



# Accommodate and adapt- coaching in COVID-19 environment

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## ABSTRACT

Tennis play worldwide has been heavily impacted by COVID-19, with many of our landmark events not being played or postponed to non-traditional times. Many tennis facilities have had to close due to governmental restrictions to stem the growth of the coronavirus pandemic. As we start to come out of this lockdown, there is an opportunity to leverage the health benefits and natural physical distancing aspects of tennis to come out stronger and increase our global awareness of our sport, where one can play while having fun at any age. A major stakeholder in this realization is the coach. It is hoped that this article can provide some practical insight into how with a laser focus on learning methodology, skill acquisition, and a player-centered approach, we can accommodate, adapt and grow our sport.

**Key words:** COVID-19, coaching, methodology.

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## INTRODUCTION

We trust that everyone is safe and well. We also hope that as you are reading this article, you have been given the green light to return to tennis play and continue to grow the game. According to the recently shared ITF Return to Tennis-29<sup>th</sup> June Update and knowing this is a worldwide publication, we are all coming back at different times and restrictions (ITF, 2020). Tennis and golf have been primarily regarded as the safest sports to get back to physical activity due to its natural ability of physical distancing (CDC, 2020). Here in the USA, we are back to play with restrictions in many areas.

We are very grateful to be back in action and playing the sport we love so dearly. The USTA has just launched a "Get Out and Play" campaign encouraging safe return to tennis play for existing and new tennis players. Some states in the USA, such as Florida, in their initial phase-out of the lockdown, were suggesting tennis as a safe option for physical activity. We also believe that our American Development Model (Long Term Athletic Development Plan) is well positioned to be our guiding light and deliver our sport in the new normal with the need for better player experiences, developmentally appropriate play and competition, more local access to tennis, and having fun along the way.

To set the scene for this article and provide a methodology on how we can cope with COVID-19, it is appropriate to look at the words of an icon, Marcus Aurelius, emperor of the Roman Empire, one of the greatest leaders of all time. "Our actions may be impeded.... But there can be no impeding our intentions or dispositions because we can accommodate and

adapt. The mind adapts and converts to its own purposes the obstacle to our acting" (Holiday, 2020).

## ACCOMMODATE

In this unprecedented time, as Marcus Aurelius is suggesting, it is important to take time to reflect and be aware of our current predicament. We are appreciative of the ITF leading the way with this COVID-19 monographic issue. We all know how negative it is with the coronavirus, so we will not dwell on this but instead look forward to coming out of this pandemic positively. The focus of this submission is to present practical applications to both welcome back current players and engage new players. The feedback we are currently receiving at the USTA is that a large number of facilities, although starting up has been gradual, are receiving a lot of interest in new players wanting to play tennis.

Applying the sentiment of Marcus Aurelius' impactful quote, how do we "accommodate and adapt" to these current conditions and come out as winners? As just mentioned, we need to reflect and understand what our current and future players have and will endure. We feel the following is an accurate account of our current condition:

- Kids unable to go to school and spend time with their friends - virtual school seems to be the norm
- Increased screen time
- Limitations to venues and programs that provide physical activity
- Limited free play and physical activity - only in the home environment

- No social interactions through sport participation
- No competitive play
- More people interested in taking up tennis due to safe COVID-19 conditions
- Coming back to play without having done much physical activity
- Mental stress endured during the lockdown
- Returning to play at a reduced level

Before we go into the COVID-19 suggested coaching methods due to lockdown, the health and wellness of the public has been put into question. Re-emphasizing the benefits of playing tennis or for that matter sports is important. Many social media posts have brought forth the safeness of tennis play, knowing in traditional singles play distancing is 78 feet, much greater than the 6 ft. recommended by the CDC (CDC, 2020).

We are going to cover specific elements of coaching tennis that have always been part of the skill acquisition/coaching repertoire. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, we feel certain coaching methodologies that might not have been practiced are more prevalent than ever and can be great tools to use to grow our great lifetime sport. You will notice our method presents coaching/skill acquisition evidence backed theories and then centers their relevance with a COVID-19 practical application.

**ADAPT**

**Sporting Activity – Definitions and Importance**

Research has delved into understanding more the skill acquisition process throughout development, more specifically, how different learning activities can nurture continued engagement (Hodges & Williams, 2020). A distinction has been identified between those activities that are termed practice, which focuses on skill development and performance and those identified as play, in which the emphasis is on enjoyment (Cote, Baker, & Abernethy, 2007). Sports activities are often placed as a dichotomy between play and practice, and there is a growing desire that a more nuanced conceptualization of sports activities is required (Ford, Coughlan, Hodges, & Williams, 2015).

A recent formation of practice and play activities has been suggested along two axes (Cote & Erickson, 2015; Cote, Erickson, & Abernethy, 2013). One axis refers to the importance which is attributed to the activity, ranging from more extrinsic or performance-related (practice) to more intrinsic or enjoyment related (play). The other axis refers to how much instruction and input are assigned by an adult or the athlete. These two axes, when working harmoniously, together form a matrix in which different sports activities can be situated.

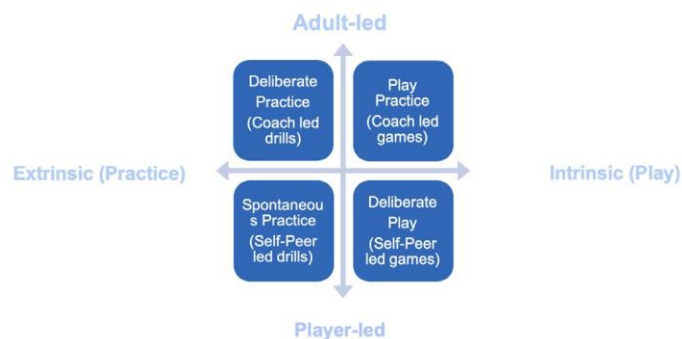


Figure 1-Matrix of sports activities (Cote & Erickson, 2015; Cote et al., 2013)

**Deliberate Practice (Coach led drills)** -training activities defined as a) specific focus on improving performance; b) a requirement for cognitive and/or physical effort; and c) contribution to skill development.

**Play Practice (Coach led games)**-activities that allow engagement in enjoyable, play like activities under the supervision of adults.

**Deliberate Play (Self-Peer led games)**-sport activities that are intrinsically motivating provide immediate gratification and are positioned to maximize enjoyment.

**Spontaneous (Self-Peer led drills)**-activities that cannot be defined as deliberate practice, play, or play practice. A form of informal learning that is determined by the athlete and no supervision by adults.

**COVID-19 Coaching application**  
**Sporting activity focus on Play and Practice and Spontaneous Play**

- Play and practice should be used more often; start practices with tennis free play or warm ups that are games.
- Make sure you manipulate the constraints (ball, racquet, court) to promote competence and confidence with both play and practice.
- Spontaneous play should also be used more and could be in the form of virtual engagement with coach sharing activities that can be done at home individually or with a parent or sibling.
- Promote family play.
- Encourage free play with friends.

**Practice Organization to Improve Tennis Playing Skills**

The planning and execution of practices by coaches depend on factors such as age, the experience of the player(s), and the difficulty of the skill. Research has pointed out that we should be challenging the traditional approach of "drilling" or "grooving" the stroke - using large numbers of repetitions with minimal variation (Reid, Elliot & Crespo, 2015).

Consideration is required on the amount of mental effort needed to perform the skill. Blocked practice - is the repetition multiple times of the same shot before changing to

another shot - the learner's mental engagement for each shot is minimal. Random practice-varying the shots-requires more mental engagement (Reid, et al., 2015). For example, if a coach asks a player to hit a slice serve from the deuce court, and is then asked to do the same shot again, the mental effort for the second serve is marginal. However, if the player was asked to hit a volley after the slice serve, more mental engagement is needed to produce the new movement sequence.

Research into the two training methods of block and random practice suggests that random leads to improved retention of the varied practiced skill, compared with practicing each task separately for a block of trials (Hodges & Williams, 2020). However, random practice does not improve the player's ability initially where the block practice does (Hodges & Williams, 2020).

#### COVID-19 Practical application

##### Organization of random practices focusing on partner work with play connection and creativity:

- Random practices are more suited to engage the players in play.
- We have an excellent opportunity to eliminate lines due to the need for safe physical distancing and have more random play.
- Partner activities are a great way to facilitate random practices. Group players with similar abilities and challenge their play through play connections with other players.
- Implement random practices through having more partner work and less coach feeding.
- A great way to promote creativity is by asking the players to come up with their own activities and different ways to pick up the balls without touching them.

#### Learner State - Developing Interest to Prolong Skill Acquisition



An essential factor for exploring interest as a critical ingredient in skill acquisition is that interest can be developed. One component that is essential to engaging and maintaining interest over time is the novelty of the activity. Research has suggested that situational interest in physical education in students was linked with experiences of challenge, exploration, innovation, and attentional demands (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001). The benefit of situational interest includes enhanced content understanding, information seeking, and prolonged engagement (Renninger & Hidi, 2016).

Possible ways to enhance the novelty of sports activities are encouraging early sampling of different sports, developing coach-led practices involving a range of activities, and infusing elements of play into coach-led practice sessions. Psychology and education research has shown that the shift from external-centered (e.g., adult) processes to learner-centered (e.g., youth) processes is imperative for the development of interest (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Often in the sport context, athletes are put into learning environments where adults control the agenda.

For youth, broader exploration is required to encourage youth-centered experiences by creating opportunities to participate in sport with different peer groups and various types of environments. Opportunities for youth to be producers of their development, problem-solve, and adapt to new situations can be done through unstructured play activities (Pellegrini, Dupuis, & Smith, 2007). Furthermore, play-based sports activities offer excellent opportunities for skill acquisition by assisting youth to acquire skills that are innovative, adaptive, and resilient. Being exposed to a range of activities builds blocks for youth in their decision making about future engagement in a sport.

Social interactions with parents, coaches, and sports organizations also play a pivotal role in fostering the development of interest (Renninger & Hidi, 2016). Parents are an empowering agent to youth to engage with new sporting opportunities that are personally relevant and meaningful. Coaches can facilitate interest by empowering their athletes to make choices during practices and by designing practices that allow athletes to make personal connections to sports activities.

#### COVID-19 Practical Application

##### Learner state application focusing on fun and player-centered

- Even though you will have previous players coming back to play, pretend you don't know them. Get to know your players all over again; establish that connection through asking questions.
- Install more fun into your sessions. Ask your players what they think is fun and follow through with one suggestion.
- Within certain constraints, ask players which activities they want to play. Give them autonomy; they will appreciate it.
- Mix up play and practice.
- Incorporate activities from other sports to bring more variety to your sessions.



## CONCLUSION

We hope you have found our insight into coaching in the COVID-19 environment impactful. Having a methodology of accommodate and adapt can assist us working as a team to grow our beautiful game. Everyone loves playing the game of tennis. How we can facilitate this objective, mainly showing a little more empathy and understanding of where our players (player-centered approach) are coming from and where they need to go, can bring us to a fruitful coaching place. Stay safe everyone!

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