



TEACHING TENNIS

Master Before the Match

There is plenty of fun in fundamentals. Stop all competition and focus more time on learning the sport.

BY BRENT ZELLER

We constantly hear people in this industry lament the decline in tennis participation. While we've been talking about this problem for decades, participation continues to wane. Is tennis such a bad sport that people simply don't want to play it? Definitely not!

As tennis professionals, we are teaching the best, yet one of the hardest, sports. Let's face it, it takes a lot of work and many years to get good at tennis. Yet we throw our students into competition before they've learned the fundamental skills of the game, then we wonder why they don't stay with it. To grow tennis, we have to shift our emphasis away from competition and over to learning.

Tennis has been all about competi-

tion—having people compete, in one “fun” game or another, from basically their first day on court. It's been accepted wisdom that the best way to get people used to the challenges of competition is to have them compete, as soon as possible and as much as possible.

Unfortunately, competing too soon programs problematic physical and psychological habits into a player's memory. Once bad habits are ingrained, improvement is difficult, and requires a lot of effort and desire. After a significant amount of poor performance and losing, people quit and go elsewhere. So, why do we make people compete before they “know” the fundamentals?

Can anyone give me a legitimate reason why people should compete before they've developed mechanically sound serves, groundstrokes and volleys? If

someone can't demonstrate competence in all the strokes, why are they keeping score? Once competition begins, the goal shifts from developing skills to trying to win or trying not to lose, and that's a big problem that limits long-term potential, performance and participation.

We need to teach people the physical, mental and emotional fundamentals of the sport—before they start competing. Competing before owning the fundamentals is a recipe for disaster, as participation rates show. Why do you think tens of millions of people have tried tennis over the years, and only a few million currently play? It's simple: They didn't learn the basics, so they lost a lot of matches, and it wasn't enjoyable. It's no fun being a loser.

The learning period in tennis needs to be significantly longer, without any competition, so that people can learn not just the physical fundamentals, but also mental and emotional fundamentals. The physical skills by themselves take a lot of practice and time to learn, and when you add in the mental and emotional skills, which every expert recognizes are the most important to success, there's no good reason to rush people into competition. Let players learn without the added pressure of competing.

After recognizing the devastating effects of the premature introduction of competition on people's games, I decided to remove all competition from my program, which I call “Effortless Tennis,” in 1992. I believe a non-competitive learning system, such as this, can be a key for how we can grow the game. With a non-competitive approach to learning, there is more success, more enjoyment and increased participation.

It's time to recognize that throwing people into competition before they are prepared is the reason our sport is struggling. When people know how to play the game, they will stay with tennis—and the game will grow. ■



USPTA pro Brent Zeller of San Rafael, Calif., is the author of “Evolutionary Education: Moving Beyond Our Competitive Compulsion.”