

The Game-Based Coaching Methodology – An Investigation of Principles and Practice.

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines findings from a recent ITF-backed small-scale study of the 'Game-Based' coaching methodology. The article presents a background to the introduction and launch of the methodology, together with a discussion of critical aspects of the pedagogy. Specific recommendations are presented in terms of possible strategies for further developing the implementation of this coaching initiative.

Key words: Game-Based, Play and Stay, Coaching Methodology, Pedagogy.

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INTRODUCTION

In an effort to promote the new 'Game-Based' methodology worldwide, the ITF launched the Play and Stay campaign at their Annual General Meeting in 2007. A year later at a dedicated Play and Stay seminar in London, they reported that the project had already had a huge impact worldwide with 80+ nations signed up and actively participating, comprehensive website support developed, and substantial promotion at major events such as Grand Slam tournaments and Davis/Federation Cup. Training courses had been run in over 40 nations with 1,300 coaches trained.

Despite these successes there is evidence (albeit largely anecdotal) that the game-based methodology needs to overcome some particular hurdles. The ITF themselves for example recognised at the 2008 seminar that:

"Most coaches worldwide are not using slower balls and smaller courts in their lessons with starter players".

The question logically arises therefore as to the extent and effectiveness of the adoption of the game-based approach by coaches around the world. With a weight of evidence supporting its implementation and the development of the sport so reliant on its success, it is crucial that challenges and obstacles be identified and addressed. With this in mind, an attempt was made in recent months to gather some information on the new methodology as it exists in current practice.

In January 2009 therefore, a sample of coaches from around the world was asked to participate in an ITF backed small-scale research assignment. Their task was to complete two sets of coaching lessons with two different groups of players. Unknown to the coaches was the fact that one of the sets of lessons provided to them was designed using the 'game-based' methodology, while the other set was modeled closely on the 'traditional' methodology. With eight countries represented by the participating coaches, the results provided a snapshot of current opinion on the merits and challenges of the game-based approach.



RESULTS

The sample of players with which coaches implemented the study covered a broad range of abilities (from ITN 4 to ITN 10), with the bulk being at the higher end of the ITN scale. This provided an opportunity to primarily assess the application of the game-based approach with beginner and intermediate players.

The general outcomes to the end-questionnaire showed a strong level of support for the game-based lessons, with 11 out of 12 comparison questions eliciting 'probable' or 'definite' identification of the game-based methodology as the preferred approach from every coach. Only one question provided a degree of support for the traditional approach – "Which group showed the most improvement technically?"

In assessing the extent to which either set of lessons mirrored the usual approach of the coach, the results indicated that the game-based lessons provided a closer match than did the traditional. While coaches reported a preference for the game-based approach in their usual coaching though, there was still a high level of reported application of the traditional approach.

Of particular interest however was the fact that despite the wide variation in the standard of the players involved and the strong support for the game-based approach from participating coaches, almost every coach taking part reported using full courts, full racquets and standard balls during the study. This would certainly reflect the anecdotal concern that the game-based approach is not being entirely embraced to the extent that it might be and that further steps may need to be taken to encourage a fuller adoption of the strategy.

MOVING FORWARD

The results of this recent study when combined with data readily available, suggest that a number of key obstacles lie in the path of universal implementation of the game-based approach. If we wish to truly promote tennis as a sport worth playing, if we hope to enable our juniors to develop to the best of their ability, and if we want to improve the enjoyment players derive from learning and playing our sport, it is evident that as a tennis community we need to take positive steps towards resolving the shortcomings in our current strategy. Primarily...

(A) Increasing the use of modified equipment.

This point was clearly made at the ITF Play and Stay seminar in 2008 and so it was disappointing to note that one year later in this specific study, every single coach reported using full courts and standard balls when completing most of their lessons (despite the fact that many of the players involved were beginners). Follow-up interviews with participating coaches identified three main reasons for this:

- Lack of availability of the required equipment.
- Concern that tournaments were not using the modifications and so players might not be properly prepared if they used smaller courts and softer balls in training.

- Belief that using full equipment at a younger age provided a greater likelihood of long-term success.

While the major distributors are readily capable of providing the necessary equipment, this research over recent months has identified a specific problem experienced by beginner coaches in particular. Many of the coaches interviewed (primarily those working with beginner players) coach only on a part-time basis and so do not have any arrangement or account with an equipment supplier. In addition, since they may be working with players of other standards as well, and may be limited to a restricted budget for equipment, they inevitably purchase balls that can be used with all of their groups – i.e. standard balls.



The acceptance that constraints in finances and storage may be an important consideration for coaches (particularly the part-time coaches who may be working primarily with our starter players) requires that a different solution be considered. Targeting resources at clubs and schools (rather than at coaches) in terms of encouraging purchase of the modified equipment, might reap greater rewards for example. The main problem is not that coaches don't want to use the modified equipment – just that many of them aren't in a position to buy it, store it or transport it.

(B) Matching competitive play with practice.

Linked to the lack of use of adapted equipment mentioned above, is the clear problem of competitive tennis for starter players still taking place on full court and with standard balls. Thankfully the fantastic 'Tennis 10s' initiative is being rolled out internationally and should go a long way towards solving this problem. A standardization of competitive events for young players will ensure that the coaches working with these players will be far more inclined to prepare their charges in the appropriate manner.

Individual, high-pressure, 'knockout' style events are therefore incompatible with the Play and Stay strategy and are probably best avoided (even if the correct modified equipment is used). Since the aim of the initiative is about far more than the individual result, team based events with multiple matches and increased opportunities for success are likely to be far more effective. Creating the conditions that change competition from an intimidating, isolated and largely unsuccessful experience, into a team building and dynamic environment with healthy exposure to a variety of outcomes, represents the most appropriate standard.

(C) Clarifying 'How'.

While a fantastic array of resource information exists in relation to the game-based approach, much of this seems to focus on what the game-based approach is - i.e. the differences between it and the traditional method.

Follow-up interviews with coaches in this study however highlighted the fact that substantial doubt existed about how to implement the

methodology. Coaches were all familiar with the general concept but were unsure as to how this should translate into their lesson planning. Some thought they were implementing a game-based approach when they weren't and others were implementing the correct strategy but almost entirely by accident. It would seem that a continuation of the current ITF training initiative for coaches is the logical solution to this problem, offering the opportunity for participants to clarify how best to plan programmes and lessons for their players.

(D) Perception that technique is being left behind.

The misconception that technique is not addressed while employing the game-based approach was apparent in the feedback received for this study and also in many of the informal follow-up interviews that took place. This view of the game-based approach as something to be employed when a player reaches a certain standard highlights a fundamental lack of understanding of the pedagogy. As we have seen from much of the existing literature, the starter player stands out as the ideal participant in a game-based lesson (in terms of enjoyment, experience of initial success, and likelihood of returning to play again). Unfortunately while many coaches accept the need for lessons to meet these criteria, their willingness and/or ability to implement the appropriate plan does not live up to this aspiration.

In particular, the confusion seems to stem from a belief that game-based lessons are entirely 'open' in nature and therefore that players of lesser ability, if unable to play full points, may become disheartened and frustrated. The solution to this problem again lies in the domain of coach education. Firstly, the challenge is to increase the awareness of coaches about the true nature of a game-based lesson, clearly identifying the 'hourglass' format that enables the lesson to be 'closed' at certain times for skill development, followed by an 'opening' to reintroduce the game situation.

CONCLUSION.

The natural human reluctance to change combined with a healthy skepticism towards new ideas, has left many coaches unsure of how best to proceed. And while much of the resource content offered to them has been driven by definitions, explanations and comparisons, there is a need for a different type of education. The emphasis now needs to be on why a change to the new system is so important and on how lessons can be constructed so that everything the coach wishes to teach can still be covered, but in a far more efficient learner-centered manner.

There is no doubt that the promotion of the game-based and Play & Stay philosophies is a crucial assignment effecting not only the enjoyment of players everywhere, but also the general development of the sport. The evolution of coaching from the traditional approach to these newer strategies will be a long-term and ongoing project, requiring constant attention and amendment. The willingness on the part of the governing body to identify and implement new methods for pursuing the ultimate goal will be a critical factor in determining overall success.

Appendix.

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