

Mary Luking

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Ms. Wilson

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Youth Tennis

Thesis: Tennis is not only a physical activity, but also a sport of the mind, and techniques to teach tennis to young children have developed rapidly through the recent years to provide this multi-beneficial sport to all ages.

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Youth Tennis

Tennis is not only a physical activity, but also a sport of the mind, and techniques to teach tennis to young children have developed rapidly through the recent years to provide this multi-beneficial sport to all ages. The origination of the sport of tennis is disputed by many historians, with some dating precursors to tennis back to Ancient Egypt and 5th century Tuscany in Italy. It evolved to be popular with aristocrats in Europe, being promoted by many rulers such as Henry VIII, who built a court at the Royal Palace of Hampton Court, which still stands today. The sport began to lose interest until the invention of vulcanisation, or the process of making rubber, which led to the patent of equipment and rules for the game of tennis by Major Charles Wingfield (Gittings). Tennis has evolved to the game it is today, including four “Grand Slam” tournaments located in the United States, France, Britain, and Australia (History Channel). However, teaching tennis at a young age has always been a problem throughout the years because of the size of equipment and the court. Now, tennis has evolved from its origination to include programs specifically tailored to certain age groups through the United States Tennis Association to teach the game to everyone.

The United States Tennis Association has included kids tennis as a part of the association since 1916, but it has become a more intricate part of USTA as time has moved on. In 1881, a small group of people in New York came together to make the United States National Lawn Tennis Association in order to have a governing national body for tennis. In the coming years, the association went through name changes, finally arriving at the United States Tennis Association, which still remains the largest tennis organization in the world. By the early 1900s, a National Boys and Girls Championship was added to USTA’s tournament schedule, followed

by the National Junior Tennis League in 1969 and USTA Junior Team Tennis in 1990 (“USTA History”). As the teenagers and adults play on larger, regular sized courts, it became apparent to USTA officials that a smaller court size would be needed for youth to play adequate tennis. The change came when a program called 10 & Under Tennis was established as a part of Junior Team Tennis. There are two divisions within 10 & Under: 6-8 year olds (including below 6 years of age) and a 9-10 year olds, each with different balls, racquets, and court sizes. In tournament play, age groups were labeled as 8 & Under and 10 & Under. The 6 to 8 year olds (or 8 & Under) play on a 36’ long by 18’ wide court (Charlotte Tennis Association). This can be visualized by splitting a court in half parallel with its length to find the smaller court’s width, and the width of the regular court being the length of the small court. Kids in this division also use a lower net than adult regulation height as well. Court dimensions of 60’ long by 21’ wide are used for the 9 to 10 year olds (or 10 & Under), who use bigger courts as they grow taller and stronger (Charlotte Tennis Association). With the changes in court dimensions also comes a change in equipment size as well, specifically racquet size. When dealing with first time players of tennis, a racket is usually placed at the child’s side with the head of the racket on the ground. If the child’s hand touches the racket without going below the handle, then that racket is the appropriate size for the child. Usually, 8 & Under play with racquets ranging from 19” to 23” in length, and 10 & Under play with racquets ranging from 23” to 25” (Charlotte Tennis Association). Also, different pressurized balls must be used for different ages groups. Expectedly, balls must bounce less and travel less for the younger age group, and it progressively gets more pressurized to higher bounces and higher speeds for a faster paced game for the adults. Balls are categorized as “Red” and “Orange” for the age groups. For 8 & Under, they must use

the Red balls which are considered very low-compression balls for small bounces and small travel distances. Likewise, for 10 & Under they use Orange balls, which are considered low-compression balls that travel and bounce faster as well as longer than the Red, but are characterized by a low bounce (Charlotte Tennis Association). Even the scoring has evolved over the years, with slowly introducing an easier way for young children to get into keeping score before getting into the conventional Love-15-30-40-game scoring style. Current standards include both youth age groups to play a best out of 3, but 8 & Under play best of 3 games that go to 7 points, and 10 & Under play best of 3 sets. Each set, for that age group, consists of first to four games, and each game is first to four points (Charlotte Tennis Association). USTA introduced the smaller courts, balls, and equipment in 2008 with Quickstart Tennis. This was soon followed by the major International Tennis Federation rule change in 2012 for 10 & Under tennis tournaments to adopt the format of Quickstart Tennis (Crawford). This world-wide change to what USTA adopted four years ago was monumental in youth tennis. Before Quickstart Tennis and the 10 & Under Program, many children were having to play with the adult-sized equipment, which wouldn't allow them to grasp the concepts of tennis because they were struggling with the size of everything. No longer were kids having the struggle of trying to play with a large format of adults and feeling frustrated when they could not play correctly. The smaller format allowed for children to learn while they play and get out on the court quickly and confidently. The new format also was a way to show how easy it is to play tennis at home in different ways, which grew popularity as well. Skills could also be built easier, and with this new internationally-adopted format, curriculums were built that could easily show kids how to play tennis. With the adoption of Quickstart tennis, there was a format of learning established

through that program. In order to teach kids tennis properly on smaller courts, an exact approach needed to be made to train the coaches and volunteers to effectively teach them quality tennis.

With this, USTA came out alongside of Quickstart with Coach Youth Tennis, a program consisting of a series of online classes and a hands-on workshop. The online classes enabled the coaches to know how to deal with specific age groups and how to connect with them in order to effectively teach tennis and different aspects of it. In addition to this, tennis players who wanted to become a certified teaching professional had to complete the Coach Youth Tennis program starting in 2014 (Walz). This educational curriculum was a way to establish standards that the coaches could keep so that all children were taught the essential skills of the game, and it also improves the quality of teaching. It also was a way for teachers to know how to connect with the kids to make tennis a much more enjoyable sport that they would want to come back and play.

USTA tennis then came out with a curriculum geared toward physical fitness teachers implementing tennis in their own schools. The curriculum has eight lessons which build up to a review of skills that accumulate to playing mini-tennis. Each tennis lesson is maximum of 40 minutes that include many different aspects that aren't just related to tennis. They include physical fitness and even using math as well as communication skills when diving into different aspects of tennis (*15605_Curriculum-Abridged*). USTA has also developed a curriculum for parents and recreational coaches when teaching youth tennis. This curriculum is divided into an introduction that introduces Quickstart tennis, detailed chapters for three age groups that provides specific guidance to teaching tennis, and some lessons on the benefits of tennis. Each lesson is specifically tailored to certain age groups, and provides a lesson objective that's met by a movement activity, a skill, and "take home tennis" activity that can be done at home

(Anderson). A “take home tennis” activity is another development within youth tennis to show kids and their families that tennis is a sport that can easily be done at home, even if they do not think it is. Within Rockingham County, North Carolina, this curriculum has been heavily used within afterschool Kids Tennis Clubs, community Play Days, and other programs utilized that bring many kids together. The development of this curriculum makes it easier for kids to be able to play tennis and feel comfortable about it too. The lessons give activities that also integrate skills such as teamwork, which allows for the kids to enjoy a fun sport and learn other things at the same time, which is further evidence of what youth tennis offers a child. Evolve9 is also another organization that was created that promotes their own curriculum, which includes two warm-ups and a repetition of two activities. Evolve9 aims to keep up with the evolution of children and their needs in order to teach tennis to them (*Orange-Cycle-1*). The repetition can help in reinforcing skills that they learn in the lesson. This different format for curriculum is an example of how teaching youth tennis is evolving as children's needs and interests change. As everyone and everything evolves, so does the curriculum of teaching youth tennis in order to keep kids engaged and wanting to play.

Strategy and concentration is also very important in tennis, not only to the older players but also to the younger players as well. As much as tennis is a sport that requires physical fitness, it also requires strategies in game play to win. Many tennis players say that tennis is 25% physical and 75% mental. If a player can find their opponent's weaknesses and exploit them, that is a track to getting under the person's skin in order to mess them up and get them psyched out. There are many books that aim to teach players about the mental side of tennis, such as *The Mental Advantage* by Robert S. Weinberg, PhD. Although published in 1988, it

provides complete insight into the strategy and concentration side of tennis. Within this book, Weinberg gives insight into concentration, attentional focus, self-talk, imagery, confidence, motivation, and preparation for a match (Weinberg vi). Many players, recreational to professional, get mentally prepared for a match. They go in with confidence even if it is a hard opponent, and have practiced keeping their motivation up for the entirety of a match. Tennis also requires a lot of concentration and attentional focus, which can be built on from early years. In the early stages of learning tennis, many activities require concentration to hit a target repeatedly on the ground to master a shot. This early-on mental skill introduction allows for kids to slowly be introduced into the mental aspect of tennis and strategy. The concentration of hitting a target on the ground will translate to the concentration of aiming for the corner of the court to win a point. Imagery is also a huge part of tennis as many players, even young ones, use this to plan out their shots and envision a match before it even happens. For example, some players may envision hitting a fast forehand to the opposite corner of the court where their opponent is not right before the play happens. This “imagery” technique allows for players to have a mental and strategical advantage. This is implemented even in the early age of learning tennis, when kids usually use imagination, which assists in grappling with learning strokes by envisioning them. Dr. Weinberg, author of *The Mental ADvantage*, explains why the mental standpoint of tennis is difficult by saying,

In fact, in the average tennis match, it has been found that a player will have to make approximately 900 to 1,000 decisions, each of which have to be made in less than a second. Second, from a biomechanical point of view, if your racquet face varies by just a couple of degrees this will likely result in hitting the ball into the bottom of the net or out

past the baseline. This makes tennis a potentially frustrating game. Third, and most importantly, the stop and go nature of tennis distinguishes it from many other sports like soccer or basketball in which the action is constant (Weinberg).

The stop and go nature that Weinberg describes leaves a lot of room for a competitor's thoughts to wander to things even beyond tennis, such as chores to do when the competitor gets home. The dead time proves the concept of how the mental side of tennis is very important, even in young ages. The excessive dead time also applies to 10 & Under tournaments as well, giving further evidence of the importance of mental aspects in young children when teaching tennis.

Tennis has many physical benefits as well that strengthen kids' abilities, and tennis also gives many opportunities to students. The physical benefits can be described as "It is an aerobic sport exercise that burns calories, strengthens heart and muscles and improves reflexes" (Rhyne). Although it may seem like tennis players do not run much during a match, the average player runs three miles in a tennis match, which is more than an average football receiver at 1.25 miles (Fox). Tennis is a tiring sport due to the fact that it contains a lot of stop-and-go movements and sprints. It greatly assists with aerobic capacities due to the movements. Not only does it help with aerobic fitness, but also with anaerobic fitness due to the short bursts of running, which helps the body use oxygen efficiently (Groppel). Overall, it helps with speed as well because often times the player is sprinting to the ball and accelerating quickly. One of the most beneficial things physically about tennis in many people's opinions is the fact that it really works on coordination. Tennis requires precise contact with the ball at the correct time, forcing quick judgement. The list of physical benefits goes on and on, but the highlighted ones show the array of how tennis can benefit the player to become a more healthy person. These benefits are not

just for adult players either because they are all worked on during youth tennis. Many lessons and fun activities youth do within programs such as Jr. Team Tennis require sprinting, running, and coordination. Therefore, youth tennis also is very physically beneficial. In addition to the physical benefits of tennis, tennis also has many psychological benefits that they can carry on into later life. Shelby Rhyne is the executive director of the Rockingham County Tennis Association, and has been involved in tennis for many years, and in youth tennis since 2010. She has worked with well over five thousand participants in not only Ohio but also in North Carolina, where she now lives specifically in Rockingham County. She has five personal favorite psychological benefits of tennis: learn sportsmanship, learn to win graciously and lose with honor, learn teamwork, develop social skills, and have fun (Rhyne). There are many more psychological benefits to tennis, such as learning responsibility and managing mistakes. Sportsmanship, teamwork, social skills, etc. can all be related to life outside of tennis. According to Dr. Groppe, a partner with USTA, aspects such as social skills can be improved within communication between points and turnovers. In tennis, many mistakes can be made, so managing mistakes can also help with realizing managing or minimizing mistakes in real life is essential (Groppe). These are some examples of the skills that can be learned within tennis and how they apply to real life. Tennis, due to how it is formatted and played, has many avenues to learn life skills. These skills are learned from an early age, especially in Quickstart Tennis and 10 & Under tournaments, when many times interaction is required between participants which grows social skills. Tennis is providing students with life skills to apply to their lives as they mature and grow.

Youth tennis is a very rewarding sport that expands a youth's horizon in many ways. Youth tennis is also becoming a very popular sport and growing throughout many communities, such as in Rockingham County, North Carolina. In the primary year of RCTA starting, 2014, they only offered the program called Kids Tennis Club at two elementary schools, and this recent year there was seventeen locations. Kids Tennis Clubs, Junior Team Tennis, and community fairs are some of the programs offered and events participated in by the association (Rhyne). Before RCTA came to be, there was no organized tennis besides the middle and high school tennis in Rockingham County, which is a rural county. Now, tennis is a blooming sport in the county, gaining the popularity of many people. This year alone, there were 4,500 participants in all of Rockingham County's tennis programs. Rockingham County's growth in tennis is prime evidence of the impact on youth tennis has. Many of the programs offered are driven solely by youth and family interest, which prove testament to the growing popularity. Community Tennis Associations that target younger audiences are able to reach youth from many different backgrounds. Directors of associations and volunteers are all trained, as stated earlier, so they are able to effectively teach kids tennis while focusing on the standards that include skills on and off the court. The growth and development of youth tennis, such as within Rockingham County, has continued impact on many youth positively while providing benefits that last long after participants leave a court on a Sunday afternoon.

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