Competition formats and considerations for 10 and under players.

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ABSTRACT
This article suggests a series of key considerations to offer competition for 10 and Unders that provides a positive and rewarding experience.

INTRODUCTION
Since 2007, the ITF Tennis...Play and Stay campaign has highlighted the importance of appropriate competition and the use of different competition formats for young players. The more recent launch of the ITF Tennis 10’s campaign has increased this focus yet further, stating that from 2012, the ITF aims to introduce a rule that will mean that all 10 and under competition must be played by using the appropriate red, orange or green ball.

Whilst this is an enormous step in the ITF’s drive to improve the way in which tennis is introduced and taught to players aged 10 and under, there are other vital considerations which must be considered alongside the use of slower balls and smaller courts in order to make competition a vital part of the development of a young tennis player.

This article poses a number of key questions which we need to consider if we are to get the provision of competition for young and developing tennis players right at 10 and Under level:

1. what is appropriate competition?
2. what are the key characteristics of 10 and under players?
3. what do these characteristics tell us about which are the best competition formats for 10 and Under players?
4. what is the ultimate competition for 10 and Unders?

APPROPRIATE COMPETITION

It has frequently been said that appropriate competition drives the sport. It should also be understood that it is the role of the coach to organise competition at local or club level, both within and outside of lessons. Competition that is attractive and varied and that is not stressful, threatening or result-oriented is what we should be aiming for with 10 and Unders. If we achieve it, we have a means of growing the sport and increasing the amount of competitors, rather than just the amount of players, who participate.

So, appropriate competition for 10 and Under players means it must be:

- suitable - the same type of competition is not necessarily right for all 10 and Under players.

- simple - Formats and scoring systems need to be simple, so that players understand what to do and how to play and score.

- consistent with emotional maturity - Young players are emotionally immature, and often do not know how to react to winning and losing.
- about being with friends - at a young age, tennis should be a fun sport to enjoy with friends.

- short – children can get tired and bored quickly, especially if they are not stimulated

Getting it wrong by offering competition which is not so appropriate may mean:

- excessive pressure on young players
- negative impact on performance
- developing low esteem and motivation
- a developing lack of self confidence

It is certain that these effects will result in players disliking tennis.

SOME KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF 10 AND UNDER PLAYERS

Once we understand what is meant by appropriate competition, we next need to consider a few characteristics of young tennis players:

- even the best 10 and Under players in the country are still 10 and under! This means that even though they may be very good at tennis, they will still behave like young children. Resist the temptation to make them grow up too soon.

- 10 and under players are not far from fully grown, so need balls that bounce lower and courts that are smaller

- 10 and under players are immature. It’s not their fault; they are just young kids who lack experience and don’t always know how to react in certain situations. Winning and losing are not always easy to deal with, some are more competitive and driven to win than others and young children find it difficult to understand that the reason they lost is because the opponent is simply a better player.

- children get upset or give up when they don’t understand. To starter players tennis scoring is not logical, and it takes time to learn the rules and how to score. If this is not handled sensitively and players are not taught the rules and scoring, competition becomes more threatening and stressful

- kids love to play games, so tennis needs to be a game they can play with their friends. Players who lose more often than they win may find this hard to accept. Playing in a team and being with friends de-emphasises the result and reinforces the social aspects of the sport

Understanding young children and the different formats available to us means that appropriate competition can more easily be organised.

Competition could range from being:

- more social to more competitive and serious
- lots of shorter matches to straight knockout
- team to individual
- singles to doubles
- 15 minutes to 1 week
- 5 minute matches to 2 hour matches

WHICH COMPETITION FORMATS ARE BEST FOR 10 AND UNDER PLAYERS?

We can categorise competition in a number of different ways, but for the purpose of this article, we’ll do so by saying that competition can either be:

- elimination formats (traditional knockout events, where half of the players are eliminated at the first round)

- round robin formats (where players are placed in boxes with other players. During the event, every player plays the others in that box. Winners progress to a next round or directly to a semi final or final depending on numbers)

- rotation formats (where players play matches against everyone else in their group before all players are rotated so that they are given a new opponent every round)

- challenge formats (league- or pyramid-type formats usually played over a longer period of time where players challenge others above them to a match, and where players change places in the league according to results)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMAT</th>
<th>ADVANTAGES FOR 10 AND UNDERS</th>
<th>DISADVANTAGES FOR 10 AND UNDERS</th>
<th>OK FOR 10 AND UNDERS?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ELIMINATION</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Weakest players lose early on Half the players eliminated at first round</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAM</td>
<td>Playing with friends De-emphasises results</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROTATION</td>
<td>Variety of opponents Many short matches in short space of time</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHALLENGE</td>
<td>Social element of challenging friends to a match</td>
<td>Best done over longer period of time, so can take a long time to complete all matches</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to understand the advantages and disadvantages of each format by considering what we know about young children and the way they play and view tennis at a young age. From a participation point of view, elimination formats clearly suit the best players and are detrimental to younger, weaker or starter players. The thought of facing a stronger player in the first round with the realistic prospect of losing in the first round is not appealing. It is therefore safe to conclude that elimination formats should not be used with players aged 10 and under, but instead should be replaced by formats where players are guaranteed a certain number of matches regardless of result. Hence team and rotation formats are best suited to younger players.

One final point to consider is that many shorter matches are better than one or two long ones. This is because it allows the players to play a greater variety of opponents, and also gets them to practise and gain experience in the vitally important start and finish of each match. If you have the choice, a format that allows you shorter matches is best!

**HOW LONG SHOULD COMPETITION LAST?**

It is not the length of the competition that will make it a great event, but making it last too long may have a detrimental effect. Young children and those who are new to competition will find that matchplay is a very new concept to them, and so should be introduced gently to it. It is wise to start with competitive games and short matches within lessons, before entering kids into longer, more formal events. Red events will typically last no more than 3 hours, increasing to 2-4 hours at orange. By the time players are at green level (and therefore aged 10 years old), 1-2 day events are acceptable.

**THE ULTIMATE 10 AND UNDER COMPETITION**

In summary, here’s a list of essential criteria for 10 and Under competition:

- team-based
- singles or doubles, or both
- no longer than 3 hours and 8 and under, and 2 days at 10 and under
- more shorter matches, rather than one or two long matches
- things to do between matches (off court activities and games and a social aspect such as a barbeque at the end)
- prizes or rewards for winners, but also for performance-based criteria such as best competitor, fair play award, most valuable player
- a simple and transparent scoring and organisation system which everyone can see and understand

By following these criteria, there is no reason why competition cannot drive 10 and under tennis!

**REFERENCES**

ITF Tennis 10’s manual (2010).
www.tennisplayandstay.com/competitions

**RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)**