




PLAYMATE

Growing the Game by Growing the Way We Teach It

by Stan Oley

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Many generous organizations have donated money to help grow the game of tennis. Once new players are introduced to the game however, it is up to us, the teaching professionals, to turn the sport into a lifetime passion. In order to accomplish this, I feel that we, as teaching professionals, need to grow as well.

When I am traveling as a speaker, I make it a point to talk with as many grassroots players as possible (flight attendants, servers, stylists, hotel personnel). When speaking with these players about tennis their major complaint is always that the game is too difficult, and that even after a few lessons they are still unable to rally consistently with their friends. Why is this?

One of the main reasons these players feel that the game is too difficult is that the ball they receive during the lessons does not represent one that is received during the match. Understandably it would be very difficult for a teaching professional to feed "game-like" balls for eight hours a day, especially to more advanced players. This usually results in the teaching professional standing close to the net, easily feeding groundstrokes into a player's strike zone at the baseline or simply remaining at the net to feed easy volleys.

This type of improper feeding results in the player lacking ball recognition skills. Ball recognition is the player's ability to judge the ball's characteristics early in flight and thus successfully play the ball in their strike zone. This recognition is an integral aspect and serves as the foundation to a player's technique. Once the player is in a game situation and unable to play the ball in their strike zone because of poor ball recognition skills their technique will suffer dramatically. This results in poor decision making on-court and creates frustration and general lack of interest in novice levels. This is where the ball machine can help by providing any type of feed or combination of feeds from anywhere on the court and allow the teaching professional to apply their expertise in teaching the player instead of just "pumping balls". Most often the teaching professional only uses the ball machine to provide rally balls in an attempt to perfect the student's technique. When the student attempts to rally the ball with another player however, it is almost impossible because they lack the recognition skills necessary to successfully play the ball in their strike zone.

Most teaching professionals complain about the resistance faced when teaching with the ball machine. The best way to erase this resistance and successfully introduce the ball machine into the lesson program is to begin by using the ball machine in the basic warm-up drills with group lessons. Keep the players moving quickly and change drills every 4-5 minutes to keep the drills from becoming too stagnant.

When teaching private lessons always have the machine plugged in and positioned on the side of the court with the extension cord unreeled for quick and easy positioning. I usually begin the lesson with some live hitting and immediately isolate a shot or series of shots to be worked on. Once these shots present themselves, I immediately pull the machine onto the court and program a drill that isolates the problem area. By effectively using my remote I can step in and demonstrate the correct method, then walk around the student to be in a position for a clear evaluation. I then finish the lesson with some live ball drilling to give an overall review of the lesson. Once the lesson is completed, I give a complimentary pass to use the ball machine in

order to practice what was accomplished during the lesson. Depending on the student's lesson frequency I like each player to use the ball machine at least once or twice before each lesson. If the player is not practicing when needed their expectations for growth cannot be as great. This makes the player accountable for their own progress rather than simply placing the blame on the teaching professional.

Often, when a club or teaching professional purchases a new ball machine there is an urgency to utilize the machine right away. If you allow people to begin renting the machine without a demo day to showcase the new machine's features and controls, the machine will lose its hype quickly and revenue will be lost. The best way to defer the initial cost of the ball machine and make it a continual source of revenue in the future is to have a ball machine club. A ball machine club is a program that enables each member to purchase a pass and then utilize the ball machine on an unlimited basis.

Let's discuss some of the national statistics. The average amount spent on a new ball machine by teaching professionals is approximately \$3,000-\$3,500. A ball machine in this price range will provide the instructor with features complex enough to teach an advanced lesson while remaining simplistic enough for even the most "ball-machine-challenged" to utilize. Tennis instructors around the world are averaging \$3,000-\$5,000 a year with ball machine club memberships where 5 to 10 years ago the ball machine was only generating an average of \$700-\$1,000 in "pay to play" rentals. The average charge for an annual single ball machine club membership is \$125 with an annual family membership (three family members) being \$150 with a \$25 charge for each additional family member.

If you are to have a successful ball machine club, there should be a marketing campaign to host a free demo day clinic to sell ball machine memberships as soon as the machine arrives. The marketing campaign should begin about one month before the new machine's expected arrival. Simple drills geared for large groups accompanied by some upbeat music can make for a terrific ball machine demo day. This free demo day clinic also serves as an icebreaker and will successfully introduce the ball machine into the lesson program.

I feel it is time that we make a conscious effort to think about how we are teaching the game. I am extremely confident that if you implement the ball machine more effectively into your programs, both as a training aid and a teaching device, you will grow the way we teach the game, as well as the game itself.

As a sponsor of the USPTR, Playmate Ball Machines offers discounts to our members. If you would like more information about Playmate's member discount or have questions on how you can successfully incorporate a ball machine into your teaching program, contact Stan toll free in the U.S. at 888-759-6283 or email him at stan_oley@msn.com