



# Growing and maintaining a successful tennis business backed by a sound framework

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## ABSTRACT

The USTA National Campus was recently awarded ITF Gold Level recognition, making it one of three facilities worldwide to have that distinction. One of the major factors for its success is the creation of a shared philosophical vision that underpins all efforts towards being best in class. This article will discuss and highlight practical implications that have served to help the National Campus continue promoting and developing the game of tennis.

**Key words:** framework, American Development Model, practical outcomes, tennis programming.

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## INTRODUCTION

To properly frame this article, context is essential. The authors are based at the United States Tennis Association's National Campus (USTA National Campus, n.d.). Located in Orlando, Florida, it has been affectionately coined as the Home of American Tennis (HOAT). With recent organizational restructuring, it has become the national headquarters of the USTA. Notwithstanding, it is also a public facility, hosts large nationwide events, and houses USTA Player and Coach Development (PCD). Relatively new, it opened in January of 2017 and continues to garner nationwide recognition for best in class tennis event hosting with events such as: NCAA Championships, USTA League National Championships, Sectional Championships, and Pro Circuit Events (ATP/WTA/ITF). However, although it is a large facility, there is a tennis programming business that operates just as any other club. As a matter of fact, the multitude of weekly events presents challenges for a Tennis Director that other clubs do not experience as there is competition for court space.

The National Campus (NC) is rather unique in that it has 100 courts that represent various surfaces and other racquet sports. There are three types of hard courts; Plexicushion, Decoturf, and Rebound Ace. There is a total of 36 clay courts of which 30 are Har-Tru, with the other six composed of red clay. There is a family zone with a combination of 36' and 60' courts. Moreover, there are four Padel courts and four Pickleball courts. The NC also serves as the home for both the Men's and Women's tennis teams from the University of Central Florida. There are also robust programs for military veterans, wheelchair tennis, and adaptive tennis. In 2020 the NC was awarded the ITF's Gold Level Recognition National Training Center, one of only three worldwide (ITF, 2020).

Although the authors are drawing upon decades of experience in running facilities all over the world, many of the practical examples presented in this article derive from the day-to-day operations of the NC. Although the NC is a one-of-a-kind facility, a large portion of these best practices



were engendered due to the current Pandemic environment. Tennis in the USA, and in most parts of the world, has benefited from increased rates of participation (ITF, 2021). A large focus for most facilities, including the NC, is attraction and retention (Allen et al., 2021). In just the USA, the Physical Activity Council 2021 study reported that four million new players were introduced to the sport during the pandemic (USTA, 2021). With that said, much attention is being put towards how to keep those players in the game for a lifetime.

## FACILITY FRAMEWORK

First and foremost, the philosophy of the facility needs to be identified. Typically, this is done by creating a mission and vision statement. Mission statements tend to be more about the day to day goals of an institution where the vision statement leans more towards an ultimate philosophical goal (Rebore, 2014). Once identified by management, all staff and consumers should be educated on this overall philosophy. Once pinned, every decision and action must be related to the mission and vision so that all stakeholders will participate in a shared commitment.

The program philosophy of the USTA National Campus is to adhere to the main tenants of the USTA American Development Model (ADM) (Davies, 2020; USOPC, 2021; USTA, 2020). One, in particular, is to engage in developmentally-appropriate play and competition. In other words, a clear understanding of an athlete's developmental level is far more important than placing constraints based on age. In doing so, coaches can appropriately tailor training, skills, and tactics over a series of lesson plans for individual players whether in group or private sessions. To be successful, all participants are provided the opportunity to first learn foundational motor skills and then tennis-specific skills before entering a competition. To ensure long-term sustainable success, participants must be given adequate time, knowledge, and experience to develop these essential building blocks for success.

Underpinned by the notion of developmentally-appropriate, a Free 30 program was started (USTA, n.d.). It is a free introductory program for anyone looking to participate in NC programs. The prospective new player is able to take a session with one of the head tennis professionals. The purpose of the session is to give the player or family an introduction to the campus and identify where they fit in programming along an appropriate developmental pathway. This way, players start from an appropriate, level-based program, which provides a better first experience. Over the past 18 months, since inception, the NC averages one Free 30 a day. Thus far, the conversion rate to paid programming has averaged 60%. Moreover, 50% have taken another step further into paid programming with a frequency of twice a week.

In regards to developmentally-appropriate coaching, the next logical step is to plan ahead for entrance into competition. In order to retain players, it is essential that coaches guide new players into competitive formats that are less intimidating. With that said, the competitive concierge concept was created. There are various coaches that run competitions using modified internal formats along with USTA-sanctioned traditional competitive formats. While managing events, coaches are able to assess the formats of competition and level of play compatibility. Certain coaches have been identified that parents can access when their child is ready for competition. Or alternatively, coaches advise the parents when their child is ready to seek out the competition concierge. The Free 30 and competition concierge are practical ways to adhere to the USTA's ADM philosophy of developmentally-appropriate play and competition. These two programs have proven to not only assist in following through with the philosophy but also helping with retention of new players.

### COACHES PATHWAY

Currently, in the USA, due to the increase of four million new players as a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, there is a lack of qualified coaches (PAC Study, 2021). For the first time in hiring history, some tennis facilities are offering a hiring bonus in order to attract coaches. Not only is there a need for programs to retain players but now an objective for facilities to attract and retain coaches.

The USTA National Campus has facilitated the retention of coaches by instilling a professional development pathway. Within the structure of the facility, coaches are able to ascertain their position in the organizational management



chart so that there are clear ways to move up the pathway. Monthly professional development opportunities are required with the goal of not only improving NC programming but to accentuate the need to be asynchronous, lifelong learners. Great coaches have proven to be both theorists and practitioners over the span of their careers (Collins & Collins, 2019). Every month, all coaches are invited to a 90-minute, full team training session on the court. Additionally, they are invited to a quarterly 60-minute department-specific session. The purpose of these sessions is to review the coaching philosophy through guided breakout sessions in small teams. A subsequent goal is to develop professionals by facilitating real practice situations and constructive feedback. For each coaching opportunity, a theme is presented that pertains to the current coaching environment. For example, recent topics have included: less talking and more touches, effective time management, progressions and regressions, wheelchair tennis, and how to coach without a basket of balls.

The NC has paid close attention to the contributing factors for young professionals moving out of the industry. One of the biggest challenges has been enabling an employee to work a five-day week. Historically, in the tennis industry, coaches are on court six days a week. Thus, the campus is looking to be innovative and is making the five-day week a main priority for teaching professionals starting in the fall of 2022. The objective is to improve the retention rate of coaches and keep them in the industry. Additionally, a Future Leaders Program was created for aspiring professionals who have ambitions beyond the court.

### RACQUETS SPORTS

The National Campus is very fortunate to have other racquet sports on site. Pickleball and Padel are complementary to tennis. To that point, they are not treated as competitors. A number of events both for juniors and adults have been staged that allow participants to compete in all three sports. This has showcased cross-over skill development and the ability to engage in different sports at the NC.

From a business perspective, it has been beneficial as diverse options are available to consumers. Nevertheless, there have been challenges as further research is needed to explore racquet sports synergies. As mentioned earlier, tennis has grown in the USA during the pandemic and both Pickleball and Padel are two of the fastest growing sports in the world. Both sports have attracted a customer that would likely never set foot on the NC. The ease of play for both sports allows for an opportunity to showcase tennis in the racquet sports market place.

From a financial point of view, the NC experienced 100% overall growth in the last two years. A little over 10% of that growth can be contributed to complementary racquet sports. New people are visiting the facility to play their racquet sport of choice, while at the same time, seeing the other sports, which has led to increased intrigue and more information. Events that incorporate all three racquet sports have proven to be a great engagement strategy.

## PARENT EDUCATION

Parent education has increasingly become more of a focus over the years. There has been immense data collection by the USTA to enhance the child's experience through the eyes of the parent. Both the competition concierge and Free 30 have assisted in parent education. While the child is taking the Free 30, parents are briefed on how the NC can meet the athlete's tennis needs. This coach-to-parent engagement builds a relationship where the parent has better insights on how to start their tennis journey which favors retention. However, making sure it is developmentally-appropriate, in both learning and competition, is paramount to a positive experience. Again, similar to the Free 30, a relationship is established through this program, which builds the education of the parent, specific to the competitive pathway. These conversations serve to highlight best practices in competition which lead to a more fun experience. Moreover, from a competition perspective, there is a great deal of value in sending coaches to competitions to evaluate their students. It is also a great opportunity for periodization purposes as the coaches are able to assess students which leads to future lesson planning.

In addition, once a quarter, there is a parent's meeting for each department within the junior program. The new virtual world has allowed for more parent participation as they can choose to attend either face-to-face or through videoconferencing. Each session starts with an overview of what the training is covering and then opens up for parent questions. The primary goal is to create a format that engenders discussion among all stakeholders. The meeting is recorded, and then sent to all parents so those who could not attend have an opportunity to view the content.

## CONCLUSION

The USTA National Campus adheres to the tenants of the American Development Model. Although multifaceted, the ADM emphasizes age and stage-appropriate development. NC leadership constantly refers to the philosophy and educates coaches, players, parents, and the general public on a developmentally-appropriate pathway. This concerted effort has promoted consistency, fairness, attraction, retention, professional development, and more racquet sports awareness at a large-scale facility. Practical implications were made clear through; creating a philosophy, adhering to that philosophy, synergies between the Free-30 program and the competition concierge, monthly and quarterly coach professional development sessions, efforts towards increased parent education, a quarterly parent's

meeting, and the utilization of competitive experiences across three racquet sports (tennis, pickleball, and padel).

It is evident that there are future opportunities to conduct research on the relationship among other racquet sports. Specifically, insights into the notion of other racquet sports serving as a precursor or addition to playing tennis should be investigated. Competition between tennis and other commensurate racquet sports have promulgated more division and animosity. Thus, the industry would benefit from empirical studies that can lead to practical outcomes in growing the sport of tennis.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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