Helping children to learn scoring and rules.

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ABSTRACT

'Serve, rally and score' - this article is about how scoring and rules are learned alongside the skills needed to serve and rally, progressing to a full understanding of tennis rules and scoring.

Key words: Counting, Rules, Competing, Tennis specific rules, Tie breaks, Short sets.

Received: 22 July 2010.
Accepted: 19 August 2010.
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INTRODUCTION

Tennis is a game with scoring and rules, and learning about them is as important as other aspects of the game. So we must include them in our teaching from the very beginning.

Scoring is a measuring tool and in its simplest form is counting and can be done in anyone's first lesson. Even three year olds can count to three! Tennis specific scoring requires an understanding of tennis rules, and simple rules can also be included in anyone's first lesson. Competing is fundamental to the final objective and the reason for rules and scoring.

Counting

Counting is good fun, and very satisfying for starter players. In the first place it's a way of measuring success and improvement and in the second place it can be competitive when children are ready to understand that concept.

Players can count an individual skill, and a cooperative skill with a partner or in a team.

Examples:

• Catch a ball after a bounce
• Throw overarm at a target
• Self-rally into a small area on own or alternately with a partner
• Running round cones

Coaches can set the counting in different ways depending on the ability of the children to count. The very young can count to three then win a cone and start again. After a time they can count how many cones they have. Older players can count how many in a set time or how many in a row and remember their highest score and try to beat their personal best. Competitively they can count and race to see who gets to a certain number first.
Examples:

- Catch a ball after a bounce and after three catches collect a cone. How many cones at the end?
- Throw overarm at a target. Five attempts. How many out of five hit the target?
- Self-rally into a small area. How many hits in twenty seconds?
- Running round cones. Who can run round ten cones first?

It's good for their concentration to count for someone else, or count with someone else in a synchronised activity.

Examples:

- Self-rally with a partner. One player hits ten while other player counts.
- Self-rally with a partner. Each has their own ball and the hitting is at the same time for both balls. Count together

Counting activities and skills will continue to be a part of a tennis lesson even when a player can play and score points. Counting skills are sometimes a better measure of improvement than match results because they are individual and not affected by an opponent. This is important for retaining the long term interest of young players.

Rules

In lots of activities, coaches can include simple rules that help children understand the concept of rules and the importance of adhering to them.

Examples:

- Catch a ball after one bounce
- Stand behind the line to throw at a target
- Self-rally into a small area with feet outside the area
- Run round the cones. If you touch a cone, go back to the beginning

Tennis specific rules

Some tennis specific rules have already been learned. For instance, when the other player misses the ball or hits the ball into the net, the rally ends. That's easy!

More tennis rules can be learned whilst learning to serve and rally. The first is about court boundaries. Define a court boundary with marked lines and then explain what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’ and that ‘on the line’ is ‘in’. Children often don’t watch the ball to the very end of its flight, so do activities to practise calling balls in and out, and get them to act as umpires for each other.

The ‘only one bounce’ rule may be difficult. Play games where children have to count bounces to help them to watch the bounces and then explain that it's the first bounce that counts.

Some serving rules can be learned well before they are able to serve from the baseline. First the rule about standing behind a line, then the concept of two chances. Set up two serving areas on the court and players have two chances to serve into each area. If it’s ‘in’ the first time, they move to the other area. If it’s ‘out’ they have a second serve. Remember also to teach players the let rule.

Other rules come with competing………

Competing

Competing must be carefully introduced, ensuring that players understand the rules and the scoring, and that the game is always fair.

Counting individual skills can be a good place to start competing when they are ready. Coaches can congratulate the player with the highest score. Ideally that player should consequently be challenged in the next game with a more difficult task so that someone else wins. This results in lots of winners.

The first team games do not involve cooperation. They can be in teams but still do an individual skill such as self-rally. The blue team players collect blue cones and the red team players collect red cones for every rally of five. Count up all the cones for each team at the end. Later, teams can play cooperative games against other teams.

Introducing an opponent can be done during small skill counting games. They can count for each other and see who gets the most, and then can go on and play against another opponent.

During serve and rally activities the players can be helped to understand the ways they win a point against an opponent.

1. the opponent misses the ball
2. the opponent hits ball into net
3. the opponent hits the ball out
4. the opponent lets the ball bounce twice
5. the opponent does a double fault on serving
6. the opponent hits the ball with anything other than the racket

Counting and remembering the points is difficult because children of this age have difficulty focusing on more than one thing at a time, and as they are concentrating on hitting the ball. So it helps if they collect cones, put pegs on their shirts or on the net, or put a ball in a hoop for all the points they win.

Soon they gain confidence and don’t need the scoreboard. They can umpire each other’s games and be encouraged to call out the score after every point and check that both players agree.

**Tennis specific scoring**

If players can confidently play and count points, and can serve diagonally, they are ready to learn to score a tie break. This should be while players are in the red stage and it should be easy with all they know already. The complication of where to stand to serve and return for each point each point will need some explicit teaching help and extra resources.

For instance, put out coloured cones at the side of the court and each player is allocated a colour. Cones the right way up mean serve from the right side and upside down cones mean serve from the left side. Each time a point is played the ball is moved to the next cone indicating who should serve and from which side.

Or encourage teenage players or parents to help. Give them tie break scoresheets to help them.

**Tennis Scoring scoresheet**

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**SUMMARY**

Scoring and rules ultimately give purpose to technique and tactics and should be given a fair share of attention in lesson time. The approach is an integrated one. There is no “Today we are going to learn the rules” or “Today we are going to learn how to score”. They are learned alongside the learning of physical, technical and tactical skills almost unknowingly to the players. They are all part of the game. One day, however the coach may say “Today we are going to play a tie-break” and it will be easy because the foundations are all in place.

**REFERENCES**
