



# COACH to COACH

Produced by **Wayne Elderton**, a Tennis Canada National Level 4 Coach, Head of Tennis Canada Coaching Development and Certification in BC, and Tennis Director of the Grant Connell Tennis Centre in North Vancouver.  
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## MOVING TO A GAME-BASED APPROACH

*Based on a presentation given by Wayne Elderton at the 2002 USA Tennis Teachers Conference in New York*

### INTRODUCTION

The game has changed over the last 30 years. With players hitting harder, athleticism increasing, and racquet technology, it is a different ball game. Only recently has coaching started to catch up.

Many coaches have been impacted by sports science. Over the next 5-10 years, there are some areas that will drive the evolution of coaching. Many of the seeds of these changes are emerging. Most of the presentations at the 2002 USA Tennis Teachers Conference contained or referenced these new coaching concepts.

The 4 key areas that will become prominent in tennis coaching form the foundation of what I like to call the **21<sup>st</sup> Century Coaching Principles**:

**Holistic:** The areas of Psychology, Physical, Tactical, and technical will be integrated more and more. All these areas have tended to exist in their own compartments. It is their integration in coaching all levels that will improve.

**Learner-centred:** How people learn is a critical issue in how we teach tennis. How we organize the skills we teach, the environment we create, the coaching tools and communication we use, the stages people pass through when learning will all impact our coaching and boost it's effectiveness.

**Open skill:** It is acknowledged internationally that tennis uses "open skills". These are skills that have to adapt to the situations players encounter on court. This is in direct contrast to the traditional way of teaching tennis by 'models' (e.g. the forehand stroke, the backhand, etc.). What is the correct forehand when it must change for different balls received, different balls sent, locations on the court, etc.

**Game-based:** Tennis is a game and people need to learn not only how to stroke, but how to play as well. Playing requires not only physical motor skills but cognitive skills like problem-solving and decision-making as well. The tactical elements and development of a player is every bit as important as their technical development. The Game-based approach maintains the fun of playing by either

scaling the game down for success or placing players into commonly encountered tennis situations. Either way, players learn as they play. Tactics and techniques all weave together. The Game-based approach teaches players in harmony with the true nature of tennis. That tennis is an open skill and balances both the motor and cognitive aspects of a player.

## **GAME-BASED APPROACH KEYS**

If a coach (program, club, country, etc.) wants to move to a Game-based approach, there are 4 key steps that are required:

### **#1: Keep the Whole Game in View**

Since tennis is playing (not just stroking), it is good to keep the purpose and objectives of the game constantly in front of a student. All too often in traditional tennis, a coach says that players, “should not play until they learn properly”. They then spend the entire lesson time conforming students to an idealized model of the strokes (forehand groundstroke, volley, etc). Imagine how the fun of playing tag would be killed if a coach put players into a series of agility and footwork lessons before they were allowed to play. This is what is being done to the fun of tennis!

For beginners, the game can still be kept in view by scaling it down to a size where the student can play with success (e.g. Mini-Tennis in the service boxes with foam or low-pressure balls). They then can have the whole game progress and expand as they develop.

### **#2: Teach tactics (what to do) before/with technique (how to stroke)**

The change in method from the traditional teaching procedure is in the positioning and relationship of tactics to technique. Traditional tennis taught a “technique first, then tactics later’ order. The key is to reverse that and teach a player what to do (tactics), then teach how to stroke (technique) as a means to perform the tactic. In traditional coaching the technique became an end in itself. Once a player could mimic the ‘proper’ form, the lesson was done.

### **#3: Use Principle based technique**

Although technique in the Game-based approach is second, it is by no means secondary. In traditional coaching the proper technique was defined by a set of idealized stroke models (the forehand, backhand, volley, etc.). If tennis is an open skill and technique needs to be adapted to different situations, these models become insufficient. What is the ‘proper’ stroke when the most successful players in the game all have different styles? Rather than stroke models to conform to, technical instruction needs to emphasize the general principles that are true in all situations. Specific situations will require principles that allow the player to be effective (get the ball where they want) and efficient (biomechanically sound). For example, where to end the follow-through is a

'form' issue. It changes depending on the grip of the player, the path of the racquet, the purpose of the shot, etc. Rather than teaching one point to end the follow-through it is more successful to teach the purpose of the follow-through. These include maintaining or accelerating the racquet through the contact and having the proper racquet path for the intended shot. If these are correct, the shot will be successful and there will be an appropriate follow-through.

#### **#4: Train Situations (not just strokes)**

Players can learn the game by being placed in level appropriate situations. They should be common situations that they encounter when they play. This "Situation Training" helps players develop their problem-solving and decision-making skills. It requires the coach programming their lessons based on situations (e.g. Maintaining a rally from the centre of the court). Traditionally, lessons were programmed based on strokes (lesson #1, 'The Forehand', Lesson #2: 'The Backhand', etc.). This type of stroke lesson programming stuck coaches in a model approach rather than a Game-based one. A Game based lesson would follow this structure:

1. Start with a playing situation where the coach analyzes the skills needed for the players(s) to be more successful.
2. Drill the specific skills uncovered in the analysis (could be psychological, physical, tactical, technical)
3. Integrate the skills back into the original situation

This type of lesson structure helps players build a library of solutions to the situations they face when they play.

#### **CONCLUSION**

The Game-based approach is a superior way to teach the game of tennis since it equips the players with all the tactical and technical skills needed for successful play. It is simply a reflection of the evolution in learning that has occurred in other fields (e.g. education and "contextualized learning", business and medicine with the 'case study' approach, etc.) In 1999 the International Tennis Federation (ITF) ratified the approach at it's World-wide Coaches Conference.

#### **RESOURCES:**

- The Games Approach to coaching: video available from Human Kinetics
- Doubles Tennis Tactics by Louis Cayer: video available from Human Kinetics
- USTA Rallyball: video and manual
- 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tennis Coaching: Learner-centred Principles for the Game-based approach: manual by Wayne Elderton available from ACE coach
- [www.acecoach.com](http://www.acecoach.com)

For more information on coaching please visit

[www.acecoach.com](http://www.acecoach.com)