



Orange to green: The step to the big court.

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ABSTRACT

The following article forms the second part of a two article series, on the importance and challenges within Tennis 10s transitions. This second article focuses specifically on the move from orange to green tennis. Suggestions are given for coaches to encourage children and parents, at such a challenging transition.

Key words: Tennis 10s, Transition, Orange, Green.

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INTRODUCTION

The recent article entitled 'red to orange... what does it really mean?' (Tennant, 2010) discussed the issues which coaches should consider when moving players from red to orange courts. The article started by stating that being a really good Tennis 10s coach is one of the toughest jobs in tennis and that the quality of the player you see on the orange court is largely down to the quality of the work done on the red court. Moving players from red to orange is one of the most important decisions you can make, and you have to get it right. This article takes us to the next level, discussing the issues and considerations when players are being moved from orange to green courts.

STOP AND THINK AGAIN

Conventional guidelines by the ITF and the increasing number of nations using the red, orange and green system dictate that players who are progressing well (assuming that they started at somewhere between 4 and 6 years old) are ready to move from the orange to the green court by the age of 10 years old. At this age, children are very different from the ones who are moving from the red to the orange court. Of course they are bigger, stronger and probably faster, and the game should be technically and tactically stronger. Other changes have taken place too: we can expect players to be more mature, more patient, more reflective, better able to make simple decisions and able to choose and implement a simple plan. These criteria combined show a player who is starting to take on many of the characteristics of a professional tennis player in miniature. In the previous article, I suggested that average physical height in relation to bounce height is a key consideration. At age 9, average height for boys and girls is approximately 133cms (WHO, 2010) with bounce height of 110- 115cms. By age 10, the average height of girls averages 1cm more than for boys

(139cms to 138cms) with the bounce of a green ball ranging from 118-132cms. In summary, age, court size and ball bounce height should increase in parallel between the ages of 4 and 10 years old from the red court to the green court.

COURT WIDTH

Court width increases from 6.5 to 8.23m (ITF, 2011), meaning that players have to cover an extra 86.5cms on each side. We should expect that players progressing from the orange to the green court are more dynamic and coordinated in their lateral movement, are able to cover greater distances more easily due to improved anticipation and reception, greater stride length and stronger leg drive from the split step, so the increased demands of the increase in court width should again be proportionate to age, size and experience. However, the faster green ball presents additional problems due to speed through the air and off the bounce, meaning that fast balls hit at angles away from the court present new challenges to green players. We should also expect players at green to have greater racket head speed and greater use of topspin, both of which lend themselves to more effective attacking shots when used correctly. It is therefore important that coaches progressing players from orange and green pay particular attention to lateral diagonal movements, the ability to hit from wide and sometimes under pressure from out wide, and the importance of effective recovery from wide positions.

COURT LENGTH

An increase in court length from 18m to 23.78m means that the court is 2.89m longer at each end. In many respects this is a very significant increase, since it impacts dramatically on where players play a large number of their groundstrokes. Think about it logically:

1. Players should be hitting harder and with more spin. The extra court length means that they will also on occasions hit higher to achieve greater depth from the baseline. These factors combined with the greater pressure of the green ball compared to the orange one mean that bounce height, speed and distance of the green ball increase markedly.

2. Our green players are only 10 years old, and have not typically developed the ability to take the ball early or on the rise. Higher bounces and greater depth result in baseliners being pushed back more behind the baseline than before.



3. It is therefore very common to see more rallies played from deeper positions on the green court than at orange and red, giving the impression that our players have almost regressed in their abilities. This is usually a temporary observation, typical perhaps of the first 3-6 months of the transition to the green court, and players should be helped to deal with these challenges.

4. A longer court and a deeper average hitting position behind the baseline means more court to cover when looking to approach; in addition, the distance to the net is further. Players will need to be more selective when choosing the ball to approach on, because many will either be too deep or too fast, or will need to be played from too deep. Identification of the slower or shorter ball and opportunities to approach become key abilities.

5. Players who are commonly deep behind the baseline leave large spaces in the front of the court, so leaving themselves open to drop shots and approaches by the opponent.

6. Greater distance to cover makes it virtually impossible to get close to the net for a first volley. A phased approach consisting of an attacking groundstroke followed by a mid court (high or low) volley and a further move forwards to close down the net is quite common, especially at early green. The timing, position and quality of the approach is also important, because a longer court means a bigger target into which the opponent can

neutralise with a dipping ball and more space over which to lob! Likewise a wider court gives more scope for passing shots.

7. If we now reverse the situation to consider our player facing an approaching opponent, the ability to play offensive lobs, passing shots and dipping neutralising or two-shot pass balls become key qualities, and can be trained at green level.

Typical solutions include learning to take the ball on the rise (a new skill for this age), and the acceptance that many balls (rallying and neutralising balls) will have to be played further behind the baseline because the ball characteristics still often dominate over the physical abilities of the player. At early green it is not realistic in many cases to train players to play closer to the baseline, so the solution in many cases is to teach them to defend well and to recover quickly to the baseline (just inside or just behind) depending on the quality of their response.



THE BALL

An ITF approved green ball is the same size as a yellow ball, with approximately 25% less compression. We can expect a bounce height range of 118-132cms. This increase in compression from the orange ball is hugely significant in a number of respects when considered alongside the increases in court dimension. In the previous article, it was explained that the progression from the red to the orange resulted in a wider range of contact points. This is even more so when moving to the green ball, due to greater bounce height and ball speed. Remember too that as our players develop better athleticism, faster racket head speed and a more expansive game, so we can expect the same of opponents. Smart players can use the faster and higher bouncing ball on the larger green court to their advantage by controlling time and space. Do your players have the ability to read the faster incoming ball, and do they have the ability to move and prepare quickly? Two additional challenges are:

1. The ability to vary the length of the swing, shortening or lengthening the take back on the swing according to time and

situation and the depth and speed of the oncoming ball; is this something you teach your players when returning first serves and aggressive groundstrokes, or when finishing from the mid court?

2. The ability to take and control balls at a higher contact point (correct semi western grips and contact points are key here), which allows a more offensive game and lets the player play closer to the baseline and further up the court.

THE SERVE

As explained in the red to orange article in the previous issue, the rules require a lower 80cm net on an orange court to allow the player to serve offensively. Coaches who ignore this effectively force a different trajectory, since the first priority for the server is to clear the net. An 80cm net, coupled with taller players and better serving technique should allow offensive serves, probably starting with the wide serve using a chopper grip, but eventually including the flat serve down the middle. As we progress to the green court, several things change for the server:

1. The baseline is further away from the net.
2. The net is higher.

These factors combined make the offensive serve more challenging unless good fluid technique has been developed through red and orange. However, players will be taller on the green court than on the orange one, and they should have better technique (better and more efficient use of the coordination chain), so offensive serves are still possible.

DON'T FORGET THE PLAYER

It's a commonly known phrase that good learner-centered coaching is about progressing at the pace of the player. Players need to believe that they can not only cope but continue to develop (and hopefully even excel) as they progress from one court size to another. In the authors experience, it is common for a player's game to appear to stop developing, or even to appear to get worse, as they progress from the orange to the green court. This is especially common in the first 3 months at green. If you think about it, it's understandable; the playing environment has changed (again) quite significantly. This is where coaching skills are really important; make sure that you work hard with the player and the parents to explain:

1. That it is normal to find it difficult to adjust to a bigger court and a faster ball. Many young players experience it.
2. That any challenges that the players face are temporary and quite normal.

3. That performance is more important than results during this period, and that good quality practice, focus on good basic technique and time will ensure that the player will soon adapt.

CONCLUSION

With the knowledge here behind you, the most important factor remaining is that the coach be positive, encouraging and supportive. These elements combined, will foster a positive environment for players making the transition, allowing your players to come through it with success.

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