

# Top 5 Under 10

## 5 Characteristics of a Great Program for Under 10s

by David Brouwer

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photo Anni Miller  
PTR Master Pro, Ken DeHart, with his son Cameron

As the tennis world continues to embrace programming for under 10s, it's essential that we, as PTR Professionals, continue to develop and improve our programs to fit the needs of these young students. With all the marketing effort that is going into programs such as QuickStart, ITF's Play and Stay and PTR Kids Tennis, there has never been a better time to implement programming for young children at our facilities. The following is a list of what I believe to be the Top 5 characteristics of a great under 10 program, and some ideas on how to develop and implement them.

### 1. Philosophy and Vision

It all starts here! Developing a vision for your program involves the division of players by age and ability, how you will progress lesson plans to maximize students' potential, how you will utilize competitive formats, how many times per week lessons and competitions will take place, and ultimately, what kind of tennis players you are seeking to develop.

As an example, the vision for our tennis department is *to develop players who are mentally tough, strategically smart, technically sound and physically fit*. This vision statement was written years ago and we continue to base decisions on whether or not they fit the philosophy. This relates to our under 10 programming, because we know what the players should look like when they get to be 16-18 years old, and this determines how we progress them at younger ages. Ideally, all lesson planning and competition will fit the vision of your program.

One thing to keep in mind is that the vision of your program or department should be easily communicated to staff, parents and students, and acceptance by all three of these groups is absolutely essential! As the director of the program, you cannot simply come up with a vision and assume that everyone else will buy into it. It should be in a continuous process of development that is constantly evolving with input and opinions from everyone involved.

When dealing with vision for your program, always remember that it's easier to act your way into a feeling than it is to feel your way into an action. For example, when we first started purchasing mini-nets and transition balls, many of our staff did not buy into the concept of mini-tennis and progressive courts, balls and racquets. But we acted our way into the feeling that it was the right thing to do. In other words, we simply went for it despite not being sure of the outcome. Now, almost six years later, there is not a pro on our staff who isn't passionate about this type of programming for under 10s.

Remember, if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. Don't let your program wander about for the next 10 years. Get going on a vision statement and then base all your decisions around that vision.

### 2. Kids

This is an obvious one, right? However, many pros struggle when it comes to the marketing and promotion of a program that will attract 4-10 year old children. I have found that the absolute best means of reaching children this age is right in their schools. Many physical education teachers do not have the knowledge, equipment or training to teach tennis, especially to kids under 10, so they are thrilled when you, the local tennis professional, call them to see if you can volunteer in their classes. Recently, our staff was able to introduce more than 300 children to the game of tennis right in their gym classes, because we simply called the

gym teacher and asked permission! We provided the racquets, balls, cones, nets, etc., from our club's program and the kids had a blast. Then, we were able to send mailers to every student to let their parents know that we had volunteered and that they could call for further information. It worked great, and we now have a wonderful relationship with those gym teachers and schools.

After you've begun to gain some momentum in your program, your next move is a *Bring a Friend Day*. Every sport has them and they're a great way to get kids playing with their friends and fired up about the game of tennis. Again, with the modified equipment currently being used, you can have children as young as 4 years old playing modified games of tennis with their friends. Their success rate will be so encouraging that they'll want to sign up for subsequent programs.

### 3. Instructors

One of the biggest mistakes I see at many facilities is that young, inexperienced or dispassionate instructors get the assignment of working with the youngest kids. It's almost like a punishment or a rite of passage for many pros. This is an unbelievable blunder on the part of many directors and head pros! These kids are the future of your program and the game of tennis. They need coaches who are just as competent and passionate as the ones you have working with your tournament players and top level adults.

I have also heard countless times that "you don't have to be a good player to work with little kids." While this is a true statement, the best under 10 coaches I've met *do* have a high level knowledge of tactics, strategies, movements and techniques, and they are able to recognize the correct times to introduce high performance concepts to even the youngest kids.

The bottom line is, if you have coaches working with your under 10s who do not want to be there or do not have the knowledge to educate these students, you're doing a disservice to everyone involved. The pro will burn out and the kids won't come back!

### 4. Equipment

Using correct equipment is essential to a well executed under 10 program. In particular, racquets, balls, nets and teaching aids help to guide the learning process if you progress the equipment along with the development of the student. Currently, there are many manufacturers making all the equipment necessary to implement a successful under 10 program, and you need to determine which ones work best for you. However, here are the essentials:

- Low bouncing **foam balls** - generally used for the youngest groups, but outstanding to teach spin, racquet head speed and timing for older players
- Low bouncing **transition balls** - the same size as a regulation ball, but depressurized and lighter so it won't bounce over the head of younger players
- **Mini-nets** - we have found that the nets lend a lot of credibility to the program and the idea that "real tennis" is being played, however if cost is an issue, caution tape or flag tapes work as well

- Have **19", 21", 23"** and **25" racquets** available for demo or purchase. It is essential that your young players are swinging the correct length racquet to develop swing shapes, racquet head speed and ball control! This is the first thing our instructors look at when young players come to the court, and we have plenty to borrow if a student shows up with the wrong size.
- An **assortment of teaching aids**, including lay down lines, cones for catching, and painter's tape for taping off competition courts are essential.

If you're overwhelmed by the prospect of buying all of this equipment, just build your inventory over time. Some programs dive in head first and purchase everything at the start, but this is not necessary and can be financially restricting. Remember, cast the vision for your program, and then go about getting the equipment that you will need to execute it.

### 5. Competition

As in any other children's sport, competition in your under 10 tennis program sets the stage for *why* skills are being learned. The idea of having a *practice* and then a *game* is a concept widely accepted in children's sports, and your program needs *both* of these elements as well.

As you set your calendar for the season (we have two - school year and summer), I recommend that your competition schedule is set up in advance and presented to all parents and participants on the first day of each practice. This gives the students a frame of mind that they are learning the skills necessary to compete in the *game* of tennis, and that they will get that opportunity many times during the season.

Generally, younger players should begin competing at their home facilities before doing any travel matches or competitions. This gives you, as the instructor, the forum to teach rules, etiquette, scoring, tactics, technique and sportsmanship in a game based situation, while keeping the pressure at a minimum for young players. Then, once children get a little older and have a good grasp on all these things, it's exciting for them and their parents to take some local trips to compete against neighboring programs. Finally, the concept of travel matches and higher level tournaments can be introduced, but generally with under 10 players, close to home is the best place to start. As my friend Mike Barrell calls it, "Flap before Flying."

Another consideration with competition is that younger players generally benefit from shorter matches against a variety of different opponents, as well as anything in a team format. There are many creative ways to set up competitions at your facility, including compass draws, round robins, team scoring tournaments, the list can go on. The most important thing is that learning is occurring and students are beginning the process of evaluating *why* they are learning skills in practice and that is, to compete!

There are obviously so many more things that can go into a world class under 10 tennis program. But if you consider these five, and begin to build momentum with these young students, you will start to see the numerous benefits to you and your facility. The days of standing young students in a line and feeding them two balls, correcting their technique, and sending them to the back of the line, need to be over at your facility! Embrace these exciting ways of teaching children under 10 and watch your program grow!