



# Tennis play and stay for beginners aged 65 and over.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss the educational value of the Tennis Play and Stay programme to introduce tennis to the elderly. After a brief historical presentation, I will discuss the population growth of people aged 65 and over as well as my experience of working with this age group, which has been extremely exciting and gratifying both personally and professionally.

**Key words:** Tennis play & stay, Beginner players, 65 and over.

**Received:** 31 July 2013

**Accepted:** 06 September 2013

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## INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL PRESENTATION OF THE TENNIS PLAY AND STAY PROGRAMME

In 1994, the French Tennis Federation (FFT) launched mini-tennis for children aged 5 to 7, the equivalent of the Red stage or stage 3. In 1996, in an effort to structure teaching activities aimed at children aged up to 18 years, the FFT officially recognised the progressive tennis concept through the launch of its Club Junior programme.

In 2000, following the success of these new educational methods based on the idea of learning to play in a fun manner, the FFT introduced its Tennis Adultes initiative, which advocates that tennis teaching should be adapted to each stage of learning, regardless of age.

More recently, in 2009, the FFT launched "baby-tennis", a programme specific to children aged 3-4. When working with children of this age group, it is essential to have an extensive knowledge of their behaviour patterns, learning abilities as well as their overall functioning in order to use appropriate teaching aids. The teaching methods used for the baby-tennis programme are closely related to these children's play space, colours, imaginary as well as specific language.

The successes of progressive tennis have paved the way for many national tennis federations around the world (LTA Mini Tennis in 2001, Tennis Australia MLC Tennis Hot Shots in 2008, etc.).

In 2007, the ITF launched the Tennis Play and Stay campaign in an effort to harmonise tennis teaching and competitions for children and young people; three different stages were introduced: Red/stage 3 (service box, use of foam balls, 31.5-

33" net height), Orange/stage 2 (58-60ft court, use of soft balls, 31.5-36" net height) and Green/stage 1 (full-size court, use of green balls and standard net height).



Now that efforts have been made to adapt tennis teaching to children (from the age of 3), young and adult players, what is the current situation for elderly people aged 65 and over? Are the different stages of Tennis Play and Stay appropriate for this age group? Is it possible to start playing tennis at the age of 65 and over and keep playing until the age of 99 and over?

In order to provide some answers, I will first take a look at some well-established facts and then share with you a recent experience which proved to be exciting and very rewarding.

## FACTS

According to a report from the United Nations Population Division on population ageing, "As the twenty-first century

began, the world population included approximately 600 million older persons, triple the number recorded 50 years earlier. By 2050, the world is expected to have some 2 billion older persons—once again, a tripling of the number in that age group within a span of 50 years.”

In comparison, in 1990, the population of France included 13.9 million people aged over 65, of which 6.8 million were over the age of 75. According to INSEE (French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies), it is expected that by 2015, these numbers will be 18.4 million and 9.1 million, respectively, representing a 33% increase in this population.

The audience of older people, including people aged 65 and over, is therefore increasing; these people are living longer (thanks, amongst other factors, to medical advances) and have lots of free time to spend.

The change in the number of FFT members aged 65 and over provides further confirmation of this trend, as an average increase of 5 to 7% has been recorded annually these last ten years.

The fact that the French Ministry of Sports and Ministry of Health have been merged into one entity in the past and the recent news in the media that sport could be prescribed by French doctors and reimbursed by social security in the future indicate that exercise has beneficial effects on physical and mental fitness and, more generally, is good for your health. It is also worth noting that some clinics, health care and rehabilitation centres already offer sports activities to their patients. In issue 42 of *ITF Coaching & Sport Science Review*, Babette M. Pluim (Royal Dutch Lawn Tennis Association) discusses the health benefits of tennis: “The health benefits of aerobic exercise are well established. Research has shown that regular moderate physical activity has a beneficial effect on health and is associated with a decreased risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.”

#### TENNIS PLAY AND STAY FOR PLAYERS AGED 65 AND OVER: IT WORKS!

Thursday, January 31, 2013 – One of the adult players I had introduced to tennis (a former professional kitesurfer) and helped improve technically using adapted Tennis Play and Stay equipment calls me to ask if I can introduce his 85-year-old mother to tennis. An appointment is made for the next day.

Friday, February 1, 2 pm – I arrive at the scheduled appointment with my modified equipment.

During the presentations, I try to learn a little about the past of my soon-to-be student, who will turn 85 two weeks later : she tells me she’s never done any sport her whole life, but is quick to add that she has “green fingers”! As for her health, she is in good physical and mental shape and is completely

independent. As could be expected, she looks younger than her age.

After a few rallies, it quickly appears that playing with the big Red/ stage 3 balls in the service box with two bounces allowed is the most appropriate game format for the novice player who is in front of me. We have fun playing like five- or seven-year-olds who discover and learn tennis at the stage 3 level. The day of our second session, my student arrives with a light adult racket (230 g) and a nice outfit that she got from her son for her 85th birthday.

After three one-hour weekly sessions, my student has made impressive progress (thanks to the use of appropriate equipment) and the consistency level she’s achieved is such that the decision is taken to maintain this weekly schedule.

“Mémé”, as her friends and family call her, is thrilled with her new weekly physical activity. Because she sometimes suffers from osteoarthritis and has 85-year-old bones, the decision is made not to have her change her grip between her forehand and her one-handed backhand and to use a continental grip to avoid all unnecessary pain. During sessions when there is no wind, we will try and play using the larger foam balls, thus reducing stress at impact. Depending on progress made, I then feel that we’ll be able to move to the Orange stage (stage 2) within a few sessions.

From the 6th individual session, we begin to switch between the Red/ stage 3 format (during warm-up, starting at the net) and the Orange/ stage 2 format that “Mémé” is more and more comfortable with as the sessions progress.

After watching others play, she volunteered to serve and asked me how to do it. So we started to simply try and put the ball into play from the service line by hitting the ball over the head without worrying about the technical execution of the movement which is a bit complex (see my online video available on my Website: [www.pro-tennis-coach.com](http://www.pro-tennis-coach.com)).

With respect to the weight and size of the racket, depending on the morphology of the player, it can be a good idea to use lighter and smaller junior rackets. As for the surface, being slower, clay is more suitable for learning and less stressful on the joints. However, it is also more slippery.



## ELDERLY PEOPLE, AN IMPORTANT SEGMENT FOR COACHES, CLUBS AND TENNIS

People aged 65 and over are an important group that the majority of tennis coaches and clubs should not overlook.

Professional tennis teachers are usually busy providing group lessons to young and adult players on Wednesdays, at weekends as well as on weekday evenings. The rest of the time is typically devoted to individual lessons, either late in the evening for people who have a job or during the day for housewives, freelancers working from home and... retired people.

With elderly people, organising groups of 3 or 4 players facilitates their introduction to tennis, as well as skill development, game situation training and doubles play. In the words of Babette Pluim, "doubles play may be sufficient for the middle-aged or senior tennis player, because their maximum heart rate and VO<sub>2</sub>max are decreased. This has the added benefit that it increases the chance that those who play tennis are likely to maintain the sport when they grow older. Hence, the positive effects are maintained. In order for exercise to exert a positive effect, one has to embrace lifelong exercise patterns."

In the United Kingdom, inter-club doubles competitions are a serious business. Speaking from experience, I can assure you that an experienced team of British senior players will give any team of young ITN 4 French players a run for their money! Fortunately, post-competition social tennis activities (afternoon tea, happy hour, dinner, etc.) usually make the process of coming to terms with defeat much easier and happier. This could give us some ideas of activities that could be organised by the French Tennis Federation or other tennis nations.

But for a professional tennis teacher, a retired person aged 65 or over is not only a student, a client or a potential team player. He or she can also be or become a club official, his or her employer as a tennis club president, an instructor, or play an educational role as a former teacher. These are some of the many important roles that retired persons can play within a tennis club, academy or federation.

It is often said that a woman adds value to any educational team, but the same can be said of any instructor or professional teacher aged 65 or over; the skills and expertise these people can offer to tennis clubs, parents or children, even very young ones, are invaluable. Madeleine Froty, an 81-year-old woman who has been teaching mini-tennis at the La Grande-Motte Tennis Club in the South of France since 1975 is a perfect example of what elderly people can bring to a tennis organisation.

As far as activities in tennis clubs are concerned, retired persons are usually among the first people to volunteer their services to

organise a meal, an evening or a trip or act as a referee or chair umpire. Because they have lots of free time and a great relationship with children, they are ideal candidates.

## SOME IDEAS OF POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES WITH ELDERLY PEOPLE

- Doubles play activities using the Green/stage 1 format.
- Friendly intergenerational events where each doubles pair is made up of a youngster teaming up with a veteran player.
- At the highest international level, the top players in the over 75 age category can be considered ITN 5 players, while the best players in the over 65 age category still have an ITN 3 playing level (such as 69-year-old Patrice Beust, Yannick Noah's very first coach). Based on this, it would be a good idea to have the top international 12 and under junior players compete against the best ranked players in the over 65 category and have players share their views and experiences at the end of the singles and doubles matches.

This idea actually reminds me of a match at the 1999 Montpellier tournament between Alain Vaysset (currently ranked 14th in the over 60 category, i.e. ITN 4) and Richard Gasquet (currently number 9 in the ATP Tour singles rankings; aged 13 and ranked ITN 3 at the time), a match that the youngster had won in two straight sets of 7/6 and 6/2.



## CONCLUSION

In these difficult times of financial crisis and high unemployment, elderly retired people are likely to become a large part of our customer base in the future, leading to an increase in the number of our weekly work hours. People aged 65 and over will represent a bigger part of the population, become increasingly independent and live longer. Consequently, they will be more and more eager to devote their free time to new hobbies and activities.

As for rehabilitation centres and nursing homes, chances are that they will turn to sports instructors (i.e. people like us) more and more frequently to offer activities and sports outings and events to their patients. With the development of and increase in cultural and sports associations for the elderly, it has become clear that people aged 65 and over represent a potential market that should not be overlooked in these difficult times.

The signs are that governments, authorities as well as sports associations and organisations will increasingly support actions in favour of older retired people.

Sport is good for your health and it is never too late to start. Based on what I have experienced professionally since the beginning of the year, I can confirm that it is indeed the case. Tennis is a great way to stay healthy, both physically and mentally, while having fun, regardless of your age or level. Now is the time for us to play the game with older retired people!

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