



Red to orange... what does it really mean?

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ABSTRACT

The present article discusses the potential challenges young players will face when making the progression from Red to Orange tennis. Changes in ball flight and court size among others are proportionately much larger when compared with physical growth and maturation of the child making this step. Key issues in the red to orange transition are highlighted, along with appropriate solutions for successfully guiding juniors at this critical stage.

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INTRODUCTION

Here are some theories about coaching 8 and under players in a Red Tennis 10s programme:

1. Being a really good kids coach is one of the toughest jobs in tennis. It's easy to be a bad coach, but being a great coach to Under 8's in a red programme is hard.
2. 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.
3. Moving players from red to orange is one of the most important decisions you can make, and you have to get it right. Delaying is not so bad, but if you move them up too early, the sight of little players who are starting to develop sound basic shapes, game understanding and an excitement about playing and competing is replaced by young children floundering in a space which is too big to cover, having to fight to control the body, the racket and the ball.

This article looks at the facts associated with moving young children from red to orange. Much of it is really obvious; so obvious perhaps you have never stopped to think about what they actually mean for the kids you teach! It will also point out just how important it is to get the technical foundations and the playing environment right to give your players a chance not just to continue to play, but to continue to improve for years to come. Just stop and think! Good coaches move at the pace of the learner (bad coaches move at their own pace, the wrong pace or no pace at all!). If we follow that logic to its conclusion, the court needs to grow at the pace of the learner too. Just imagine that you decide to move your player from the red group to the orange court. In the week that they complete their last lesson on a red court, they will average approximately 127

cms in height (World Health Organisation statistics). They will still average approximately 127 cms the following week when they start on the orange court! But in the same period the court length has increased by 7 metres, and the average ball rebound height has increased from 95-110 cms to 110-115 cms. Can you start to see the challenge for a young child?!

It is hoped that as you read this, you will reflect on the abilities of your players and on your own coaching. Is there more that they should be doing in the red programme, can they be doing it better, and could your coaching improve? Let's explore things in more detail.

COURT DIMENSIONS

Depending on which manual or guidelines you read, a red court for official competition will measure 11 x 5.5m to 12 x 6m. The orange court should be 18 x 6.5m for singles (ITF, 2010). In square metres, this means an increase of 93%. The percentage increase for the height of the child over the same time could be 0%.

COURT WIDTH

We know that a key part of coaching is to teach players to receive the oncoming ball, move and prepare, strike and recover. Movement requires coordination and therefore has to be taught and learnt.

An increase in court width from the red court to the orange court, assuming we are going from 5.5 or 6m at red, to 6.5m at orange, is a proportionate and realistic increase in the court coverage required across the baseline, and therefore should not present many challenges for young players.

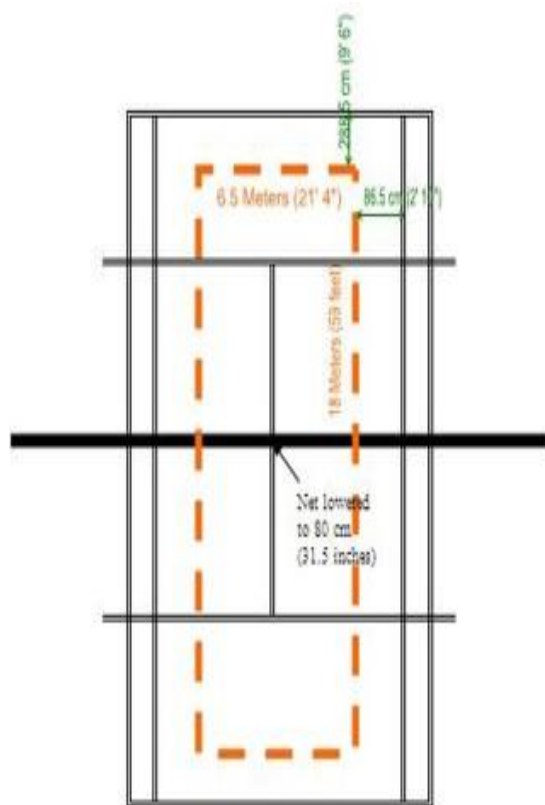


Figure 1. Orange court dimensions.

COURT LENGTH

An increase in court length from 11 or 12m to 18m means that the court is 3 - 3.5m longer at each end. This means that an awful lot suddenly changes in the way that a young child needs to play the game:

1. The court is longer, so the player needs a longer and faster swing to propel the ball the additional distance to keep the opponent at the back of the court. This will be helped by progressing to a 63 cm (25 inch) racket. Has the player learnt the correct shapes on the red court based on simple shoulder-led swings and stable wrist which do not break down under pressure and which can be replicated consistently? If the answer to this is "no", then it is unlikely that the player will cope with the increase in swing length (changing from a straight take back or very shallow loop at red to a longer loop at orange). Remember that players have to learn control and rhythm first, before faster racket head speed is added.
2. Greater racket head speed should eventually result in more consistent depth being achieved in rally situations but this will take some time. However, the likelihood is that greater distance will also result in higher trajectories to help achieve the greater distance required. Higher trajectories mean higher bounces, which, coupled with the slight increase in compression of many

orange balls, results in higher average contact points. Have your players developed eastern or semi western (not extreme!) grips by the time they leave the red court, so that they can progress on the orange court to deal with higher bounces?

3. A longer swing with a steeper path and a semi western grip will result in more topspin. The extra length of the orange court facilitates greater spin. By the time they leave the red court, can your players cover the width of the court and play from out wide? On the orange court you can be sure that they will have to play more balls from wide positions and from short angles.

4. Take a look at the distance from the orange baseline to the net. Now consider the stride length of 8 and 9 year old players. It's a long way to the net, so asking players to approach is a tough expectation. Can your late red players change the tempo of the rally by hitting a little harder or flatter with intent and accuracy and do they have the receiving skills to recognise an opportunity to approach? If not, it is likely that they struggle to approach with ball speed and accuracy to allow them the chance to approach the net? Do they have the ability to play a basic volley on the red court, so that they can take this to the orange court and learn to volley from close to the service line (they may not get much closer to the net than this due to the distance)?

THE BALL

1. A longer court means more time, but orange balls are smaller so they travel faster. They have slightly greater compression, so they fly and bounce a little faster too. Players should in theory have better technique, and so overall we can expect increases in ball speeds. Players should be developing better depth perception (depth perception in young tennis players lags behind width perception) and so should be seeing the ball more quickly.



2. Higher trajectories and slightly higher average bounces will result in more variation in the height of their contact point when the opponent attacks fast and wide. It's fair to say that on the red court the range of contacts should be narrower, usually between knee and stomach height. At orange, as the players face more offensive opponents, the range of contacts extends, not just to knee to shoulder height but also wider and shorter as more spin and angles are used in attack. Do your players have good receiving skills by the time they leave the red court so that they can continue to progress on the orange court? They need to establish consistent contact points early on, so that the range of heights of contact points can be extended as the game becomes more dynamic (attacking and defending) on the orange court.

3. Higher trajectories and slightly higher average bounces mean that players will have to play from far from the net and well behind the baseline when the opponent plays high and deep. Has your player learnt to see the ball early and move backwards at red, so that they can defend effectively from deep on the orange court?

HEIGHT OF THE NET

A red net should measure 80 cms. Given that the orange game is played on regular courts with lines added, many coaches forget to lower the net to the same 80 cms (or can't due to an absence of net winders!). This effects the serve and tactical intentions:

1. I've already explained that whilst the length of the court has increased significantly in a short period of time, the player won't have grown much at all. The same can be said about the distance to the opponents service box and the height of the contact point on the serve. Have your players learnt to serve with a fluid action, using a consistent ball toss? If not, the serve cannot progress to become an offensive stroke, and will instead be attacked by better opponents at every opportunity.

2. A net height of 80 cms allows for angles to be created on wide serves, even when the extra distance of the orange baseline is taken into account. But players can only serve offensively if they are able to apply racket head speed and spin to the serve. By the time your players are leaving the red court, can they serve consistently and fluidly with a chopper grip? If not, they'll struggle and this needs to become a priority at early orange. The lack of spin, direction and ball speed does not create the angles which are offered by a longer court, extra width and a lower net, and the player will struggle to build or attack with the serve.

3. Good basic technique on the serve is also essential to control the longer 63 cm (25 inch) racket which is needed on the orange court. If the technique is not well developed with the 58 cm (23 inch) racket on the red court, the 63 cm will be even harder to control.

SOLUTIONS

The aim of this article is not to stop you moving players from red to orange. It's more about making you think, just taking time to reflect and understand the issues thrown up by the change in the playing environment. Progression and moving players up is good, provided that it is done in the right way and at the right time. It's a decision to be made by the coach, not the parent or the player! Nor is it simply about progressing players as soon as they pass their 8th birthday. Hopefully you are now a little clearer about the physical, physiological and technical considerations that also have to be considered. These are your field, one in which you need to be the expert, so take your time and make the right call. There are some things you can do to phase the orange court in, to reduce the shock a little:

1. Gradually introduce the progression to orange by allowing players to double up for a set period as they are preparing to leave the red programme. If they can play on red courts and orange courts every week for a period of time, it provides a more gradual induction

2. Introduce the orange ball at the end of red. This will allow players to get used to slightly different ball characteristics. Make sure you do it the right way round – moving to the orange court with the red ball won't work!

3. Turn the players round so they face a different way. Your players will have grown up playing across the court on the red court. At the end of the red programme, try playing from the service line over the 80 cm net. From there you can gradually extend the length of the orange court, as you probably did at red.

4. Parent education is vital. We spend so much time with the players but we ignore the ones who make the decisions, pay for lessons and drive them to sessions. Good communication to parents is essential. If they understand the issues at stake when progressing players, they are more likely to be on your side. Work with them rather than without them.

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