stages of initiation with a broad and globalizing vision considering the motor literacy and long-term development of the athlete.

The proposal recognizes key aspects such as motor literacy, the role of coordination in the training of the athlete and the adaptation of the material, space, and methodology in the process of teaching and learning tennis, and the social and emotional aspects of the teaching and learning process.

MOTOR LITERACY IN THE INTRODUCTION TO TENNIS

The introductory stage of tennis should initiate motor or physical literacy which, according to Whitehead (2010), is "the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to sustain physical activity throughout life".

At this stage it is very important to know what are the characteristics of young athletes and work together in coordination with the activities done in children's physical education carried out in educational centres (Solanellas, Campos & Morejón, 2000; Buszard, Reid, Masters & Farrow, 2016; ITF, 1998; Hebert, Landin & Solmon, 2004; Luiz, Rodrigues & Aparecida, 2019; Sánchez-Alcaraz, 2013; Temple & O'Connor, 2005; Tomov & Ivanov, 2012; Torres & Carrasco, 2005).

Therefore, as stated by several authors (Avilés, Campos & Abarca, 1996; Crespo, 2002; Douvis, 2005; Elderton, 2009: Goodway, Ozmun & Gallahue, 2019; Sanz, 2012; Zetou, Koronas, Athanailidis & Koussis, 2012), it is important to provide children with varied experiences that foster creativity through discovery and experimentation with the material, their own body and the practice space.

The multisport practice in teaching is a very valid means for the development of general coordination to be able to generate transfers between different sports and racket sports to end up in the practice of tennis (Letort, 2002). It can be raised from different criteria: variants of tasks, with diverse material and with limitations in the execution of the actions to be performed (Aznar, 2014; Fitzpatrick, Davids & Stone, 2017; Sahan, Erman & Ertekin, 2018; Sanz, 2017).

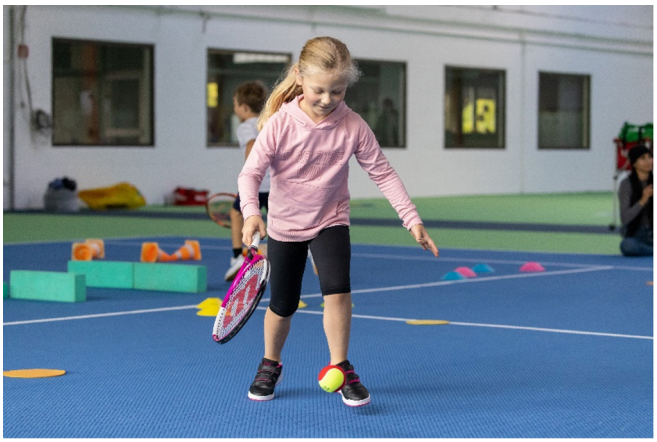

Figure 1. *Experimenting with the material and the playing space.*

THE ROLE OF COORDINATION IN THE TRAINING OF THE ATHLETE

Of particular importance is the work on general dynamic coordination through walking, running and jumping as the most effective skills; and quadruped, crawling and climbing as less effective skills, as well as propulsion and transport (Temple & O'Connor, 2005).

As per the specific dynamic coordination, when we incorporate the ball, different body segments and/or extremities can intervene. In this case, to improve the eye-hand coordination we should work on throws, catches, drops, hits, and drives; and when the lower limbs are involved, we will work on hits, deflections, drives and stops. In eye-head coordination we work on deviations, driving and stops (Figure 1).

The proposal of motor circuits allows the children to be in constant movement, the time of motor commitment is high, and the learning can be greater.

ADAPTATION OF THE EQUIPMENT, THE SPACE, AND THE METHODOLOGY

Several authors (Letort, 2002; Crespo, Reid & Miley, 2004; Vesseaux, 2003) state that a child is not a miniature adult. This is why the literature provides evidence on the need to adapt the demands of adult tennis to the possibilities of the child, and this is observed in the size, weight and shape of the rackets, balls, dimensions and shapes of the playing space, and the aspects related to communication and the teaching methodology (Hammond & Smith, 2006; Kachel, Buszard & Reid, 2015; Dillard, 2003).

The shape of the playing field and its dimensions, as well as the modification of the height and location of the net or obstacle to overcome are elements that facilitate learning in different situations and allow the global vision and the sense of the game.

Goodway, Ozmun & Gallahue (2019) describe what the general characteristics of athletes in formative stages are: on a cognitive level, the imagination they possess, the facility to express thoughts and ideas verbally, and their eagerness to investigate and discover; on an affective developmental level, egocentrism, and fear of novel situations; and in relation to motor development, they tire quickly.

At a methodological level, rows are reduced or eliminated, baskets are not used, and balls are not thrown in a repetitive way. By doing this, it is possible to work at the same time with many children by using the stations, with self-throwing and working in pairs or small groups.

The initial parts of the sessions are planned without racquet to work on displacements and mobility; the throwing of balls with both hands to targets at ground level and hitting with racquet to different targets is encouraged.

Progressively, when the children have more skill and precision, you can ask them to hit the ball while moving towards the net and then over it, emphasising the importance of touching the ball softly, without excessive power, and setting targets at a short distance.

RED BALL GROUP

HAND THROWS

Allow children to begin throwing with both hands to master the direction, the necessary momentum, and prepare to make a similar motion with the racquet.

RACQUET DRIVING

Instruct them to carry the ball near their body, on the ground. In this way, they can also be left to explore ways of taking the racket, which they will adjust to their need and comfort.

PUSH WITH THE RACKET

If we ask them to push the ball towards a target with the racket, they will be working not only on the direction, but also on the orientation of the body at impact.

LET IT BOUNCE AND HIT

By letting them throw their own ball to hit a forehand, we are teaching them how to position themselves to hit, crossing the free arm (shoulder rotation), and gain autonomy from a very early age.

HIT IN THE DIRECTION OF THE COACH

Giving them a target will always keep them focused on the shot they are going to hit and learn to control their shots from the start. Every ball they hit should have a target and a meaning.

INTERACTION WITH PEERS

Having always worked with control of direction and power, the interaction between partners will be facilitated. Tennis is a sport of exchanges, the sooner we achieve this, the sooner our students will be able to feel they are PLAYERS.

Figure 2. *Coordinative skills in the early stages.*

Figure 3. *Equipment adaptation during play.*

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF THE INITIATION STAGE OF TENNIS BETWEEN THE AGES OF 4 AND 6 YEARS OLD.

From the perspective of attention and emotions, it is necessary to know the children, to understand the language we should use with them, for how long to talk to them, what kind of skills and abilities we can work on, and which ones we can't to avoid frustration.

Tennis is taught and trained as a group but is competed individually. During the sessions, the coaches give instructions, but during the matches, they cannot talk to the players. In other words, we train in a different way than we compete. That is why it is important that the player knows how to understand the game (Sánchez-Alcaraz, 2013). To achieve this, it is necessary that they first know their capabilities, develop their skills, and then focus their attention on mastering the tools that facilitate their task.

We must try to ensure that every child who starts to practice this sport experiences joy in doing it, feels capable and is part of a group.

The work should be progressive, based on three key concepts: fun, creativity, and dynamism.

- Fun: it is essential that the children find in the classes a space for relaxation and happiness. But always, the activities carried out in search of fun must have a useful basis and content.
- Creativity: we should know how to exploit it, and allow children to express themselves freely within the proposed activities. Do not robotize, allow exploration, create different situations so that the routine does not cause boredom. The coaches should also do the activities, propose new and challenging exercises, both for themselves and for the pupils.
- Dynamism: classes should be very active. Repetitive exercises, focused on technical gestures, tend to bore children, and make the session lethargic. Stations, motor circuits, cooperative work, etc. There are many ways to keep the students in constant movement.

On the other hand, all tasks should be adapted to the individual abilities of the players. That is to say, do not set the same objectives for the whole group. Do not let a difficulty become a frustration.

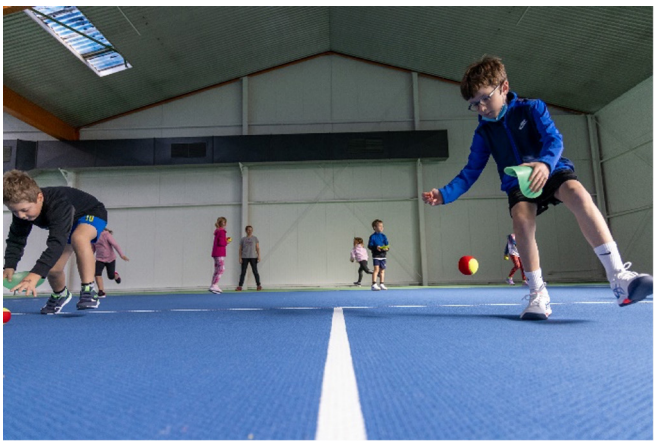

Figure 4. *The recreational and social component in the initiation to tennis*

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to emphasize the need to put the athlete at the centre, especially in the early stages of their involvement in tennis. Motor literacy must allow them to practice our sport for many years, and this is easier when they have a good multi-sport motor base that supports the specific skills of tennis.

The adaptation of the sport to the athlete (and not the other way around) allows learning to be richer, deeper, and longer lasting. And the mastery of methodological aspects that facilitate environments and climates of attention, continuous improvement and fun will also allow the development and training to be more efficient and effective.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS AND FUNDING

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