The importance of slower balls and smaller courts in developing high performance 10 and under players.

Patrick McEnroe.

United States Tennis Association.

ABSTRACT

Slower balls and smaller courts at the 10 and under ages are very important tools for developing high performance players and it is vital that "performance" coaches worldwide understand and believe this.

INTRODUCTION

Most coaches now accept that Tennis10s (slower balls and smaller courts) are important for increasing participation by making it easier for the 10 and under players to play the game from the start. However in the USA we still have work to do to convince some coaches working with high performance players of the benefits of slower balls and smaller courts in developing high performance players.

As the Director of High Performance for the USTA and a former professional player, I was at first somewhat skeptical about how slower balls and smaller courts could help develop top players. It was difficult for me because, like most coaches and former players, I was trained as a junior on a full court with a regular ball and that's how our tournaments were as well. However, after observing the introduction of Quick Start Tennis (the USTA version of Tennis10s) I am now completely convinced that the rule change being introduced by the ITF regarding 10 and under competition will be a very positive step not only for increasing tennis participation but also in the development of performance players. The rule change eliminating the use of the regular ball in 10 and under competition from 2012 onwards will mean that the slower red, orange and green balls will be used in all 10 and under competition worldwide. I am sure that once the tournaments all use the slower balls and smaller courts, the coaches will follow suit and use them in training their 10& under players to prepare for tournaments.

To me the benefits of using slower balls and smaller courts for developing young performance players are obvious but here are just some of the positive things that I have observed:

• With the slower balls and smaller courts, the young players can implement advanced tactics that they could never hope to implement on a full court with a regular ball. Tactics such as serve and volley; approach and volley and attacking ground strokes are only possible because the ball is bouncing lower and because the players have a little more time. They can approach the net and feel confident that they can cover most passing shots and lobs. The slower balls and smaller courts certainly encourage the players to make more tactical decisions then they would do on a full court

• The lower bounce and the difference in ball trajectory facilitate the development of a wider range of strokes with more efficient technique in most cases.
• The lower net and relatively bigger service box (the player is closer) allows the players to develop a more attacking first serve at an early age

• The smaller courts make it easier for the players to cover the court and the slower balls make it possible for the players to stay close to the baseline and to take the ball early.

• The slower balls allow the players to develop and generate more racket speed while still maintaining reasonable control of the ball

• Because of the lower bounce, there is less chance of the players developing extreme grips and so more chance to develop a more all round game and less risk of injury at later stages

• There is more chance of the players to use one handed backhands either as their basic topspin shot and/or to use one handed slice backhands as a variation

• The slower balls and smaller courts encourage players to use spin and angles in order to move their opponent as this is usually the only way that they can maneuver them out of position on the smaller court. On a bigger court, spin and angles are less important as the high bounce of the ball and the larger size of the court often is enough to put the opponent under pressure with little need for spin and angle.

One of the big objectives of a coach should be to help build independence in their players. With the red and orange balls, very young players find it much easier to practice all of the game situations (serve and return: approach and pass and baseline game) even when the coach is not present. Previously the coaches would often have to use basket feeding in the lessons (usually dead ball feeding) to simulate the advanced tactical situations but the players struggled in practice and in match play without the coach present to do anything other than use ground strokes.

I have observed that the players in the USA who have come through red and orange tennis over the past few years display similar technical and tactical characteristics as top professionals. It’s so exciting to see! The development of these characteristics at an early age will no doubt save performance coaches valuable time that previously was spent developing these tactical characteristics after age 10 or on fixing flaws in players technique that often develop in those early years because of the high bouncing ball.

In short…..I am convinced!

Tennis 10s is going to change tennis for the positive…..by helping to increase tennis participation……..but also in making it easier to develop high level players!

If you are a performance coach…..don’t get left behind! Get on board…. and support Tennis10s now!