Building a Great Junior Program
Questions and Answers

Q: Do you think topspin is taught way too soon? Do you think learning a defensive foundation (elementary strokes) is preferable to an advanced foundation (learning topspin) in early stage development?
A: First and foremost I would address GPS to make sure the basic foundation of technique is there. Grip - Preparation and Swing Path. From there it is a progression of what you feel the player is ready for. Topspin is a skill that every competitive junior must learn. Once a player has demonstrated a basic level of competence with the technique, starting to develop the motor pattern of topspin will help advance the skill of the strokes.

Q: How does a junior get invited to a training camp?
A: A player gets selected through a combination of objective and subjective criteria with collaboration from the sections, coaches commission, national coaching staff and Player ID and Development department. Our aim is to keep the base as wide as possible for as long as possible and providing these supplemental opportunities for players competing on the competitive pathway.

Q: Is it better to start the day with strength and conditioning, or is this a non-factor?
A: Strength, power (speed) and movement are always better to perform when you are fresh. Mobility, coordination and conditioning can go beginning or at the end. If someone needs to focus on tennis skills (which most of the junior players are), probably should do the tennis first. Again, when the training block or it's a phase that focuses on something specific, that should be performed first. Also, as the programs gets more advanced, we can do strength, power, and movement at the end of the day under fatigue.

Q: Do you spend equal time on court and off court when it comes to mental skills training?
A: I don't think there is a set ratio. A lot of great mental work should be happening naturally on court in a very engaged, productive practice. That needs to be the core of training. But the additional daily mental skills practice or specific mental skill concepts can be addressed in an off-court session with that set objective and that skilled can be honed in that way. So I wouldn't get caught up in equal time on and off court - they should go together, and how it applies specifically for a particular player or group of players will depend on your read as a coach - that is what Jose Higueras calls the "art of coaching"!

Q: What motivational techniques do you use to get kids to turn up the power plant and increase their energy level in a practice session?
A: I try to keep it very simple with players and treat them as individuals. First, it is very important to listen to the players carefully, so many times we as coaches talk too much. When you listen carefully you establish a foundation for learning and trust between you and a player. Secondly, I feel strongly that kids will be motivated when they feel that they are improving and learning new skills. As teachers/coaches it is our obligation that real learning happens every day in practice. I believe that kids like learning new things, and they are looking forward to it...motivation should not be a problem as long as we as coaches are doing our job well. Finally, I'm a huge believer of taking players out of their comfort zone when training...I'm convinced that kids like to be challenged and they
will respond well to different obstacles and challenges...it is much more interesting and fun for players and coaches.

Q: If I'm working with a group of 14 year old 9th graders who have never played before, should I start them out with modified equipment and court?
A: You certainly could. The main gauge is their success. How can you help them be successful right away? It’s an awkward age and kids can be very self-conscious. They don’t want to look bad in front of their friends. Success builds self-esteem so using the modified balls or manipulating the space can help them learn and achieve and their confidence (and skill) will grow. Where you need to start depends on the coordination level of the group of kids. But for kids that age if you make it fun and not a demotion they learn quickly. Have you seen touch tennis? https://www.touchtennis.com/gb/ it’s a tour in Europe with adults playing on a modified sized court with a foam ball and 21” racquets and it is really fun. It’s grown-ups playing mini tennis!
The modified equipment and court size can be used as a tool for any age to help them achieve success. You can start the group with foam on the service line (which is 42’) or 36’ court and have them learn to rally and get rhythm. The red ball typically bounces a little too low for a 14 year old (it’s meant to bounce in the strike zone of a smaller player) but you could try it out and see how they do. Then as they improve and are successful, you can progress them through the ball colors and gradually increase the space through the length of the class. The only time the space they play on is regulated is in competition; so in training, you can modify the space to help them achieve success. Rally progressions help a lot too, we have different rally progressions that help them learn to time the bounce.
There isn’t a right or wrong way but being innovative with the variables you use to teach the kids can help them achieve success sooner and they will have a lot of fun.

Q: Do you emphasize that players younger than 13 should play multiple sports?
A: Absolutely! Playing multiple sports is important for children younger than 13 for many reasons. From a physical literacy point of view, kids who play multiple sports learn a variety of athletic skills in a fun way, it improves overall athleticism. Kids pre-puberty are at the optimal age to develop their athletic skills and playing different sports is a great way to do that. There is a chart in Positioning Youth Tennis for Success (page 60) that discusses the critical ages children can most optimally learn athletic skills. Not that they can’t learn them later but the years pre-puberty are the optimal time to maximize their learning.
From a mental/emotional standpoint it reduces boredom and burn-out when kids are involved in multiple sports. Kids become bored doing the same sport all the time. This can lead to them losing interest in the sport and motivation to improve their skills. Over-training can result in burn-out. Playing multiple sports keeps everything fresh.
From a health perspective, playing only one sport can lead to overuse injuries. There are alarming stats in this country that younger children are seeing an increase of overuse injuries due to early specialization. If you have a chance to read any of the work of Dr. Neeru Jayanthi, M.D. or information from the Aspen Institute that could help you further.
Nearly all of the kids I teach play multiple sports particularly our 12U players. I find if I know what else they play, I can relate tennis concepts back to them in terms they have learned in their other sports. It helps them connect the dots of movement and coordination. Additionally, and this is anecdotal, I find kids who compete in other sports approach competition on the tennis court in a more healthy way. They tend to be better competitors maybe because they are more used to competition? That is just my observation.
I think it’s also important to realize that multiple sports don’t have to mean organized sports. Families are so busy, it’s sometimes a tough ask for moms and dads to have so many activities. Free play, playing the backyard or in the
park with friends, can be equally if not more valuable. You can also include other sports in your lesson in the warm up and athletic development part of your classes.

Q: With the changes we are having to make for summer- kids not touching the balls only coaches. I feel this will cut down on so many of the net generation activities. Do you think it’s going to put net generation coaches going back to lines?
A: As we return to the courts it’s now a new frontier for coaches. We will have to factor in sanitation standards and social distancing on top of teaching children. I think most of the Net Generation activities will allow or can be adapted to keep distance. It’s going to be our challenge as coaches to find the games and activities that can be adapted and it’s going to take creativity and planning to keep things fun but safe. Most of the Net Generation activities are live ball either individual or with a partner, and we can help the kids keep space with designated spots for them to stand on or zones for them to stay in. I actually think having lines will create a problem because while you may be able to keep the kids from touching balls, in lines they will be too close to each other (and the younger ones tend to have more difficulty not touching each other!) In rally activities, they are separated by space: a line or a net.
In our program, it is likely we will have fewer 36’ courts on each side of the net to keep space between players and eliminate confusion on which ball is theirs. Having a low ratio is going to help, I would say a necessity. Other things we’ve been thinking about are: marking the balls with numbers and having children pick up or use only the number assigned to them, and using fewer balls so instead of a bucket, each player has their 4 or so numbered balls.

Q: Do you feel the American model of competition is too intense for kids?
A: I think competition is very important, but also the mindset that a player has and that the player’s family, coach, etc. have is very important too. It shouldn’t be just about winning and losing, especially at the younger ages. It should be about having fun, making good decisions out there on the court, being affirmed for those good decisions, etc. The pressures that are felt can be harmful, but also I believe can be very healthy if framed in the proper context and in a healthy perspective.

Q: What are some mindset/mental skills tools or apps to use with your players?
A: I believe that the most important "tool" is the trusting relationship and communication between the player and the coach. As a team, they have to spend a lot of time with proper goal setting regarding training and competing...that has a direct effect on players’ motivational level and overall mindset. In my mind the most important mental skills are: focusing skills (routines) and relaxation skills (breathing). These skills have a direct impact on players’ pressure tolerance. Most of these skills should be learned on the court with realistic and challenging situational point play. I strongly believe that the best training happens outside of players' comfort zones...as coaches we need to create these conditions on a daily basis.

Q: Any suggestions on how to build mental skills in the 12-14 yo?
A: I’m a firm believer that training outside of players’ comfort zones is the best way to learn new skills including mental skills. I would spend a lot of time with focusing skills (routines) and relaxation techniques (breathing) during situational point play...coach should create challenging and stimulating point play situations for players to learn how to recognize and handle the pressure moments. Training like this will increase players' pressure tolerance and confidence when competing.

Q: How many sets per week would you recommend a player play at each level starting from intermediate, advance and high performance?
A: I believe that playing the game is the best way to learn it; it is more fun and stimulating for players than just endless drilling. That said, players need to obtain a certain skill level of hitting the ball and keeping it in play in order to enjoy it. I would spend at least 50% of training time to play situational points and sets with intermediate and advanced level players. HP players need to consider which part of training periodization cycle they are in...generally speaking, here in the USA, we do not play enough points and sets comparing to players from Europe and South America. During the normal training period, I would like HP players playing at least 10+ sets per week...those sets should include straight up sets and situational sets. Please also consider individual differences among competitive players...some players are already strong competitors when dealing with pressure moments, so they would need less time with straight up set play.

Q: What are some drills that we can do to simulate match play pressure or is set play the only real tool to achieve that?
A: I like situational point play drills to improve pressure tolerance. You can create all kinds of different pressure scores and situations tailor made for your specific needs. For example, as a server you have to win your game point...if not your score goes back to zero in that game...great way to focus on game points. I’m also a big fan of winning three (3) points in the row to win a game. I also like putting something on the line (an incentive) when you are playing sets and matches...a Gatorade, for example, for a winner can increase pressure very nicely!

Q: What tricks are out there to get coaches out of their comfort zones? Established coaches are set in their way to must at times and not open to change too much.
A: Unfortunately I’m not aware of any tricks to get it done...we just have to rely on coaches’ willingness to learn new concepts and ideas. If and when a coach has a teacher’s mentality, there should be no hesitation to learn new ways to teach and coach. As a parent, you can ask your kid’s coach to keep up with certain coaching education requirements and keeping an open mind regarding always evolving training methods. Smart coaches will keep up with new training ideas and keep on improving their skill set.

Q: What is the design of your first lesson with 10 year old beginners? How much time do spend with the parent.? Assume it’s a private lesson.
A: Typically, before the first lesson in the process of the parent hiring me, the parents and I have already had a conversation about my philosophy, my teaching style, the progression and where their child fits, why their child wants to play tennis, and what their goals are. By the time we are on court, the parent isn’t going to be involved in the lesson.

What we cover depends on the time we have. If it is a half hour that goes quick, I will focus on maybe two things in that time. If it is an hour we’ll typically start the first lesson with an assessment of their level of athletic level, establish a rapport with the child by asking questions.

When introducing tennis skills, for a 10 year old who has never played, I’m going to start them orange ball on the service line. While tennis is played eyes-mind-feet-then hands, I am going to introduce tennis to them backwards, starting with the hands. Basics such as ready position, athletic stance, grip, unit turn (on the forehand we call it “high-five-hands”) small c shaped swing to contact, and finish. I start more static and progress to more dynamic if/when they are successful. If they are progressing well we may try to rally even if it is modified, it really depends on the child.

If we have time we will introduce the serve. That is a progression all of its own, deconstructed and broken down and put back together as they progress.

The first lesson is mostly an assessment and introduction. Getting them excited about tennis, connecting with the child, phrasing corrections in a positive way, bringing energy, praising effort and telling them what they did well, is the most important. If they had fun and want to come back you start building on that foundation.
Q: Vesa and Tracy- How do you discipline a player in a group setting when he/she becomes a distraction?
A: I like a three (3) chance rule: First, a friendly but firm warning, then a brief time-out off the court to calm down and reflect, and with a third offense finally removing a player from that particular training session. It is essential that there will be a follow up discussion with a player and parent ASAP, hopefully within 24 hours. Also, all these steps should be performed with a kind but firm manner. I firmly believe that most problems can be avoided with clear and comprehensive communication with players and parents regarding specific training environment expectations and policies.