

Learn, Move, Compete: An alternative approach to mini tennis lessons

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we look at how competition is presented in the typical mini tennis lesson plan used by federations, finding that it usually occurs once, at the end of the session. We then explore some of the limitations associated with competition in this framework. Following that, we discuss the importance of developing competitive capabilities, and propose an alternative way of designing the mini tennis lesson to provide more opportunity for competition while systematically developing tactical and technical skills in a manner consistent with a game based approach, and findings from skill acquisition research. This framework, we suggest, provides an upgrade to the game based approach used at the mini tennis level, and offers a more fertile environment in which to develop competitive performers alongside the tactical and technical performance factors.

Key words: Mini tennis, competition, methodology

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, modified forms of tennis have proliferated across the world. Federations have encouraged the use of low compression balls, modified court spaces and scaled down equipment to help young players serve, rally, score, and develop their skills across the four performance factors. This has coincided with an increased emphasis of delivering tennis lessons using modern approaches like the game based approach (Crespo, 1999; Pankhurst, 1999) and the constraints-led approach (Davids, et al, 2008). A wide range of nomenclature has been used to label this family of approaches such as the Action Method, Teaching Games for Understanding, GameSense, Game-Centred Approach, and many more (Unierzyski & Crespo, 2007). While these approaches have slightly different origins and theoretical underpinnings, they all agree that tennis is an open skill sport, and learning to play tennis is not just about developing strokes in isolation, but instead involves different game situations (serving, returning, both back, approaching or

at the net, opponent approaching or at the net) and tactical intentions (offense, neutral, defence). Though a tennis lesson for a group of 8 year olds may not involve playing a full match in the traditional sense, the activities involved in the lesson typically resemble familiar game situations with tactical intentions, modified and adapted for the ability of the players. In short, it should look like a game of tennis. In the literature, game based methodologies encourage the playing of the game at the start of the lesson in order to observe and analyse the needs of the players, establish a tactical objective that can be achieved using technical principles. This objective is then trained before being put back into a match-like situation at the end of the lesson, forming an open-closed-open pattern across the course of the lesson (Pankhurst, 1999; ITF, 2007). Despite this methodological approach, mini tennis group lesson plans often do not include competition at the start of the lesson, and instead include it only at the end of the lesson. Table 1 illustrates some mini tennis lesson formats used by a number of federations in their curricula.

Table 1

Sample of Mini Tennis Lesson Structures.

LTA Mini Tennis (2001)	Tennis Australia Hotshots (2008)	Tennis Canada Learn to Play (2009)	USTA Net Generation (2017)	LTA Youth (2020)
Warm-up	Movement activity	Warm-up	Warm-up	Warm-up
Main theme	Throwing and catching activity	I Can Rally	Skills (athletic)	Body and Ball
Progression or Regression	Striking activity	I Can Rally	Skills (tennis)	Body and Racket
Competition	Serve, Rally, Score	I Can Play Points	Game	Game

While each federation has their own terminology for the different stage of the lesson, the structure of the lessons are similar, with competition appearing at the end. This potentially limits the development of competitive capabilities, since players are only exposed to one competitive opportunity during the session.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT APPROACH

An obvious limitation of leaving competition until the end of the session is that children are not exposed to competition very frequently. Developing a skill requires frequent exposure to a situation in which the skill is needed. If you want to develop the technical skill of hitting a slice backhand that stays low after the bounce, then it will require that the skill is practised frequently across time. Instead of practising a slice backhand for ten minutes at the end of a tennis lesson, it would be better to practise more frequently (little and often) across the lesson. Correspondingly, in order to develop better competitors, it is logical to increase the frequency of competitive opportunity that players are exposed to.

Second, because competitive opportunity appears only at the end of the session, players may be physically fatigued and mentally exhausted. While there is of course a good case to be made for training competitive skill under conditions of stress, it is not the only condition under which it can, or should, be trained. It is possible that developing competitiveness under a variety of conditions (e.g., when fresh, when energy is middling, when fatigued) more closely replicates the demands of competition in a tennis match.

Third, while it is well established that young children have short attention spans (Crespo, 2010), there is increasing evidence that the current generation of children experiencing the mini tennis lesson (i.e., those born 2010 or later) have shorter attention spans than previous generations (Twenge, 2017), and possess a comparatively lower degree of physical literacy than would be expected for their age (O'Brien et al., 2016). This increases the need to reimagine and redesign the mini tennis lesson to engage and excite the current generation of tennis playing children.

These are important considerations because tennis is a game that is inherently combative in nature. At the end of a match, one individual or team wins, and the other is vanquished. Tennis players of all ages have to be equipped to deal with this fact, as it is an inescapable part of our sport. It is therefore crucial that tennis coaches help players at every level develop not just their tactics and technique, but also their competitive capability. In order to develop competitive capability, children have to be exposed to frequent competitive opportunity during the mini tennis lesson. Possessing, for instance, appropriate tactical and technical skills is not enough. When competing against another player of a similar ability, it would be advantageous to be a great competitor and not just a good hitter of the ball.

It is therefore important to upgrade the game based approach typically used for mini tennis lessons, and integrate competition more frequently throughout the lesson.

DEVELOPING COMPETITIVE CAPABILITIES

While everyone starts with differing levels of competitiveness, it is, nonetheless, a skill, that can be developed (Dweck, 2017, p. 52). Competitiveness is not a fixed trait like shoe size

or height (you cannot, for instance, train yourself to have bigger feet or become taller). Just as a player can develop the technical skill of hitting a slice serve, so too they can develop their competitive skill. For example, a player can gradually change their attitude, mindset, and beliefs to become more competitive:

- I chase the ball → I beat the bounce
- Sometimes the ball bounces twice → I never let the ball bounce twice, I always touch it
- People can out-rally me → No one out-rallies me
- I get anxious at the end of a match → I play my best tennis at the end of the match

As with any skill, these competitive beliefs, attitudes and mindsets are not developed overnight. Rather, this sort of transformation happens gradually, little by little, over a period of time. If tennis coaches want to help players become better competitors, it is important that this is reflected in the format and nature of the tennis lesson. If this is not reflected, then the corresponding competitive skills are less likely to emerge, in the same way that a player is unlikely to improve their serve if they do not spend much time practising it, or only practise serving in the last ten minutes of their lesson.

Specifically then, the tennis lesson should provide frequent opportunities for those competitive attitudes and identities to emerge while simultaneously developing tactical and technical skills required to play the game. It can be argued that the typical mini tennis lesson format – as it is presented in the coach education resources and training curricula of many federations – underplays this aspect of the sport, and relegates competition to the end of the session. With this approach, most of the lesson is learning or drilling, and only a small portion of the lesson is competition. In contrast, short, simple, and frequent competition helps normalise the competitive nature of tennis, which is important, because competition is one of the key drivers of the sport (Tennant, 2010). Frequent competition also has the additional benefit of showing the coach how well motor skill has been retained and transferred from practice to competition.

It is therefore necessary to consider an alternative structure for the mini tennis lesson that emphasises competition. Below is a systematic framework that helps children experience frequent competitive opportunity while simultaneously developing the tactical and technical skills needed to serve, rally, and score with each other. We suggest that this format can be much more dynamic and engaging than the typical mini tennis lesson format, more closely meets the attentional needs of the current generation of children learning to play tennis, and increases the likelihood of developing healthy competitors.

LEARN, MOVE, COMPETE

In order to provide more opportunities for competition within the mini tennis lesson, we propose an alternative structure, using a game based approach, that includes more frequent competitive opportunity for players. By reimagining the mini tennis lesson in this way, tennis players learn, move, and compete throughout the lesson. They are therefore exposed to competition much more frequently than they would be using the typical approach. This format is not a replacement

for a game based approach, but rather an upgrade to it, via the systematic inclusion of more competition. Figure 1 exemplifies the difference between the lesson formats, and shows the increased presence of competitive opportunity in the learn, move, compete format. The typical mini tennis lesson features only a small element of competition. The learn, move, compete format evenly distributes the lesson between learning, drilling (movement) and competition. In both variations of the learn, move, compete format, one third of the lesson is spent competing, and that competition is spaced out across the session.

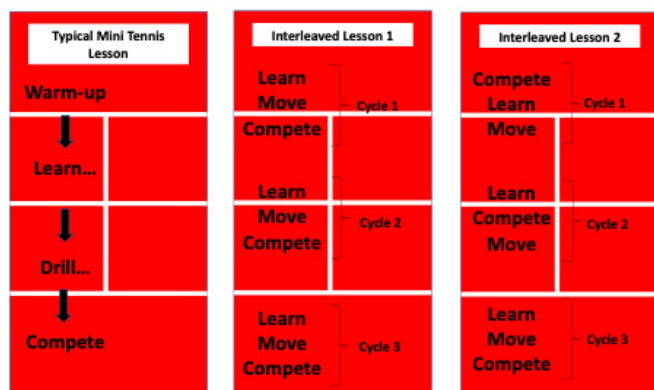


Figure 1. A comparison of different lesson formats

Coaches are encouraged to mix up the order of activity to best suit the needs of the players. The important point is that competitive opportunity is not left until the end of the lesson, but occurs frequently throughout. This gives players the opportunity to integrate learning and develop competitive capability, and coaches can observe the impact of their interventions.

The learn, move, compete format uses interleaved practise design to integrate more competition. Interleaving involves switching between different practise situations and varying the order of practise (Weinstein et al., 2018, p. 93). The typical mini tennis lesson progresses in a linear manner until finally, at the end of the lesson, the skill is ready to be integrated into competition. While the linearity of this approach seems intuitive, it can also become stale and lack dynamism over time. The learn, move, compete format, on the other hand, is non-linear, and switches between three situations more frequently. Research has shown that this is an effective practise design. Players are less prone to mental fatigue by drilling one single skill over and over again, because the situation is varied frequently. Players must retrieve different solutions to the problems and situations they are faced with (Lee & Schmidt, 2014). In this regard, they are less likely to be on auto-pilot. This is particularly useful because it reflects the reality of playing tennis, where you do not face the same situation over and over again without change, but instead must be able to discriminate between different situations within the game. For this reason, interleaving also improves decision-making and problem-solving skills. When a player selects a motor skill that is incorrect, or does not meet the demands of the situation, this strengthens understanding and helps players decide which strategy or movement solution should be used in that situation (Weinstein et al., 2018, p. 96). Research shows that interleaving practise is an effective learning strategy, and leads to higher retention and transfer of motor skill (Taylor & Rohrer, 2010; Lee & Schmidt 2014). Compared with the linear lesson format that many federations are currently using, the

non-linear design of learn, move, compete, combined with more frequent competition, has the potential to help players become more skilful and more competitive.

Learn

In tandem with this format, we present a systematic framework to develop rally skills across a range of abilities, from floor tennis, to children rallying with each other using rackets. This provides coaches with a roadmap for their lesson planning based on the current ability of the players they are working with. Using this pathway in tandem with the learn, move, compete structure still provides players with the opportunity to develop their tactical and technical skills, while simultaneously developing their competitive capabilities. Figure 2 illustrates the pathway for developing rally skills. Within each stage of the pathway, it is recommended that the skill is developed by moving progressively from easy to more challenging. This is done simply by first learning the skill with minimal movement or variation. Then, performing the skill with additional movement or an added level of variation or coordination. Table 2 shows partial lesson plan for players at the blue stage, using this learn, move, compete format.

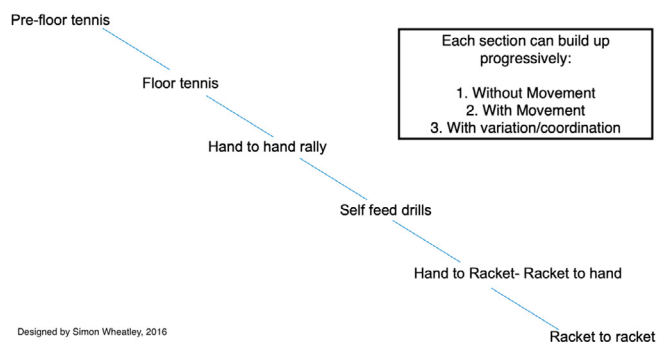


Figure 2. A progressive pathway for developing rally skills.

Table 2

Learn, move, compete partial lesson plan

Aim: Develop rally accuracy by controlling direction of the ball	
Activity: Floor tennis rally through a goal positioned between two players	
Learn	Stop the ball with racket, then point the strings at the ball and towards the goal. Use a push feeling back keeping the strings connected to the ball for long as possible through the hitting zone.
Move	Movement/variation options: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Send the ball, then run and touch a sideline after each shot - Stop the ball, run a circle around the ball, then send - Stop the ball, jump back and forth over the ball, then send - No stopping the ball, push straight back
Compete	Players race to see which pair can have a floor tennis rally of 10 shots (with or without a movement variation).

Players could then go through another cycle of these three stages - learn, move, compete – with another skill relevant to rally accuracy. This could involve the same floor tennis activity, and this time players direct the ball through two different goals placed side by side. Or perhaps the floor tennis rally now takes place off both the forehand and backhand side. These are just two of myriad options to develop the skill of rally accuracy, and coaches are limited only by their imagination (and the imagination of the players!) when it comes to what and how to add elements of variation and coordination, all of which help increase the level of challenge and develop skilfulness.

Move

By adding different elements of movement or coordination into each activity, a learning effect called contextual interference occurs. This is when practise conditions or characteristics are varied for the learner. Research has shown that contextual interference leads to higher retention and higher transfer of motor skill (Magill & Hall, 1990). It is therefore possible that the learn, move, compete approach may help players become more skilful more quickly than the typical framework for mini tennis lessons that federations are using in their coach education.

Compete

While the benefits of more frequent competition have been outlined, it is helpful to provide a framework for categorising competition as well as some practical examples of that can be used quickly and frequently during the mini tennis lesson. Schematically, competition can be broken down into four categories: individual, cooperative, cooperatively competitive, and competitive, as seen in Table 3. These competitive categories can be progressively layered into the lesson structure.

Individual competition is the idea of improving your best score. Cooperative competition is the idea of working with a partner or as a group to get the best score. Individual and cooperative competition could be used as competitive elements in the first learn, move, compete cycle in order to expose players to the concept of competition, and provide a rationale for subsequent learning and skill development.

Cooperatively competitive competition is the idea of working with a partner or as part of a team, competing against other teams to get the best score. This could be used as a competitive element in the second or third learn, move, compete cycle. Here the competitive element has progressed and players are exposed to the possibility of beating another team.

Finally, (and perhaps the most relatable form of competition for tennis coaches and players) is the competitive situation where two players are competing against each other. This could be used as the competitive element in the third learn, move, compete cycle. With two players competing against each other, this is the form of competition that is most representative of the competitive demands of a tennis match.

Table 3

Four competitive categories.

Competition Category	Examples
1. Individual (Learn, move, compete cycle 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How many tap ups can you achieve in one minute? - How many self-feeds can you hit to the target area? - How many times in a row can you serve without hitting the net?
2. Cooperative (Learn, move, compete cycle 1 or 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How many tap ups can we get together as a group? - What's your highest throw and catch rally with a partner? - How many times can you complete the sequence: serve, return, 3rd shot?
3. Cooperatively Competitive (Learn, move, compete cycle 2 or 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which pair can be first to have a throw and catch rally of ten shots? - Which team can get the highest groundstroke to volley rally? - Which team can get the highest number of groundstrokes in a minute?
4. Competitive (Learn, move, compete cycle 3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 1 v 1, who can rally the ball into the target area most often? - 1 v 1, can you out-rally your opponent? - 1 v 1, can you win three points in a row against your opponent?

The order and use of these competitive categories will of course depend upon the dynamic of the players within the group and the aim and intention of the lesson. The following progressive approach to layering competition is a logical recommendation, but depending on the ability and needs of the players, coaches could just as easily interleave match play or conditioned points at each stage of the learn, move, compete cycle. The important point is that there is some element of competition occurring frequently across the lesson, in order to best develop the competitive capabilities of the players.

By using these competition categories as part of the learn, move, compete format, coaches can increase the frequency of competitive opportunity available within the mini tennis lesson. This is an important component, especially at the recreational level of the sport, where players may not have been exposed to formal tennis competition before embarking on mini tennis lessons. Tennis specific research has demonstrated that young players newly exposed to the sport are less competitive than children with a previous sporting background (Rasmus & Kocur, 2006). Given this fact, it is logical to integrate competitive opportunities throughout the mini tennis lesson so that young children have the opportunity to develop their competitive capabilities. This also normalises the idea that tennis is a competitive game, and not just an activity. This may have the additional benefit that more people are more likely to play tennis matches more often, which is good news for coaches and tennis operators because it is likely to improve player retention.

CONCLUSION

As we have outlined, the format of the archetypal mini tennis lesson has not changed much in twenty years. While it has served its purpose for federations, there are some limitations with the current format, particularly in the way it de facto relegates the importance of competition. Competitive capability is an important performance factor for tennis players of any age and stage of development, and so federations and coaches should look for ways to enhance the competitive experience within the mini tennis lesson. By reimagining the structure of the mini tennis lesson, the learn, move, compete framework offers a solution to this problem. It provides a simple framework for coaches to develop tactical and technical skills in conjunction with competitive skills in equal measure. Reimagining the format of the mini tennis lesson in this manner should be seen not as a replacement for, but an upgrade to, the game based approach. It has the potential to change the way children experience the sport, and enhances and normalises the competitive experience. Designing mini tennis lessons using the learn, move, compete structure offers a dynamic and exciting learning environment for tennis players to become more skilful across all the performance factors. We encourage coaches to test this out and apply the idea in their club environments.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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