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MODERN TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR JUNIOR TENNIS
PLAYERS

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Abstract

Tennis specialists try to find out simple strategies to improve technical and tactical aspects and to involve more often and earlier the match aspects. Because tennis coaches want to prepare young juniors for competitions as early as possible, they try to skip over the analytical aspects. In the latest tennis methodology, we can find strategies such as teaching global service, teaching basic hits while running or integrated sessions. They want to put players in close touch with all kind of variables involved in tennis matches. The research is based on junior training sessions and we want to underline the positive aspect of global training for the future development of a tennis player. This kind of training is opposite to analytical training, where players are more static and do only parts of the movements or phases. Tennis players are more focused on what happens after the hit and try to be more intuitive on the opponent's actions. Because tennis players turn pro very early, we seek to get them used to all kinds of challenging aspects during the match and after. The main issues of global training are the opponent's hitting possibilities, the angles of service and return, and the results of the ball effect. That is why all these global training sessions are with an active player as an opponent and only actions as game situations. This might be the future of junior tennis players for improving the skills needed in competitions.

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1. Introduction

Tennis specialists have started to change the training strategy in order to adapt the players' style for winning the point as soon as they can.

Because the first phase of the tennis game is the fixed one, which includes the serve and return, most coaches want to develop a strategy based on very efficient hits in this part of the game.

This kind of training session should start very early in the junior period, because players must learn from the beginning the importance of efficiency factors (effect, length, speed, direction and height) and how to read them during the game.

Several authors tried to highlight the importance of the serve and return, most of them underlining the importance of the relation between the two parts. They analysed the serve and return from different points of view (technical, tactical, biomechanical, mental and physical aspects) and many have provided us with a lot of connections between hits.

According to some authors (Bollettieri & Maher, 1995), tennis is 90% mental, so they have tried to prove that an efficient serve starts with a mental strategy of placing the hit; also, for the return, if players have a mental image of the height of the ball, they can adapt the hit for any kind of serve. So, after this mental visualisation, players have to do with the on-court training session for learning these practical aspects (Felsing, 1997). The most important issue in the preparation of players is their inner drive that will push them to try to find out the best hit for every situation (Gallwey, 1997). Biomechanical research is also very important to develop the serve and baseline hits, because it helps us discover new reserves for powerful hits.

That is why the serve is based so much on the upper body (shoulders), torsion of the lower body (hips) and hand-eye coordination (Hess, 1992; Knebel, Herbeck, & Schaffner, 1988). The serve and return must be played both during the training session and the match, so it is important for the servant to also play the third ball, because he/she must be able to focus on the opponent's return. Most of the training sessions are only done with the serves, without an opponent or a semi-active opponent. Therefore, the player is not used to step in the court for the next hit or to do the split step for having the weight centre low or changing the direction as soon as they can (Segărceanu, 1988). The tactical aspects of the fixed phase are based on the level of performance, the age of juniors and the efficiency factors: effect, direction, speed, height and length of the ball (Kriese, 1993; Zancu, 1998).

2. Problem Statement

Starting from these aspects, we have tried to underline that if, in the junior tennis training sessions, we work the serve and return as a unitary system, the players' efficiency during matches can be increased in this phase. The analytical session cannot allow the player to have better anticipation of the opponent's hits.

3. Research Questions

- 3.1 Can junior players learn to anticipate the opponent's serve watching his/her toss of the ball?
- 3.2. Can junior players chose an efficient hit after the serve effect of the ball?
- 3.3. Can junior players anticipate how the opponent will hit after his/her service placement?

4. Purpose of the Study

4.1. The research objectives

Starting from these questions, we developed a specific methodology for increasing the efficiency of the serve and return for junior players (11-12 years old).

We tried to develop the technique of both the serve and return based on the efficiency factors.

We tried to develop the specific motor qualities for these two actions.

We tried to teach players to anticipate the next hit based on the placement, effect, height, angle and speed of the ball.

The important tasks were to:

Control the level of physical preparation

Control the level of performance

Develop special tennis training sessions

Record the results in official matches, which can underline the efficiency of this training strategy.

5. Research Methods

5.1. The research subjects

To emphasise the efficiency of the research, we used a single group made up of 10 tennis players of the same age (11-12 years), during the same stage of preparation. The players were registered at the “As Tennis Club” of Bucharest for 6 months when the training sessions and matches took place.

5.2. Observation

To better observe the content of the fixed phase, the serve and return of the juniors, we developed a system of recording the data related to the efficiency of the serve and return:

- total number of serves
- direction of the ball for the serve and return
- the landing areas of the ball
- the degree of efficiency of the serve and return.

For a good result, we split the tennis court into 9 areas for the return and 6 areas for the service (Figure 01). These areas gave us the possibility to record the relation between the placement of the serve and the return of the opponent.

7		6	5	1	
				2	
8		9		3	
			4	3	
1		2	3	2	
				1	

Figure 01. The strategy of tennis zones for the serve and return (yellow for the serve, green for the return)

5.3. The technical test

The players had to hit the serve in the zones 1, 2 and 3, and then to do the return on the cross areas and in the middle area. The test is for two players, who have to serve and return. The serves must be hit with an imposed effect and the return must be hit in some areas due to this ball effect. In the initial test, the players hit the serve with their own options for the effect, and in the final test, with a specific effect. For the return, they have to hit the ball back depending on what zones the service ball bounces.

The initial test was done at the beginning of the research. Between the initial and final tests, we used the new strategy for the serve and return, and then we finished with the final test.

5.4. Statistical method

To analyse the data, we used the ANOVA method included in the Origin computer program. Because we calculate the significant test with this method, it allows us to interpret different aspects of the training of the tennis players.

6. Findings

After recording the data, we can underline some interpretations on the serve and return of our tennis players.

For the serve, the most hit areas were zones number 1 and 2, and afterwards, zone 3. Junior players used these zones to open the angles for the next hit (zone 1) or to hit the ball in the body of the opponents (zone 2), as a good tactics for the serve.

For the return, the most used zones were 1, 7, 8 and 9. Junior players used the return to hit in the opposite corner of the servant (zones 1 and 7). Also, they hit the middle alley of the court to stop the opponent opening the angles for the next hit.

A short conclusion is that the junior players' first option was a long return, and the best one in this case is cross, because it has the longest direction. Another option was in the middle of the court to stop the opponent opening the angles.

The serve is more with a slice and topspin effect and is less flat, so, at this age, players prefer to have efficiency instead of power.

It is very interesting to see that the serve in the middle is very often missed, and the precision is low, because they want to risk it.

Also, after recording the efficiency of the serve and return following these training sessions, we discovered an increased percentage of efficiency for the fixed phase during official matches. In Tables 01 and 02, we analyse differences between the efficiency of the serve and return during competitive matches, before and after applying the training strategy.

Table 01. The serve and return – Results of the technical test

Name	Serve on the right			Serve on the left			Second serve		Return cross		Return in the middle
	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Zone 1	Zone 2	Zone 3	Right	Left			
O.H.	9/12	11/15	10/13	8/15	10/14	7/14	14/16	15/17	15/17	13/17	15/17
M.R.	6/8	7/10	5/7	6/7	8/12	7/9	13/14	13/15	10/11	9/11	13/14
S.T.	7/9	8/10	6/7	7/10	9/11	7/9	15/16	14/15	13/14	11/12	15/20
C.A.	9/13	8/15	7/5	8/16	10/14	7/15	14/17	15/17	13/16	14/16	15/17
N.C.	10/12	11/13	12/14	9/11	9/11	10/13	15/18	14/16	14/16	13/15	13/14
C.M.	9/12	12/13	15/16	9/11	10/12	11/13	16/19	13/16	13/15	15/17	14/16
P.I.	11/15	11/16	10/15	10/12	12/16	13/17	15/17	13/18	14/17	13/16	12/20
I.P.	9/11	9/10	10/12	10/11	11/12	12/11	14/15	14/16	16/16	15/17	11/13
C.M.	10/12	10/14	9/13	11/13	12/14	9/11	13/16	13/17	13/16	14/17	15/17
G.B.	11/13	12/14	10/12	9/11	10/13	13/15	12/14	13/16	12/15	14/17	15/16

Table 02. Match results – Efficiency of the serve and return for the best 3 players, before and after the training sessions

Player	% 1 st serve		% 2 nd serve		% return on 1 st serve		% return on 2 nd serve	
	initial-final		initial-final		initial-final		initial-final	
O.H.	46%	65%	56%	74%	65%	78%	72%	84%
N.C.	54%	67%	62%	70%	70%	82%	77%	82%
P.I.	62%	72%	58%	72%	60%	76%	68%	78%

7. Conclusion

This method should be included more often in the training sessions of junior players, because this strategy can eliminate the free phase and can develop a new strategy for the fixed phase.

The results in official matches showed us that the efficiency of their serves and returns was better.

The players learned to use serves with different effects for different zones.

Also, they can adapt now the return after any type of service of the opponent.

The players have, after these training sessions, a new tactical strategy for the fixed phase, in the sense that they will use the serve and return for winning the point.

They are used to anticipate the service, the return of the service and the ball after the return, the first important 3 balls of the point in a tennis match.

They have also developed the physical aspects included in the serve and the basic hits of the return.

The changing of directions and the effects are now applied for imposing a strategy to open the angles of the court for winning points more easily.

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