

TRAINING AND COMPETITION

SYNOPSIS

- In late-specialization sports such as tennis, patience is required for any training and competition program.
- Training should be age- and developmentally appropriate, and it should focus on essential athletic skills such as agility, balance, coordination, and speed as the foundation of all sport.
- Competition in children can promote healthy play and development, but such competition must not be “adult-style” in format and length. Instead, competition in children should provide short-format matches in which the goal is to play against many different people on different surfaces, to play team matches, and to avoid focusing on the win-loss record.
- There is an emerging consensus that tennis’ national governing bodies should not offer national 10-and-under tennis tournaments and should not develop a national ranking system for children 10 and under.
- The USTA Player Development model for 10 and Under Tennis integrates a long-term athlete development model with a progressive introduction of proper technique that recognizes the prime importance of playing tennis with the mind and eyes, the feet, and the hands.

Training and competition are the stepping stones for developing the person, the athlete, and the tennis player. From a community tennis perspective, training and competition allow the tennis player to have fun while improving his or her game and engaging in various competitive formats that reinforce having fun and

improving as a player. One of the great advantages of community tennis league play is that various formats may be utilized to suit the particular needs of the community and the individual, and league play fosters a sense of team camaraderie.

From a player development perspective, training and competition provide an opportunity for the national governing body (NGB) to take charge of the most pivotal pathway in a person’s overall development. All the evidence to date reinforces the notion that competitive tennis is an early initiation and late-specialization sport.^{2, 3, 9, 108} For a NGB to succeed in providing a framework that fosters excellence in personal, athletic, and tennis-specific development, the framework must take into consideration the fact that patience is required for long-term success. Any attempt to jump start or bypass the pillars of late specialization will more than likely lead to combinations of peaking early, dropping out of tennis early, burnout, and overuse injury. From such a perspective, the NGB has failed the individual and has failed as a morally responsible entity.^{17, 18, 90, 108}

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Patience does not mean avoiding competition. Indeed, much of the evidence presented at the USTA Youth Tennis Symposium embraced early and frequent competition, but the competition that drives and develops children is not the adult-model competition of traditional tennis.^{29, 31, 109} Children do not have the physical and psychological makeup to engage in long matches that utilize a best-

two-out-of-three-sets format, and there is no compelling reason to force such an adult model on developing children.^{15, 52, 83, 106} The brilliance of 10 and Under Tennis is that scoring and competition can and should be as adaptive as the courts and equipment.¹²¹ For NGBs to succeed in providing an ideal environment that fosters long-term success, they must be willing to legislate competition, which is the best way to influence the behavior of parents, coaches, administrators, and the developing player. Such legislation should be based on the best available evidence-based data and should not be driven by politics or traditional sentiments.⁷

The USTA has wrestled with junior competition for many years and recently amended the junior competition structure so that national tournaments are fewer and regional competition is encouraged. Twenty-five years ago, a USTA task force (Taking Care of Tomorrow) recommended the elimination of national championships and rankings for 12- and 14-and-under boys and girls.¹⁴² The rationale was to place a greater emphasis on developing technical correctness and tactical development while placing less emphasis on competitive outcomes and rankings. In this framework, the task force also recommended “short-court tennis” with modified equipment. The task force members believed that the childhood focus should be fun, and that early tournament play should be focused on round robins and compass draws rather than single-elimination tournaments.

As a result of the task force recommendations, national championships and rankings for 12-and-under boys and girls in the United States were discontinued in 1989. (They were reinstated in 1998.) Unfortunately, we do not have prospective outcome data regarding this experiment.⁴⁴ We do know that during the subsequent 10 years, junior membership increased by

24 percent.⁴⁴ However, this competitive structure shift occurred during the time of rapid expansion for ITF Junior Circuit and Pro Circuit events, and the international landscape changed accordingly. As a result, a progressively competitive entrance pathway to professional tennis became more easily accessible worldwide and many players (through their parents and coaches) took advantage of this pathway by turning professional at a young age.⁶¹ The pathway opportunities coincided with the reintroduction of tennis as an Olympic sport in 1988 and came with remarkable political opportunities, especially in Eastern Europe. The Revolutions of 1989 led to the overthrow of many Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, opening the world to many young, aspiring athletes. In addition, these young athletes received funding through the International Olympic Committee’s Olympic Solidarity Program, which provides assistance to newly independent countries. Therefore, while the USTA was focusing on one pathway of long-term player development, many other countries were rapidly launching into a new world of athletic opportunity, which was often coupled with sport specialization at a young age.

It is impossible to judge whether the recommendations of the Taking Care of Tomorrow task force, if followed through in whole, would have advanced the USTA’s constitution and mission of growing the game in a healthy manner while providing an environment that fostered the development of world-class players.⁶¹ It is fair to say, however, that the rush to early specialization worldwide had devastating consequences on players. Indeed, the WTA developed a special advisory panel that addressed this devastation in girls with forceful legislation limiting a player’s ability to compete in professional tournaments. This Player Development Advisory Panel created age-eligibility rules

in 1994 that did not allow girls under age 14 to play professional tournaments, and that allowed girls between ages 14 and 17 to play professional tournaments in a strictly enforced and piecemeal manner.¹⁰⁵ Such age-eligibility requirements were coupled with an extraordinary educational campaign for players, parents, and coaches, plus progressive recommendations for health-care delivery at all professional tennis tournaments. What was the driving force of this advisory panel? A somber realization that young female tennis players were becoming victims of parental, coach, and societal abuse, with numerous documentations of premature career cessation because of burnout, injury, and unhappiness.^{61, 105}

What has been the result of this bold intervention by the governing body of professional women's tennis? Remarkably, the WTA supported its legislation with considerable structural support that helped to ensure player education and well-being. At the same time, it collected data prospectively that clearly demonstrated a positive result from the interventions. Published 10 years later in a peer-reviewed scientific journal, the WTA's report demonstrated that the Age Eligibility Rule/Player Development pathway was associated with the following 10-year results:

- The median WTA career length improved in all age divisions between 14 and 17.
- The median career length and probability of a 10-year career or longer increased considerably.
- The Age Eligibility Rule was reinforced by health-care initiatives that effectively dealt with many of the known stressors in professional tennis. These initiatives included:
 - ◇ Annual sport-specific physical exams

- ◇ Enhanced sport science and sports medicine services
- ◇ Proactive coach, player, parent, and agent education
- ◇ Mentor programs
- ◇ Media training
- ◇ Guidance on proper training, periodization, injury prevention, and rehabilitation¹⁰⁵

The WTA continues to convene on a regular basis with international experts who are members of their Player Development Advisory Panel. It is the charge of these experts to analyze pertinent data and to make recommendations to the evolution of the Age Eligibility Rule, keeping in mind the safe and healthy development of the player. The WTA is a model of how legislation of competition, coupled with sport-science initiatives, improves the health and wellness of players while helping to assure player longevity.

The Age Eligibility Rule was reinforced by health-care initiatives.

The ITF has also developed age-eligibility rules for players who compete in ITF Junior Circuit events, and these rules are coupled with an expanding educational campaign and sport-science support. Unfortunately, the WTA and ITF have not agreed on a common rule, even though the evidence clearly demonstrates that internationally competitive junior players will compete in both ITF Junior Circuit events and professional tournaments. Thus, many highly competitive junior players compete in a world that has two separate age-eligibility and competition requirements, and it is entirely possible for such players to compete in the maximum number of tournaments allowed

by both governing bodies while ignoring a more unified holistic approach to competitive excellence.⁶¹

As discussed earlier, the average age of the top 100-ranked professional players has increased considerably since 1996. For men, the average age has shifted from 20.8 years to 22.3 years, and for women from 17.9 years to 21.6 years.³⁴ In part, especially for women, this shift toward late specialization resulted from legislative efforts. However, power has become important in today's game, and physical maturity is required to move and deal with power effectively. Any rush to turning pro at a young age has been counterbalanced by legislation and a shift in the nature of the game, and these forces have led unequivocally to the late specialization of tennis.

Children must develop athletically before they develop as tennis players.

All player development training and competition guidelines must be driven by long-term athlete-development concerns and late-specialization concerns.^{7,8} One could argue that a long-term vision of training and competition must artfully combine fun, athleticism, incremental deliberate practice, a healthy competitive structure, and patience by all. And we must always remember that having fun is the essential foundation of any long-term athletic development program. There is overwhelming evidence that player retention is driven by the child's perception that he or she is having fun.⁷

With regard to training, we now have a wonderful opportunity to incorporate the magic and science of 10 and Under Tennis. The magic is the fun. The science is the ability to learn tennis in an age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate manner.

From a tennis-specific viewpoint, the progression from the red to orange to green ball represents the pillar of training. Such ball progression will be discussed under "Transition from the Red to Orange to Green Ball." Irrespective of ball and court transition, the more primary foundation of training for 10 and Under Tennis is that children must develop athletically before they develop as tennis players.^{7,8} That is the best evidence we have to date, and therefore should become the basis for our training recommendations. As demonstrated in the table on the following page, although there is not universal consensus about the specifics, there is general agreement from representative countries and the ITF that tennis is but one part of player development in children.

This table also introduces competition recommendations. As a player progresses in age and development, the competitive landscape changes and becomes blended into adult-style competition. However, best evidence tells us that this progression must be slow and developmentally appropriate for 10-and-under players. They are not physically and psychologically equipped to play long matches, and the imposition of adult-style competition on children does not breed success. More importantly, a child's early exposure to competition should be fun. If the formats are successful, then the competitions become another tool for engaging the child while improving his or her tennis experience.¹⁵ The competitions should not simply be a way to measure a child's success, as such a measurement will result in failure for too many children.

Tennis is unique in that it can be played as both a team and individual sport for life.

COUNTRY AND ITF COMPARISON IN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TENNIS-SPECIFIC AND GENERAL ATHLETIC TRAINING

Country or ITF	Age	Tennis Training (Hours/Week)	Other Training (Hours/Week)	Yearly Matches	Total Hours (Weekly)
Australia	4 – 7	2 – 4	5 – 7	n/a	7 – 11
Canada	5 – 6	1 – 4	4	15 – 25	5 – 8
ITF	6 – 8	1.5	2.5	Various formats/ scoring with short match format	4
U.S.	5 – 8	1.5 – 3	4.5 – 8	n/a	6 – 11
Australia	7 – 8	4 – 5	5.7	15 singles/ 25 doubles	9 – 12
Australia	9 – 10	7 – 9	5 – 7	15 singles/ 25 doubles	12 – 16
Canada	7 – 8	4 – 9	4.5 – 5	25 – 40	8.5 – 14
Canada	9-10 (boys)	8 – 10	5 – 6	30 – 45 singles/ 30 doubles/ 40 practice matches	13 – 16
	9 (girls)	6 – 8	4.5 – 5.5	24 – 30 singles/ 16 – 20 doubles/30 – 40 practice matches	10.5 – 13.5
	10 – 11 (girls)	10 – 12	5.5 – 7	30 – 45 singles/20 – 30 doubles/30 – 40 practice matches	15.5 – 19
ITF	9 – 10	4.5	4.5	Various formats/ scoring with short matches and multi – match format	9 – 12
U.S.	8 – 12	4 – 6	8 – 11	20 (8 – 9 years old) plus unlimited practice matches	12 – 17
Australia	10 – 12	10 – 12	6 – 8	35 – 45 singles/ 15 – 25 doubles	16 – 20
Canada	11 – 12 (boys)	10 – 12	5.5 – 7	45 – 60 singles/ 30 doubles plus 48 practice matches	15.5 – 19
Canada	11 – 12 (girls)	12 – 14	4 – 5	45 – 60 singles/ 30 doubles plus 48 practice matches	16 – 19
ITF	11 – 12	6	5	70 singles and 35 doubles matches	11 – 16
U.S.	10 – 13 (girls)	15 – 20 (combined with other training)	15 – 20 (combined with other training)	40 (by 11 years old) plus unlimited practice matches	15 – 20
U.S.	11 – 15 (boys)	15 – 20 (combined with other training)	15 – 20 (combined with other training)	60 matches (by 14 years old)	15 – 20

Source: USTA

Tennis is unique in that it can be played as both a team and individual sport for life. Even progressive player development pathways can encourage some players to specialize as a team (doubles) rather than as an individual. Fed Cup, Davis Cup, and Hopman Cup epitomize team tennis and drive national participation in a team worldwide. In 10 and Under Tennis, players can share the fulfillment of competition if the format encourages fun. And if children are having fun, they will want to continue to have fun. With this in mind, 10 and Under Tennis competition can focus on team matches, short matches, and accessible competition. Why? Kids also like to play on teams, and the physical and psychological attention span of kids is of short duration. If matches are accessible and desirable, then the whole family can participate in the activities.^{75, 139}

Following are the ITF guidelines for 10-and-under tennis competition:

- Utilize short matches and multi-match formats.
- Do not record results for children who are 8 and under.
- Encourage the local network (clubs, community tennis associations, etc.) to cater to competition needs of all players.
- Provide user-friendly competition.
- Competition for 10 and Under Tennis is “playing a game.” Kids like to play games, and this does include winning and losing.
- Compete against a variety of opponents on a variety of surfaces.⁹⁶

These guidelines are in keeping with long-term athlete development and the realization by coaches and clinical scientists that healthy and fun competition is more important for a child than a competitive model that is driven by

win-loss ratio and rankings. Experts agree that when the professional adult model of wins versus losses, coupled with rankings, is forced on a child, then the child loses. Children do not have the coping mechanisms and physiological substrate to thrive in such an environment.

The ITF does not allow 10-and-under children to play international events.⁹⁶ There is an emerging consensus that national competition and rankings are inappropriate for 10-and-under tennis competition because such a structure encourages a focus on the win-loss ratio and rankings, which will then lead to a drive for early specialization. That is the balancing act.^{31, 109} NGBs should set the competitive structure so that they can shape a healthy behavior by coaches and parents while facilitating the healthy development of the child.

The table on the next page provides a snapshot of 10-and-under national competition and rankings in select countries.

RANKINGS

At the USTA Youth Tennis Symposium, there was universal consensus that rankings are inappropriate for children 10 and under.^{3, 31} Rankings are determined by competition that thrives on winning, and in children, this model is developmentally inappropriate. Parents, coaches, and administrators need to understand that children can be harmed by rankings more than they can be helped. Furthermore, all the evidence-based data reveals that rankings in children under age 10 have no predictive value in a child’s ultimate success in a late-specialization sport. Indeed, much of the data reveals a negative correlation between high rankings in children and sport participation as a teenager for late-specialization sports.^{54, 110, 135, 148} For the purpose of separating kids into levels, internal ratings or standings based on past results may be appropriate.^{35, 109}