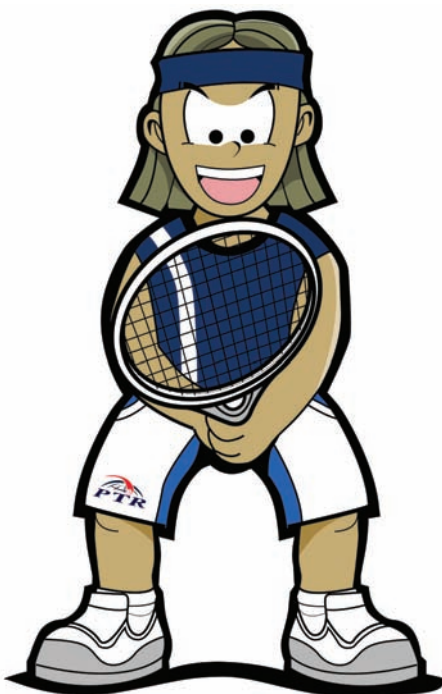


# What's Next with PTR Kids?

by Mike Barrell

Mike is the Director of evolve9, a specialist training company that focuses on coach education and program development for the under 10 age group. He also works as an LTA Coach Education Tutor, where he conducts certification courses. He was a major contributor to the LTA Mini Tennis Program, and now continues to work as a consultant, delivering coach education and consultancy for tennis associations, clubs and major organizations. He has been a teaching pro for the 24 years, is an LTA Level 3 Licensed Coach, and a member of BTCA and PTR. He was named PTR Professional of the Year in 2007. Mike wrote the PTR supplement, *Growing Kids, Growing the Game, a Developmental Guide for Teaching Under 10s* and has been named a favorite speaker at the several PTR International Tennis Symposia.



With QuickStart, ITF's Play and Stay, and other initiatives based on modified approaches fast becoming the global norm, PTR is building on the existing PTR Kids Tennis Workshop by introducing the Advanced PTR Kids Tennis Workshop at the 2009 Symposium. This article is based on some of the information covered in the new course. Additional the topics in the workshop include:



- Structuring, Managing and Delivering Appropriate Competition
- Player Development Principles for 36', 60' and Full Court Players
- Technical and Tactical Progressions for Advanced Little Players
- Coordination and Functional Physical Development Training
- Planning and Managing Programs
- Planning Lessons and Sessions
- Maximizing Learning through Effective On Court Principles

## Between the Lines

### How the environment on court shapes a player technically and tactically in a rallying situation

Using modified equipment to make the game easier to learn is at the heart of programs like QuickStart and the ITF Play and Stay campaign, but as you work more and more with the systems, you will discover that it's not just about playing the game quicker, but also about creating a systematic approach to developing both technical and tactical skills.

By gaining a better understanding of the game on the 36', 60' and regular court, you can understand how to gradually incorporate the different needs of players at each level into your training. In my last article (*TennisPro, September/October 2008*), I made reference to the four principles: court, ball, movement and using two players. These are presented as the cornerstones for creating the right environment for players to maximize both conscious and unconscious learning. Now, by looking at the player, ball and court in more detail, we can explore how to be more systematic in our approach to training and coaching.

Technical and tactical factors are described in a great many different ways around the world, so first it's useful to clarify our descriptions. For the purposes of this article, we will use the following:

- Technique - the way in which the player uses their racquet and body
- Technical Skill - the ability of the player to make the ball do something
- Tactical Intention - the decision the player makes in relation to the four on-court awareness factors (self, ball, court, opponent)

All three are very closely linked. For example, a player may find it easier to make the ball travel cross-court on an angle (Technical Skill), because they are able to use a slightly open stance and have a semi-western forehand grip (Technique), and they are doing this to take their opponent off the side of the court in order to create an opening for the next shot (Tactical Intention). There are a great many other ways to discuss tactics, strategy and technical issues, but we will stick with these.

When we talk about Technique, Technical Skill and Tactical Intention, we should not forget that these are focused on what the player can do. Using modified balls and courts also play a large part in determining what is needed to play the game.

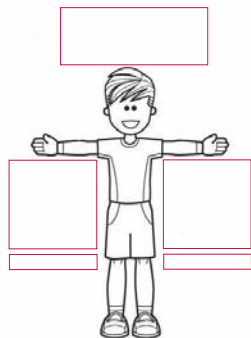
## On the 36' Court

### Set, Balance, Rotate

The red (foam) ball is bigger and slower than other balls. It has a consistent bounce - on the majority of baseline to baseline shots - that places it between the knee and the bottom of the rib cage. Most balls are hit around this area, and it is very difficult for a player to make the ball bounce much higher for their opponent. The court is relatively narrow, so players need to move forward and a little side to side, but backward movement is a limited requirement. Players can usually move, stop and balance in preparation for each shot. As a result, the focus in training should be exactly that - simple early reaction and movement, good balance and rotation, and consistent contact points.

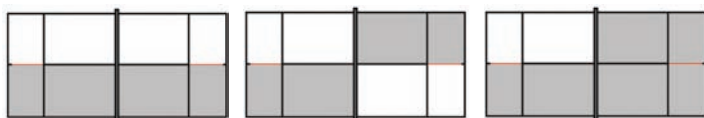
Consistent bounce of the foam ball and limited court size mean:

- Most balls will be hit mid-chest to knee height
- Some open racquet face skills are required on lower balls
- Only volleys and serves are hit above shoulder height
- Serve contact point height depends on age and capability
- Body rotations will be made with shoulders level



Unless they are at a very advanced level, young players' tactical intentions are limited, and they are unlikely to have full awareness of their opponent. Although they may be able to hit the ball away from their opponent, they don't fully understand how to make it difficult for the opponent in other ways, because they are focused on themselves and the ball.

In order to achieve some tactical intention, practices should be based on the technical skills of directing the ball down the line and crosscourt, and also redirecting the ball to hit away from the opponent. Use the following court shapes to practice.



By creating this simple foundation of move, stop, hit, recover, and focusing on consistent contact point on the forehand and backhand, players will have great foundations to move on to the dynamic demands of the 60' court.

## On the 60' Court

### Time to really move

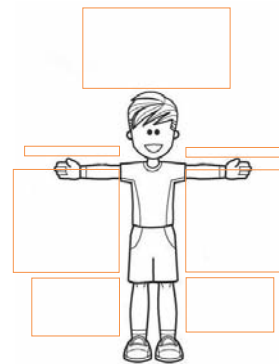
At the 60' court level, the transition ball flies faster and reacts well to increased speed. Players will have less time to position themselves and may have to hit more balls from a dynamic position (and must learn to hit off of either foot). Required movement is much more lateral, resulting in more shots hit from a semi-open stance. There is an increased demand to move forward, so that the player must be able to coordinate well into different hitting positions. Unlike at the 36' level, there will not be as many opportunities to arrive to hit perfectly balanced. Players will now need to hit from a variety of positions, including contacting the ball at a higher point, scrambling for lower balls, and hitting from further away from their body.

Increased court length and faster ball speeds mean:

- Players hit at lower and higher positions
- Hit balls further from body (on run)
- Serve moves higher
- More dynamic use of body, mostly on a horizontal plane
- Rotations may require separation of the upper and lower body (hips and shoulder at different angles), as there is not always time to step into the court

Technical skill now needs to be based on making the ball move faster, which in turn gives the added demand of creating more spin in order to maintain control of this faster ball. This may require the use of grips that better facilitate spin and allow for greater racquet head speed. Obviously, as one player seeks to hit the ball faster, they use the kinetic chain

more and this starts to result in better shoulder rotation off of a semi-open stance. Equally, as they receive the faster ball, they must learn to hit from this stance, because the use of spin and speed allows them to hit more angles and move their opponent wider and wider.



Tactically, players should be developing a better understanding of court geography and start attacking and defending at appropriate times. The court, being longer and a little wider, also means they should use this space by changing the depth and angle of their shots to open the court.

Due to a greater degree of cognitive development, players will also start to use patterns of play, understanding that if they can move the opponent wide, they should aim their next shot to the space they have created. All this means that the use of time has become more important than on the 36' court, and by taking the ball early and by hitting sequences of shots, they can take the time away from their opponent.

In addition to the previous court shapes, which should continued to be used, players will benefit from these court shapes in order to develop the new skill sets.



Players should have experienced a dynamic environment where movement is key, and the ball's velocity increases visual and physical demands. This forms a great foundation for the next level, which will help to create a total tennis player.

## On the Full Size Court

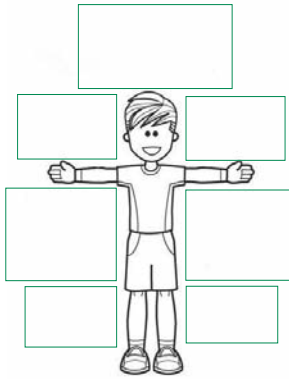
### A whole new level

Moving on to the regular court, whether you use the green mid-ball or a regulation tennis ball, provides the ultimate challenge for a young player. The court is now adult size, and let's not forget that in no other sport do players as young as 10 move to play on the full regulation field. Even though we have 36' and 60' courts in preparation, this is still a big step.

Of course, each time a player moves to the next court, the first thing that happens is they learn to adapt to the demands of distance and pace. Players who were technically and tactically capable of performing a skill will temporarily regress as they focus on trying to regain this skill in a more demanding environment.

This environment is not just about the size of the court, but also about the characteristics of the ball. Remember, we already have players who have become used to dealing with the "faster" ball at the 60' level and, as a result, have learned to move well in most directions (laterally, forward and diagonally). But now, the ball requires some more competencies that were rarely used before. On this court, the ball is harder and the energy transferred into the ball (spin, height, pace) has more of an influence when and how the ball bounces.

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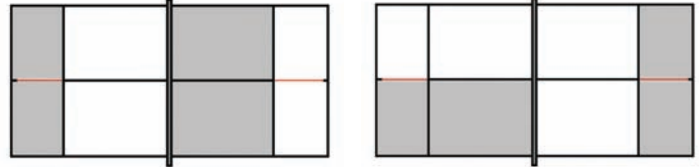
So now, a player can hit the ball with height, spin and pace and make the ball bounce up at the opponent. This allows the player to move their opponent away from the baseline. In opposition to this tactic, the opponent must learn to contact the ball at a higher point on some shots, hit more balls off of the back foot as they are forced back, and adjust their body height to maintain a position of strength. Of course, the counter to this is to take the ball early, but this is still a challenge for some players, particularly if they are smaller or have not developed the required racquet head acceleration on the 60' court.

Court size and ball density now mean:

- Players must hit in all positions (use of height as weapon)
- Serves move higher
- Body used to align vertically to balls
- More use of incoming ball speed to create pace

Tactically, a player is likely to be able to integrate more information into their decision making process. They should now understand the geography of the court and how to create space and time. In reaching the final level of awareness, they will also be able to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their opponent and formulate a strategy to "beat" them by making it difficult for them. In being more aware of their opponent, they are also likely to be able to use anticipation cues to determine what their opponent is doing and start to link shots as part of this plan. For example, they will understand that if they can hit a ball crosscourt with pace, height, depth and spin to their opponent's backhand, the likely response will be a defensive shot back crosscourt or a weak shot that they can move forward to and attack.

Continued use of the previous court shapes to stimulate tactical and technical skills is recommended, as well as using the following, is now encouraged.



Players need to be strong and quick to play on the full size court, but many will undoubtedly move to this court before they are ready. As a coach, you can deliver the ball at a lower height, so it doesn't seem so apparent, but as soon as your player competes against someone with the technical skill to make the ball move, then the nice balls you were feeding start to become irrelevant.

The important message is that a player's ability to hit with a coach is not the same as their ability to play the game. Tennis is a dynamic and demanding sport at the highest level of junior tennis. By understanding the tools you have through QuickStart and ITF Play and Stay, you can develop young players with a much higher level of technical and tactical skill. Just hitting the ball doesn't cut it anymore!

### Summary

It may seem too much to hope for that our young players at 10 or 11 might be able to develop an understanding of the game that is so rich and in depth, but in reality the players that have moved through a QuickStart style program with expert coaches who focus on the details and understand the demands of each environment, can! It is just a matter of being systematic in your approach and focusing on building skills and understanding in a logical order. Most importantly, you must see this as a way of advancing the level of the game played by youngsters and, as a consequence, the level they will be able to play as older juniors and adults.

This approach is a five year development program where everyone gets to *play!*

Please join us for the PTR Kids Tennis Advanced Workshop at the 2009 Symposium in February.

# VOTE PTR Board of Directors Ballot

The following people have been selected by PTR's Nominating Committee to serve a 3 year term on PTR's Board of Directors. You may nominate a candidate to be added to the ballot. Nominees must receive \*65 votes to be added to the ballot. The election will take place at PTR's Annual Meeting, February 19, 2009. All current members may vote. You must be present or provide proxy to vote.

- **Dennis Van der Meer**
- **Jean Mills**

Existing Board Members and terms:

- 2006-2009 - Dennis Van der Meer, Jean Mills
- 2007-2010 - Lewis "Skip" Hartman
- 2008-2011 - Luciano Botti, David Dinkins

Write-in Nominee \_\_\_\_\_

Write-in Nominee \_\_\_\_\_

Ballot must be returned by February 10, 2009  
Send to PTR, PO Box 4739, Hilton Head Island, SC 29938 USA or fax it to 843-686-2033  
\*(.05% of membership)