

TRANSITION FROM 10 AND UNDER TENNIS TO 12-AND-UNDER TENNIS

SYNOPSIS

- Transition to 12-and-under tennis should be based on a child's development and technical proficiency. A green ball may be appropriate for many children as they begin to play on a full-size court.
- As children begin to compete in more matches, it is important to be placed in a competitive environment in which there are more wins than losses (but also where there is a balance between wins and losses).
- 12-and-under children are not allowed to play ITF Junior Circuit tournaments, but national governing bodies—including the USTA—sanction national 12-and-under championships.

The transition from 10 and Under Tennis to 12-and-under tennis (or to the 78-foot court) must be grounded in maturational and technical proficiency. Because 12-and-under tennis is most often played with the yellow ball, there are many potential pitfalls with assuming that the developing child is ready for a full transition, including:

- Most 12-and-under children are either pre-puberty or are just entering puberty. As such, they are still children, both physically and emotionally. An attempt to impose adult standards on such children poses the same dangers as doing so with 10-and-under children.^{31, 55, 56}
- Because the child is now playing "traditional" tennis on a full court with a yellow ball, the perception from parents, coaches, and players could be that the child must now behave in all "traditional" adult ways, and there may be an increasing emphasis on winning

rather than developing. Since children at this age are still focused on fun and since they are just beginning to develop an innate love of the game, shifting the emphasis to adult-style winning too soon may lead to a premature exit from the sport.^{31, 120}

- There is not a clear-cut linear correlation between the success of a 12-year-old and ultimate peak performance. With this in mind, the transition must be done cautiously and patiently, with attention to technique and emotional balance.³¹
- Even though 12-and-under children are often playing with the yellow ball, there are still many options available for making the transition maturation and technique appropriate, including:
 - ◇ The Rules of Tennis provide an option for children at this age to train and compete with a green ball. It is the wise coach and parent who recognizes that a child may need more time perfecting technique with a green ball before rushing to play with the yellow ball.
 - ◇ Many children at this age may continue to have short attention spans and limited endurance, even if they are developing in an appropriate manner athletically and technically. With this in mind, the rules of tennis allow for modified scoring that may be more appropriate. What is key is to adjust any competition to the needs of the player, and to consider shorter matches or Play Days as alternatives.^{31, 85, 120}

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With any type of competition, it is important for the coach and parent to be mindful of the competition goals. Remember, competition should be a tool for improving,

and the focus—especially at this age—should not be on winning. That being said, it is important that the child be placed in a competitive environment in which he or she has a win-loss record of two to one (2:1) or better. If the child is losing more regularly than he or she is winning, then it is difficult to continue to have fun and the chance of losing interest in the game increases.^{31, 85, 120} It is nearly impossible to try to improve when your psyche is fraught with unhappiness and feelings of being inferior. If the child’s win-loss record is very high, then improvement may be impaired as well. A major learning point of competition is to enter the competition with the result in doubt, as this fosters a creative approach to playing the game and forces technique mastery and shot selection to improve.¹⁰⁶

Competition at this age should also focus on children playing a variety of opponents

on a variety of surfaces, as this increases versatility, which is a key component of later success. Additionally, doubles play should be intertwined with singles play and should also be considered for ranking purposes. Most experts believe that early doubles play encourages a wide variety of shot selection and a more complete mastery of the tennis court, which is pivotal for the progressive development of the tennis athlete.^{31, 85, 120}

The ITF has placed restrictions on 12-and-under children. No child 10 years old and under is allowed to play international competition, and no child 12 years old and younger is allowed to play ITF Junior Circuit tournaments.⁹⁶ NGBs set their own rules of engagement for national play. As noted previously, the USTA had previously abandoned 12-and-under national competition and rankings, but has reinstated both, which is consistent with

NATIONAL COMPETITION IN SELECT COUNTRIES

Country	12-and-under National Championships	Competitive Structure	Singles/Doubles	Scoring Formula	Ball Used	National Rankings in Place
Australia	Yes	Round robin and playoff	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
Brazil	Yes	Single elimination	Singles & doubles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
Canada	Yes	Round robin with single-elimination playoff	Singles & doubles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes (under review)
France	Yes	Single elimination	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	No
Germany	Yes	Round robin with single-elimination playoff	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
Great Britain	Yes	Single elimination	Singles & doubles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
Japan	Yes	Single elimination and consolation	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	No
Netherlands	Yes	Single elimination	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
Russia	Yes	Round robin with single-elimination playoff	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
South Africa	Yes	Qualifying and feed-in, single elimination and consolation	Singles & doubles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	Yes
Spain	Yes	Single elimination	Singles	Best-of-3 sets	Yellow	No
U.S.	Yes	Compass draws (multiple elimination)	Singles & doubles	Best-of-3 sets, tie-break for 3rd set	Yellow	Yes

Source: USTA

NGBs worldwide. All national federations have annual singles national 12-and-under championships that utilize the yellow ball, and most countries have a national 12-and-under ranking in place. The majority favor a standard knockout competition structure, while some prefer round robin with qualification to a single-elimination playoff. The table on the previous page illustrates some select countries' approach to national competition.

It is interesting to note that there is experimentation within the USTA sections regarding the type of ball utilized in 12-and-under competition. This suggests that USTA sectional leadership is not necessarily pushing children to play a traditional adult-style

format in this age category.⁷³ Ideally, data will be collected and analyzed so that we can all learn from this non-uniform approach. The table below demonstrates how various sections are approaching 12-and-under competition.

In summary, the transition from 10 and Under Tennis to 12-and-under tennis should be done carefully, with an eye toward the developing child's capacity and interest in the game. The green ball and optional scoring provide an opportunity to help ensure that the developing child continues to advance with a mastery of technique and athleticism, while not pushing the child out of the game with adult formulas and expectations.

USTA SECTION 12-AND-UNDER COMPETITION			
Section	Junior Members	U12 Tournaments	U12 Ball Use
Caribbean	1,582	12	66% yellow, 33% green
Eastern	19,328	600	100% yellow
Florida	17,263	800 (U11 & U12)	11: 100% green; 12: 100% yellow
Hawaii Pacific	1,646	79	100% yellow
Mid-Atlantic	10,501	159	100% yellow
Middle States	10,298	113	100% yellow
Midwest	35,567	817	97% yellow, 3% green
Missouri Valley	8,036	220	100% yellow
New England	10,257	180	65% yellow, 35% green
Northern	5,361	35	100% yellow
Northern California	13,649	280	100% yellow
Pacific Northwest	5,905	238	86% yellow, 14% green
Southern	55,280	1144	60% yellow, 40% green
Southern California	16,021	350	100% yellow
Southwest	3,779	146	100% green
Texas	19,970	348	100% yellow

Source: USTA