



Do you get me? Strategies to create learning in Tennis10s!

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ABSTRACT

This article will discuss in detail ways in which learning can be more efficient and improved in Tennis10s. Different types of learning will be highlighted, such as implicit and stimulating, and evaluated as methods for improving the learning of Under 10 children. Useful tips and advice will be given to the reader in order to promote a better learning environment.

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INTRODUCTION

There's a great deal of literature available concerning how we teach. Open any tennis magazine around the world and you will see in-depth analyses of the top players technically and tactically. Comparatively, much less is written concerning how people learn, and yet this is perhaps much more important. Fortunately, a step outside the realm of tennis will reveal a wealth of applicable research which we can quickly translate into a more effective approach to coaching, and more importantly to learning!

It is also important to remember that despite the increased levels of tennis skill and competition with the global proliferation of tennis10s, a child is a child, and fundamentally learns like a child (Barrell, 2008).

Working with under 10 players is not so different from the best practice of working with all players. However, there are a few points of distinction which are particularly relevant in creating an environment that maximizes learning for this age group.

THE BASELINE

Before delving deeper into more specific and unique learning concepts here are a few that we all can easily acknowledge and understand.

1) Most children are visual learners, so pictures mean so much more than words

2) Children learn both through explicit teaching and implicit play (Barrell, 2008)

3) A learning environment is one that provides the time and opportunity to gather and assimilate the task or skill to be learnt

4) Learning is driven by need, so players must also have the desire to learn the task or skill

5) Learning usually involves a process in which a child will face challenges, as well as experience a degree of failure and a degree of success or progress (Hustler, 1998)

What Toys are in the Toy Box? - Implicit Learning

If children learn visually and the world is a myriad of pictures, then we need to accept that learning happens with and without us! This doesn't mean that we have no control over the learning process. Instead, it implies that we can create an environment in which children can play (Hustler, 1998). It's a little like the toys that a child is given to play with, girls may develop fine motor skills as they play with dolls while boys develop gross motor skills as they play with things to throw and hit things with. Of course there is a nature and nurture element to this but it is undeniably influenced by the environment around them.

Channelling learning by harnessing the environment can help us to make a much more effective impact as coaches (Landy &

Burrige, 2002). We have to be mindful about what is in the tennis environment.



Players must learn to modify technique based on the intended target area, deal with the existence of an opponent at the other end of the court and link shots together to create effective tactical plans.

In practice, define the court or target area clearly, demonstrate where the ball must come from and go to, include movement in every task and do lots of partner based practice rather than tasks where they hit or move with no response or opposition. This sets up an understanding of what tennis is truly about and provides an implicit feedback loop for players as they perform tasks within this environment.

Ignition – Stimulating Learning

If you were to ask a child to draw two faces, odds are that he or she will create a smiley one and a sad one. As another example of this phenomenon, we have all played the word association game where someone says black and you say white. Although maybe at the time we didn't think much of it, this pattern gives great insight into the way in which we store and process information. We understand left because there is right and hot because there is cold. In short, this association between opposites establishes a framework of understanding (Landy & Burrige, 2002). In motor skill development these contrasts provide more clearly defined sensations, allowing a child to gain a more concrete awareness of the feeling. Schmidt's schema suggests that we can learn motor patterns faster when there are differences involved.

But the idea of using opposites in practice helps us in other ways too!

On the tactical side, Hick's Law suggests that we make decisions more rapidly if we have a limited number of options involved in the process, so short or deep, attack or defend will help players to effectively use decisions at a younger age than using 3 or more options. Opposites and differences may in fact

provide the best frame-work for both learning new skills and repeating existing ones!



Small Batteries

It's also necessary to go a step further in understanding that the child not only also has a shorter attention span, influenced not just by age but also motivation, but a smaller physical engine overall (. Ericsson has identified the major limiting factor in maintaining deliberate practice is the ability to maintain concentration and others have identified lack of sleep as a major inhibitor in new skill development (Barrell, 2008).

We also know that repetition is key to cementing and maintaining a skill once the body has begun to learn it. One of the major challenges is that the physical system of a child is like a small battery, with both a limited physical and mental "engine". It is effective for a shorter period of time but equally recharges quicker. Learning a new skill takes more energy and focus than practicing or maintaining an existing one so the battery is depleted sooner. So during this phase repeated short bursts of 10 minutes or less with rest periods or alternative (or opposite) skills in between meets the physical capacity of children more than mass repetition. This means taking a different structure to lesson planning where rather than sticking to one topic for an extended period of time there is a benefit in leaving that topic and returning to it in small blocks.

Context

If you are a parent then you know that children are learning machines. You may also remember the age of "why?" When every statement, discussion or instruction was followed by "Why is it like that?" Despite the challenge that this posed this was not a deliberate ploy to make life more difficult for you as a parent. It is simply the desire for children to make sense, create order, and develop meaning for the world around them. And while opposites create a framework at a young age, context is key in aiding both effective learning, and eventually

decision making. Once a child understands the benefits of learning something their motivation and application to the development of that skill will increase greatly.

Readiness

If you have ever been frustrated by the lack of progress by one child and amazed by the rapid progress of another then you may have questioned a child's readiness to learn.

Readiness is based upon the interaction between the player's cognitive development, their physical development and prerequisite skills, and the demands and opportunities presented by the environment. If any of these is lower than needed then learning may be slowed or not occur at all.

A good example of this is a child's tactical awareness. Look up the court and in a moment you can assess the situation and make decisions. Your mind has been conditioned over years and years to observe more than you realise. But what if your brain was not yet developed enough to consider more than the court and the ball? What if the opponent's strengths and weaknesses were not part of your decision making process, or even the fact that they were left handed?

Piaget, one of the world's foremost child development gurus called this process assimilation and identified different levels of this in a child's development. Importantly for us we should understand that only in his "concrete operational stage" between the ages of 7 and 11 that children may be ready to view scenarios from the perspective of others, thus recognising full both the role and capabilities of the opponent.

Though we will all see different levels of awareness with different aged children it is worth considering that based both on age and competence level a player may be making decisions without integrating the whole picture. On the flip side the increased time that tennis allows children should mean that the demands and opportunities presented by the environment should not be slowing progress.

Playing Around

As we said at the start, learning is not constrained by formal teaching situations. Learning through play is a widely accepted principle. A child who is considered talented or highly coordinated is often identified by their ability to be creative and adaptive (Barrell, 2010). Spending time on open creative skills may not seem directly relevant to situational training or technical refinement but it is actually the building block of essential adaptive skills required to adjust to the highly variable ball characteristics that tennis provides. Remember that despite the level, a child is a child, encourage creative play and provide periods of time that ask children to solve missions and invent solutions. This is not only beneficial from a skill development perspective but also aids motivation.

CONCLUSION

We are both fluent, just in different languages!

A famous commercial on UK TV involved the actor Rowan Atkinson in a North African bazaar bartering for a carpet. After being asked if he understood by his assistant his response was, "We are both fluent, just in different languages!" As a coach we are working with an age group that many of us were not trained to. Younger children see the world, make decisions and learn in different ways to adults but that doesn't mean we can abdicate the responsibility that we hold. Creating effective learning environments is not easy, nor is presenting information in a different way than we learnt it, but whose tennis is this anyway? In a different way than we learnt it, but whose tennis is this anyway?

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