



POSITIONING YOUTH TENNIS FOR SUCCESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





As we navigate the
tipping points
of youth tennis, youth
sport, and youth health
in the United States,
the USTA has asked:
“Is there
a better way?”

For only the fifth time in the history of tennis, the Rules of Tennis have changed. Tennis is no longer asking children to play an adult-model sport; thanks to the rule change passed and implemented by the USTA and the ITF, kids 10 and under will now compete on courts and with equipment scaled to size to suit their needs and abilities. The change could not have come fast enough, nor is it all that is needed. Something drastic needs to happen if the poor rate of tennis participation in children is to be remedied. In an attempt to best gauge how to provide the proper foundation for kids to excel in tennis—through training, competition, and transition—the USTA held its inaugural Youth Tennis Symposium in February 2012. *Positioning Youth Tennis For Success* sprung from the symposium and pertinent literature, with the goal being to provide a rational for developing a child-centered training, competition, and transition model through 10 and Under Tennis. Children are not young adults. They differ physically, physiologically, and medically. Of course, while children are not young adults, they can be influenced negatively by societal forces, just as adults are. America is in the midst of an obesity epidemic and health crisis that threatens our youth. *Positioning Youth Tennis For Success* is the USTA's attempt to break down the fault lines that exist in the current tennis and developmental structure and explore 10 and Under Tennis as a definitive, viable solution for the long-term health of our lifetime sport of opportunity.

Out of 4 million junior players who played tennis in 2010, only 11,000 6 to 10-year-olds played in USTA junior tournaments. That is a fraction of 1 percent.

<1%



WHAT THIS MEANS:

- The USTA's current competition offering is unattractive to our players and their families.
- If the base of players is small, there are fewer potential great tennis players to develop.

World-class players should not only be training; they need to be playing in quality competitions to develop and advance. We believe that if we package competition the right way and make it exciting, players will experience that thrill. They will then want to play more, and ultimately, develop into frequent players.





Children are not young adults. They are different **physically, physiologically, emotionally, and socially.** Therefore, youth sports should fit the special needs of children.

Children have an inherent limitation in muscle development, endurance, and perspiration. The global athletic essentials of agility, balance, coordination, and speed need to be developed prior to puberty, or there will be considerable athletic limitations in adulthood. Children have limited attention spans that must be respected, and their movement patterns more naturally occur in frequent stops and starts. If a youth sport paradigm is to succeed in capturing and retaining the interest of a child while promoting health and wellness, the paradigm should be for and about children and should not be based on adult models.



The primary reason children play sports is to **have fun**. Having fun entices children to **participate** and compete.

The long-term athlete development model is based on empirical evidence that all sport initiation should be centered on fun. This means that fun activities such as Kids' Tennis Clubs or Tennis Play Days should be an essential part of tennis initiation in children. Furthermore, children should be encouraged to play multiple sports before puberty so that they develop athletically before specializing in one sport.



Competition in youth tennis should focus on **providing** children with ample opportunities to play, with a focus on the **play** and not the results. There should be no 10-and-under national rankings. Also, there should be no rankings for 10-and-under youth at any level.

As noted earlier, children are not young adults, and adult-model competitions for children inevitably lead to sport dropout and sport injury. It is appropriate for children to learn to compete, and a sound child model is to compete in multiple short matches with a focus on learning how to play the game. Children like to compete; parents like to compare. We should let children be children so that they can take ownership of their sport. By thrusting young children into national competitions and rankings, we pervert the foundational elements of long-term athlete development. At the USTA Youth Tennis Symposium, there was universal consensus that national competitions and rankings are inappropriate for 10 and Under Tennis.



As the national governing body of tennis, the USTA has a **moral obligation** to address how to roll out 10 and Under Tennis so that it **addresses the problems** of overuse injuries from early specialization, sport dropout, and America's health crisis.

One of the purposes for which the USTA was formed is to promote the development of tennis as a means of healthful recreation and physical fitness. As the national governing body of tennis, the USTA establishes the format and regulation of American tennis competition. The USTA has both an obligation and duty to be certain that 10 and Under Tennis is rolled out with the intent of promoting the health and well-being of children as they develop their athletic and competitive skills. The primary reason children play sport is to have fun, and the vast majority of Americans feel that more needs to be done to ensure the health and safety of young athletes. By facing these realities in conjunction with the National Youth Sports Health and Safety Institute, the USTA is fulfilling its obligation and demonstrating leadership while showcasing tennis as a model sport that promotes health and wellness.



There has been a tremendous decline in youth sport **participation** over the years. Furthermore, youth sport has become highly specialized and **professionalized**, with a resultant exponential increase in overuse injuries.

Despite the passage of the 1978 Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act, grass-roots opportunities for youth sport participation have dwindled while non-Olympic governing bodies increasingly recruit and exploit children for national championship competitions that resemble adult professional events. The results from these disparate trends are that youth sport participation has been plummeting while youth overuse injuries from highly specialized sport participation has skyrocketed.



Tennis provides an
opportunity to
develop **character**
and to share **integrity**
with society.

As the national governing body of tennis, the USTA should provide training and education on the values and ethical expectations of tennis participation and competition. Unfortunately, many children drop out of sport because they no longer perceive its value. When we overemphasize winning to children—which can quickly translate to winning at all costs—children lose a wonderful opportunity to experience an athletic journey whose foundation is character development. If the USTA promotes a steady infusion of ethical values in tennis, we can become a model sport whose participants share integrity as the basis of camaraderie and competition.



Tennis is an **early** initiation sport and a **late**-specialization sport.

Initiation refers to the age at which someone begins playing a sport, even if there is only occasional play. Specialization in sport is the age when an individual trains and competes at an advanced level in one sport throughout the year. Early specialization sports are those sports in which peak performance is expected in the middle teenage years, such as gymnastics. Late-specialization sports are sports in which peak performance is expected after the age of 20, such as basketball, football, baseball, and tennis. If sport specialization occurs at too young an age in late-specialization sports, the individual is at risk of an early-age peak performance coupled with the development of overuse injuries. In the long-term athlete development model, children should not specialize in late-specialization sports until after puberty. From a player development perspective, this means that children should begin playing tennis at a young age, often between 4 and 8 years old, but that they should not specialize exclusively in tennis until they approach puberty.



It is **critical** to
develop the **athlete**
before the player.

Athleticism is best developed in a well-rounded program of multiple sport participation at a young age. Even in a player development model of tennis, young children should not be playing tennis on a daily basis, and their tennis play should be balanced with participation in other sports and the development of athleticism. A strong athletic foundation is critical to long-term success in late-specialization sports.



The **transition** in racquet size, from red to orange to green ball, and from 36' to 60' to a 78' court, should be done in a deliberate manner in accordance with tactical and technical proficiency. The transition is **not a race** to the yellow ball.

10 and Under Tennis is “real” tennis, and red, orange, and green balls are “real” tennis balls, just as 36' and 60' courts are “real” tennis courts. The red, orange, and green balls are all a legitimate part of progression in tennis, and the progression is most likely to succeed if the child has developed tactical and technical proficiency prior to transition from one ball to the next. Transition from the red to orange to green ball is associated with an increasingly sophisticated stance, footwork, racquet swing, racquet grip, and dissociation of upper and lower body movements.



The transition from 10 and Under Tennis to 12-and-under tennis should be done **thoughtfully**, and it is appropriate to utilize either the green ball or yellow ball, depending on the level of **technical proficiency**.

Many children who are beginning 12-and-under tennis (i.e., tennis on a 78-foot court with a yellow ball) are pre-pubertal, and as such, they are still children, both physically and emotionally. Other children may simply have not developed sufficient mastery of technique with the green ball. This means that some 11- and 12-year-old children are not ready to play with a yellow ball on a 78-foot court. In these cases, the Rules of Tennis provide an option for children 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.



Rankings at 14-and-under are poorly predictive of becoming a world champion. However, most players who achieve Top 100 rankings are reasonably **successful** at this age.

Most Top 100 players were competing nationally or internationally when they were 14 years old. This means that future elite tennis players have developed a minimum level of tennis sophistication by age 14. However, 14-and-under rankings are poorly predictive of obtaining a Top 20 ranking as a professional. Thus, there is an important balance between developing players around the age of puberty without imposing a belief structure that they must obtain a top ranking at this age.



USTA Player Development recognizes that many great tennis players excel at different ages and the Player Identification system is fluid, allowing for players to bloom based on their maturity and physiology.

The USTA has established Certified Regional Training Centers, which allow USTA Player Development to partner with the best programs in locations throughout the country, building relationships between America's best coaches and raising the level of training for the best 8- to 14-year-old juniors. These programs help train hundreds of junior players close to home and help facilitate relationships between personal coaches and USTA national staff. USTA Player Development staff members nurture talent by supporting the player, family, and coach through coaching and training support. They also nurture talent by inviting promising young athletes to Player Development camps at the three USTA National Training Centers (in Boca Raton, Fla.; Carson, Calif.; and Flushing, N.Y.). This is a fluid process in which players may develop to their full potential at a time and place that is not pre-determined.



Coaching provides
a wonderful
opportunity
to develop young
children as people,
as **athletes**, and
as tennis players.

National surveys indicate that coaches are ranked as the #1 positive influence on today's youth involved in sport. Successful coaches understand that children are not miniature adults, and they recognize that children need to develop in a multi-dimensional manner that is age- and developmental-appropriate. One goal of *Positioning Tennis for Success* is to provide a foundation for a unified coaching pathway in 10 and Under Tennis that will: (1) promote athleticism and character development; (2) teach technical proficiency in a consistent manner as a child progresses from the red to orange to green ball; (3) help ensure health, wellness, and injury prevention; (4) encourage age- and developmental-appropriate competition; (5) provide a schedule in which there is an appropriate balance of training and competition; and (6) help the child to transition in sport and in life—or to the pros!



The “optimal parent push” means motivating a child without placing undue pressure on the child to succeed.

The primary goal of parenting is to do what is right for our children. 10 and Under Tennis can be an ideal vehicle for parents to promote health and well-being in their children, and it can foster a pathway for some children to become top-ranked tennis players. The important issue is for parents to understand what they are trying to accomplish when they encourage their children to play tennis. As children begin playing tennis, they rely on their parents to provide emotional, logistical, financial, and organizational support. The balancing act is to provide this support while also fostering an environment in which the child will thrive. Dr. Daniel Gould, Director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, has demonstrated through research that the majority of tennis parents have a positive influence on their child's development. Dr. Gould defines what he terms the “optimal parent push” as understanding how to motivate a child when he or she is being lazy or is not doing what is needed to develop as an athlete and tennis player, while not placing undue pressure on the child to succeed. Coaches perceive that optimal parent push goes wrong when the focus is on winning.



America is in the
midst of an **obesity**
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crisis that threatens
our **youth**.

The United States has become the “fattest” country on the planet. The rate of obesity has more than tripled from 1990 to 2012, and this has a long-term negative impact on a child’s health and well-being. The shocking reality is that for the first time in American history, younger generations are expected to live less healthy and have shorter life spans than their parents. Furthermore, research indicates that overweight and physically inactive children have lower IQs than children who are physically fit and that they do not perform as well academically.



The majority of children do not **exercise** enough. The majority of elementary schools do not offer enough **physical education** in accordance with national guidelines.

The “Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans” recommends one hour or more of moderate- or vigorous-intensity physical activity daily, with vigorous-intensity activity plus muscle-strengthening and bone-strengthening activities occurring at least three days per week. Unfortunately, three out of every four high school students do not engage in the recommended amount of physical activity, and physical education opportunities have been increasingly eliminated from grade school curriculums.



10 and Under Tennis is an **exciting** program that opens the door to myriad **possibilities** for the USTA and for America.

The USTA believes that 10 and Under Tennis provides a definitive, viable solution for the long-term health of our lifetime sport. We believe that 10 and Under Tennis can become the model of youth sport in which the safety and well-being of all children is paramount, and the long-term athletic development of children is nurtured in patience and evidence-based data.



This is the just the
first step. We need
more information—and
everyone's **support**
—to find and define
viable solutions that
ensure long-term health
of our **sport of**
opportunity.

The USTA will continue to explore and research the best ways to approach and develop a child-centered training, competition, and transition model. But we need your help. Take the time to read the literature. Have the right conversations with key sport stakeholders. We are navigating the tipping point of youth sport, and we need everyone's support—and passion!—to encourage greater youth tennis participation in the United States—now and for the generations to come.