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t no point in tennis history have teaching professionals been more important than they are today. As tennis organizations strive to keep the game growing, teaching pros continue to be brought to the fore as critical to the sport's long-term success

Tennis is not an easy game to learn. While the USTA, USPTA and PTR have all initiated steps to modernize and improve the methods and tactics teaching pros use to *teach* the game, these professionals also need to be well-versed helping players with their equipment. This is a vitally important aspect that, if ignored, can have a detrimental effect on whether a new player stays with the game beyond a brief introductory period.

Having the right equipment, and especially the right racquet, is a vital component of the learning process, and is too often overlooked—or even ignored—by teaching pros. Or worse, if the pro isn't knowledgeable about equipment, he or she may provide wrong information to a student.

Using a racquet with the wrong frame specs, or even the wrong string or tension, can be detrimental, especially for beginning players. A racquet or string that isn't fitted to the player's skill level and physical abilities will not only hamper their development and enjoyment of the game, but also can result in injuries that could put them on the sidelines—or out of the game completely.

Professional Racquet Advisor

Two years ago, recognizing the importance that coaches, teaching pros, retail store staff and others can—and should—have in helping players to enjoy and stick with tennis, the USRSA added the certification of Professional Racquet Advisor (PRA) to its offerings. (The USRSA created the Certified

RACQUET ADVISORS

EQUIPMENT

Influence Peddler

Teaching pros have an important role in helping players find the right equipment for their games.

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Stringer (CS) program in 1986, and in 1993 added the Master Racquet Technician (MRT) certification.)

PRA certification is for individuals working in the industry who are called upon to provide their expertise regarding racquet and strings but who don't actually service racquets. The certification was primarily designed for coaches and teaching professionals, so they can exhibit their knowledge and expertise in frame and string technology. In particular, it can showcase their ability to apply that knowledge in fitting players with the proper racquet and string set-up for their game.

To become a PRA, an individual must pass an exam covering all aspects of frame and string technologies, as well



as demonstrate an ability to apply that knowledge in fitting players with the right racquet and string. The annual exam also ensures that Professional Racquet Advisors are up to date on all the latest racquet and string technologies. (For more on becoming a PRA, visit www.racquettech.com.)

What are some of the basics teaching pros should know?

1 / The Frame

Frames can have many variables, and fitting a player correctly with each specification is vital.

Generally, most players can easily identify four racquet characteristics: power, maneuverability, shock (or comfort) and spin potential. Beginners may not be able to articulate these concepts, but if you listen, you can tell that they're feeling them. (Spin potential, however, may require some experience before it can be determined by new players.)

These four characteristics are what manufacturers consider when designing frames. They are trying to provide a variety or mix of these four characteristics to meet the needs of various playing styles and abilities. This is accomplished by altering the specifications of various frames in their line, for instance, making changes to the frame's stiffness to provide more power and less shock protection.

2 / Handle Size

While experienced players may have some wiggle room when it comes to sizing the handle, it is critical to have a properly sized grip for beginning and inexperienced players. If the grip size is too large or too small, the player will not have adequate control over the racquet, which can result in inconsistent shots—and possibly arm problems.

3 / Head Size

Again, for experienced players this may be more of a personal preference. The larger the racquet head, the more forgiving the racquet will be. Beginners will generally prefer an oversize.

Many of today's racquets have head sizes of 115 square inches or more, but many teaching professionals prefer to keep beginners in a 105- to 110-square-inch head size, allowing the student to learn to be more accurate with their swing, rather than being encumbered with swinging larger heads.

4 / Weight and Swing Weight

Weight refers to the actual weight of the frame, while swing weight is a measurement of how heavy the frame feels when held by the handle and swung. Although the two measures are related, they can be very different.

A frame with the majority of the weight in the head—head-heavy—will feel much heavier than its actual weight. Heavier swing weights provide more power and stability since there is more mass at impact with the ball, but the frame is also more difficult to swing.

A proper swing weight will be determined by the player's swing and skill level. If it is too heavy, the player may become fatigued too quickly and could have trouble getting the racquet through the swing to make proper contact with the ball. Too light, and the player may feel the racquet is very unstable, if they are playing at a level with balls coming in at higher velocity.

5 / String Pattern

The string pattern is simply the number of main and cross strings in a frame. Commonly, racquets have either 16 or 18 main strings and 18 to 20 crosses. However, there are exceptions. More "open" patterns—meaning fewer crosses and mains—cause bigger spaces between strings, will allow more ball pocketing (hence more spin on the ball) and more comfort, while a denser pattern will provide more string durability from experienced players.

6 / String and Tension

Today's strings are more diverse than ever before, from very stiff monofilament polyester strings to multifilaments made from thousands of microscopic fibers twisted together. Like the frame, choosing the proper string type and tension requires assessing the player's needs, and how that string and tension will work in the chosen frame.

For a player to perform their best, regardless of skill level, they need a frame that is best suited for their ability, swing speed and game. As players, we are consistently changing and in need of reevaluation, so our requirements will change.

We recommend each player be evaluated at least every three years, and more often for beginning players advancing in skill level. This will ensure that the player has the best racquet possible for their game. ■