

PROGRESSIVE TENNIS – Innovation in Canadian Junior Development

A mini-revolution is brewing in North America. The approach is called “Progressive Tennis”. It is imported from European countries like Belgium where it was used to successfully develop players like Justine Henin and Olivier Rochus. In Switzerland, Roger Federer promotes the approach. Progressive Tennis uses a systematic progression of court sizes, balls, and racquets, to scale the game down to an appropriate level for 5-10 year olds.

WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Modified racquets and balls are not new. For example, Tennis Canada unveiled its ‘new’ Mini-Tennis initiative in 1986 with a video featuring Bjorn Borg (Sweden was using Mini-Tennis in their junior development system). The equipment has been around for a while, as has the ‘graduated length’ concept. Coaches have used bits and pieces for years seeing the advantage from the perspective of fun and safety.

The difference this time is that all these elements have been brought together in a much more systematic way than ever before. Tennis companies now carry the full line of equipment. The organization of the progression gives the approach more power to transform players better and faster. Simply put, learning tennis is more effective with this progressional, systematic approach.

SYSTEM BASICS

Here is the basic progression. Levels are colour-coded for easy recognition:

Step #1: 1/2 Court Tennis (Red) 5-7 yrs
(Called 12 Meter Tennis in Europe)

COURT: Net height: 80 cm (31.5 inches)
Length: 12 m (42 feet) or 11 m (36 feet)
Width: (singles): 5.5 m (18 feet)

RACQUET: 19 or 21 inch (depending on player size)

BALL: High Density Foam ball
(e.g. Wilson “EZ Hit”)



1/2 Court Tennis is played sideways across the court (11 meter/36 foot length). It uses an oversize, high-density foam ball which is easier to visually track, receive, and control, since it flies slower and bounces lower. Regular rules apply with the exception that the server can serve anywhere in the opponent’s court (in front of the regulation singles sideline) and the scoring is simplified. It is recommended to have a minimum of 2 levels of Half-Court development:

- **“FUNdamentals”**: This first level emphasizes the “ABC’S” of athletic development (Agility, Balance, Coordination, Speed). Players learn to track a ball and move with balance in multiple directions, create a stable, waist level impact point, and send the ball cooperatively to a partner with groundstrokes and overhead serves.
- **“Competitive”**: This next level helps players compete with groundstrokes, serves, and volleys. They learn how to adapt their impact point when moving, link their arms and bodies on groundstrokes, serve with an overhead throwing action, and direct the ball to win points. Players should have a solid base of technique before ‘graduating’ to the 3/4 Court program.

Step #2: 3/4 Court Tennis (Orange) 7-9 yrs
(Called 18 Meter Tennis in Europe)

COURT: Net height: 80 cm (31.5 inches) Length: 18 m (59 feet) Width: (singles): 6.5 m (21.3 feet)
RACQUET: 23 or 25 inch (depending on player size)
BALL: Low Compression ball (e.g. Wilson “Winners” ball)



3/4 Court Tennis uses a scaled down court (length and width). For a 7-9 year old, the ratio of length to width is basically the same as a full sized court is to an adult. This allows for development of an all-court game style with net-play. The key is to develop the same tactics as full court tennis along with the associated techniques. 3/4 Court Tennis uses low-compression balls that facilitate this tactical development. The balls are easier to control and don’t bounce as lively as a regular ball. They also assist development of good biomechanics. 3/4 Court Competition is played on an 18 x 6.5 meter court with low compression balls. Full tennis rules apply.

Step #3: Full-Court Tennis (Green) 9-11 yrs
(Called 24 meter Tennis in Europe)

COURT: Net height: 91.5 cm (3 feet) Length: 23.77 m (78 feet) Width: (singles): 8.25 m (27 feet)
RACQUET: 25 or 26 inch (depending on player size)
BALL: Transition ball (e.g. Wilson “EZ Play”)



The final step in the progression is to move 9-10 year olds to the full court. Transitional balls that fly slower and bounce lower are used to enhance consistency and control.

After ‘graduating’ from the Progressive Tennis System, 10-11 year olds would be fully developed to successfully use a full court and regular balls and play in regulation full court competition.

THE PLAY IS THE THING

Currently, coaches use this modified equipment as a novelty. Because tennis is challenging to play, typical North American lessons consists of a series of “fun” games that poorly or indirectly develop good skills. Many coaches think, *“They can’t play until they learn properly so, they should just have fun”*. Since it is not believed kids can play skillfully at an early age, lessons become time-filler activities. The problem is, playing “Tennis-Baseball” or dressing kids up in costume may seem exciting however, one could do those games for years and still never learn to rally.

The power of the progressive tennis system is that it allows players to *play* quickly and successfully. In Progressive Tennis, the philosophy is that tennis is a great and fun game to play and the quicker and more skillfully a player can play, the more fun it is. No need to ‘dress it up’ with trivial activities. Each program not only has specific equipment to aid success, but particular skills to develop as well. It is recommended a Game-Based Approach be used. **The coach’s job is to get them to play, and help them learn to play better.**

Progressive Tennis training sessions should include play and there should be a schedule of leagues or even tournaments at 1/2 Court and 3/4 Court lengths.

ACADEMY SET-UP

Here is an example of how we run our Progressive Mini-Tennis Academy at Grant Connell Tennis Centre.



Up to 24 players can be accommodated each day on 3 courts. The on-court session lasts 1 hour. A league is also run every Friday (same court set-up). It is important that off-court physical development also be included in the program. We have 3 separate physical training sessions per week, but including an extra 30-45 minutes of physical training to the on court sessions can work just as well.

Court #1: 1/2 Court Program: The “Fundamentals” program is on one side of the court (6 players to 1 coach). The “Competitive” program is on the other side (6 players to one coach). By playing sideways across the court, six 11 Meter courts can be set-up. 12 players can be easily accommodated.

Court #2 & 3: 3/4 Court Program: One court has a full 18 Meter court with 4 players (the more advanced ones). The other uses the 3/4 Court length, but splits a full doubles court in half to make two 18 meter courts with 6 players. This way, the 3/4 Court program can accommodate 10 players on 2 regulation courts (1 coach per court).

RESOURCES

A number of companies carry the equipment. Wilson has the full progression of racquets, balls. Mini-nets are also available that fold into a bag and take only a minute to set-up. Wilson also carries “Drop-down” EZ Lines to make court boundaries. All of the equipment is also available from Joe Dinnoffer’s equipment company, Oncourt/Offcourt.com.

Using the Progressive Tennis approach can speed up the development of younger players. Tennis Canada is promoting the approach to all coaches and facilities. Hopefully, all tennis facilities across the country will adopt this option for junior development.



If you would like to ask a question, give feedback, or want more information, contact us at:
www.acecoach.com

PROGRESSIVE TENNIS COURT DIMENSIONS

Half-Court = Red “dot/dash” lines (can be set-up length or width-wise on the court)
3/4 Court = Orange “dash” lines
Full Court = Green

