

# Starting Them Even Younger

Developing a program for children aged three-five years old could help reverse discouraging trends in Australian tennis. **SHANE SCRUTTON** reports.

Developing Australia's next Lleyton Hewitt could begin with a pre-tennis program for three-five year-olds.



**T**oday's children are exposed to a multitude of sports from an ever younger age, with sports like football, soccer, basketball and cricket whose savvy administrators and marketing departments increasing market share and participation. At the coalface of the tennis club, not only do coaches compete with other sports but we also compete against the now-ubiquitous Xbox and Playstation.

Tennis, the game Australia dominated in the '50s and '60s, has undeniably lost ground. With only one male and two women in the world's top 100, the question of how to reverse this trend has assumed even greater importance.

It is critical, therefore, that tennis coaches come up with imaginative ways of:

- Enticing children into the sport from an early age.
- Ensuring their experience in the game is a fun one.
- Developing those children with the basic skills needed to become tomorrow's champions.

**Children love to hear the sound of their own voices, and to show each other what to do.**

One remedy for discouraging trends may be in developing a pre-tennis program for children aged three - five years-old. This would provide children, from a very early age, with the opportunity to participate in a sport that can not only be played for life (unlike many others) but is one of the few that can be successfully modified for young children. Such a program could act as a feeder program for an existing coaching business and provide a valuable introduction to the sport.

As the head coach of the Little Tacker tennis program, a program running since 2005 which operates at four venues in Melbourne's North Eastern suburbs and caters for over 120 children aged three-five years old, I have learnt that establishing such a program is not necessarily easy. Nor is it suited to every coach.

From my own experiences in developing a pre-tennis tennis program I suggest that a coach needs to consider the following questions:

***Am I suited to this age group in terms of personality and temperament?***

Do I have enough patience to be able to give the same



Making it fun is the secret to engaging young players.

instructions repeatedly without displaying or feeling frustration, and be able to project a confident manner that says to the child (and parents), "I enjoy what I do and I want you children to feel the same".

This is where the right coach will make or break the program. A coach whose body language and words project an assertive and approachable image is the coach who will succeed, not necessarily one who can coach elite players. It doesn't matter if you can teach a 15-year-old how to hit a kick serve when you have a four-year-old who can't make contact with the ball.

***Am I able to provide clear instructions that children will be able to understand in an easy manner?***

This is where having teaching experience (particularly primary teaching experience) can be of more importance than any coaching or playing background. Children of this age need simple instructions as well as firm directions on behaviour to promote a safe coaching and learning environment.

***Is my program adequately structured with modified equipment?***

Children of this age need to know exactly what to do, and how to do it. From exactly where to stand on the court, to how to stand for a forehand, to how many balls to pick up, the more specific the better. The use of place mats and lines cannot be underestimated, or the use of soft tennis balls, mini-nets and racquets.

Within this program a coach needs also to possess a contingency plan when what was intended to work doesn't.

***Have I got the right type of coaches who can assist me with coaching children of this age?***

Teaching children of this age can be mentally tiring. As a coach you have to learn to expect the unexpected and to anticipate that children's concentration and temperament can be erratic. It takes a lot of mental energy to have eyes in the back of your head, recognise when an activity is not working, and make it fun at the same time. You may find it beneficial to utilise other coaches with these qualities to provide some variety, as well as to assist in the development of their coaching skills.

***Do I sincerely believe that this program is beneficial to children at this age?***

This is perhaps the most important question. If the coach doesn't believe it, then the children will recognise it and so will the parents. Some parents may initially believe that teaching a child of three years of age is simply too early. I have been surprised how many parents have provided extremely positive and surprising feedback regarding the program's effect on the children, from increased concentration time to improved behaviour and listening skills at kindergarten.

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Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that children are a lot more capable than we give them credit for. Children love to hear the sound of their own voices, and to show each other what to do. There have been some amazed looks from parents when I have asked one child to show another how to hold the racquet with the correct backhand grip. Providing them with an opportunity to assist each other is an important skill required for life-long learning in any endeavour, and a great way to bolster self-esteem.

Ultimately the sport of tennis needs to catch up to other sports that have leapfrogged ahead, and we as coaches need to come up with inventive ways to attract children to the sport, and retain them. Exposing children to the sport as early as possible is a great way to attract them to participate for life. ●

*Shane Scrutton, a TCA coach, is the coach at Eaglemont Tennis Club, a qualified Secondary and Primary school teacher and former world ranked player.*

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