



Incoming!: Reception skills.

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ABSTRACT

Reception skills are crucially important in the development of young tennis players, indeed many of the mistakes or difficulties a child experiences in rallying come down to their ability to perceive and receive the oncoming ball. This article highlights the importance and practicalities of developing reception skills.

Key words: Reception, Perception, Receiving Skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Tennis is often listed as a “sending and receiving” sport. In fact I would change that to “tennis is a receiving and sending sport!” Only the serve starts with the sending process. The remaining shots all start with the reception process. Reception is the core skill of our game and without it you just can’t play!

With ‘Serve, Rally, Score’ now being our mantra in Tennis 10s and understanding that a child will perceive themselves a tennis player only when they can rally; reception is key to successfully working with young players. Yet still much greater emphasis placed on the mechanics required to send the ball than those to receive it.

Some challenges for children in receiving are due to:

- A still maturing eyesight
- Lack of experience, limiting their opportunity to use certain aspects of anticipation
- Difficulties with de-centring (applying various pieces of information to a problem or situation)
- The application of effective visual search and cue utilisation
- Complex coordination of movement required to accurately position themselves once they have processed the visual information

There are also challenges from the different characteristics of ball flight that are provided by the nature of the game itself:

- Two flights of the ball (from racquet to bounce and then from bounce to racquet)

- Different speed and height combinations

- Varying degrees of spin

As with most aspects of working with 10 and under players, this is further complicated by a player that is constantly developing both physically and cognitively. A six year old doesn’t see the world in the same way that a 9 year old does, and has different physical and coordinative capabilities. We are not just dealing with a changing game but also a changing child. However, many of the challenges that the game and the development of the children presents can be overcome.

Ready

Creating time for a player is crucial at an early age. A great ‘ready condition’ is important from the start, setting the player in an alert position and helping them to understand that they will have to move from this position. Setting the simplest of visual clues is also important. Encouraging a player to react at the point the ball strikes the opponents strings, gives the most concrete visual clue to the player. Part of creating this condition is to ensure that we set a movement cycle in place also so that players develop good recovery habits right from the start. Too many static hitting drills can inhibit this and ideas like standing on a spot should be avoided as they serve to further inhibit a player’s natural movement.

Space

Creating court boundaries may not seem essential to supporting the development of reception skills, but actually they are crucial. The boundaries (baseline and sideline) determine the characteristics of the ball within that space. Making a wider court will mean that a player understands that they will have to move more laterally and a longer thinner court

will reduce lateral movement and mean that a player must only move forwards and backwards. Changing the size and shape of the court will mean that as coaches we can create a relevant level of challenge and success for players.



Reaction Time

Once you have clearly set the player and space to start the process it's really important to ensure that players react quickly enough. A simple drill to start is to get them to call out if the oncoming ball is going to their forehand or backhand or if the ball will land short or deep. To ensure that players read the oncoming ball at its earliest place, add a third player at the net who must call out a key word as the ball crosses the net. The receiving player must call out the direction (or depth) before the net player calls out ensuring that they react to the ball before it reaches their side of the net.

This also creates the start of the anticipation process, as players implicitly start to read the hitters racquet face and swing to help in their decision. This can be further enhanced if the coach changes their swing shape or body position when feeding balls.

Watch the Ball

How many times have we said this as coaches? But just watching is not enough in fact we need to focus on the ball and block out other information. This "visual selection" is important as young players find it hard to stay focussed. Some players may "see the ball" very clearly but not identify the key points in the flight of the ball. A simple practice without rackets is to clap when the ball hits the ground. Do this with a partner and try to see if both players clap at the same instant. Add an extra degree of complexity by trying to clap at the ball's peak as well.

A few simple focus drills once a player is rallying could be

- Write numbers on the balls and players must call out the number that they see
- Use different coloured balls that must be hit to different places. Green balls cross court and orange balls down the line.

- Opposites. When one player hits topspin the other must hit slice and vice versa.

Anticipation

Of course by far the most sophisticated element of reception is anticipation. There are a few things that you might consider to help players to gain more insight.

- Do as many drills as possible with a partner at the other end. Players need to get used to observing and reacting to the opponent.
- Explain the geography of the court. As they move into orange tennis help them to understand the percentages.
- Encourage them to watch the body position and racquet face of the opponent
- Link shots together logically in drills to ensure that players understand what are the likely sequences

During the 6 – 10 age group players are going through greater physiological and cognitive development than at any other time. Their bodies are growing and developing, including the maturation of their eyesight which does not meet adult levels until the very end of this age group. And while red, orange and green evolves into not just a participation programme but also a player development model we must consider the part that reception skills play, not just in helping kids to play but also in helping them to play better!

Flights

Most young players do not struggle with the perception of direction of the ball, however tennis provides its own unique challenge due to most shots being hit after two flights of the ball (from racquet to bounce and then from bounce to racquet). Most young players do a good job of assessing the first flight of the ball and we know this because they move very close to the bounce. In fact most move way too close. The challenge for us is to help them move into a position that allows them to make a comfortable contact in a position of strength. In short they have to make room between the bounce and the impact point and usually this means striking a ball as it falls.

Before moving to explain this let me say that there is a big difference between hitting on the rise intentionally and hitting on the rise because you are simply in the wrong position (by accident).

Some drills and tools that we can use to help players with this are:

- Catching the ball in an upturned cone, bucket or baseball cap. This encourages players to back off and catch the ball as it falls

- Hitting after two bounces. Encouraging players to move away from the first bounce and create space

- Controlling the ball with a foot or knee. Players instinctively move back to find space to do this.

These practices can be used for short periods (just a few minutes) and sandwiched by periods of hitting. Players will quickly transfer the skill into their rallying skills finding space between the bounce and the hit and not rushing the ball.

SUMMARY

Reception skills are fundamental to the development of young players, and should receive as much if not more focus the stroke mechanics – as without reception skills children will not be able to implement good technique in a game situation.

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