

# The use of low compression balls in the development of high performance players

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***This article has been written to support the ITF Tennis...Play and Stay campaign. It appears in the ITF Quarterly Coaching and Sports Science Review Monographic Issue 42 with the kind permission of the ITF.***

Too often low compression balls have been considered as just an alternative for the recreational player. Less talented players benefit from these balls by developing far better consistency when rallying. This enhances the "fun" element of tennis. Furthermore, we are convinced that the use of slower red, orange and green balls, together with other adaptations (smaller courts and racquets) is the key in the development of talented young players. The differences in ball trajectory (slower, lower bounce) facilitate the development of a wider range of strokes and appropriate tactical decision-making.

## A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

### Red ("discovery stage") for 6-7 year olds

Having completed the initial basic learning stage and by staying long enough on this Court, the more skilful children will master the whole court. They will be able to change the direction and height of the ball, come to the net and maintain stability while running and hitting. The small racquets (23inch) allow consistent contact with the lighter, red ball. Tactically, players will be put in situations where they have to stay in control of the court and ball, attack or defend quickly, pick up cues from their opponent and the ball and react accordingly. Physical qualities such as agility, adapting to different trajectories, court positioning and rhythm will also be developed.

### Orange (total tennis) for 8-9 year olds

During this stage the best players are able to develop a complete technical repertoire. The length of the court forces the attacking player to be accurate and use topspin. It allows players to approach the net and develop the net game. Consequently, counter attacking will be more than just playing defensive lobs - short angled passing shots, aggressive drives and topspin lobs will be developed. The width of the court will necessitate the use of spin to produce angles and to be precise in attacking and volleying. When defending or being taken off the court players will need to cover some ground but will not be completely off balance. Due to the height of the net (80cm) and the use of the full service box, even children can create an advantage with their serve. The technical quality of the serve is favoured when using the correct racquet size (25inch). Flat and slice serves will be used predominantly. The lower bounce and lighter racquets will also prevent extreme grips on the groundstrokes. The use of a one-handed topspin backhand (and also slice and volley) will be facilitated. Overall we observe that talented players display the same technical/tactical adaptations as professionals on a full court!

### Green (transitional stage) for 10 year olds

Even advanced players face a difficult time on the larger court. Playing forward, coming to the net, using the serve as a weapon...it all becomes a lot more difficult. The court dimensions and the height of the net don't favour 'total tennis'.

Coaches should emphasise an advanced court positioning (around the baseline), taking the ball on the rise (contact between hips and shoulders will prevent extreme grips), and enough weight transfer into the shots (to prevent high loopy trajectories). By doing so, it will be possible to preserve an offensive/constructive attitude and to play at a higher tempo. The use of the green ball will favour this philosophy. Using a 26inch racquet is another key element in "preserving" the technical/tactical level. Rackets that are too heavy or long at this stage often create technical problems on the serve, groundstrokes and volleys, due to inertia. Doubles on the green court is played on a full singles court. It has been shown that this allows and stimulates a more active participation of the net players and an easier coverage of the net: another element in the development of a wider range of strokes and tactical options. This compensates the difficulties in mastering the net game in singles at this stage. We therefore advise the organisation of team competitions, including doubles, for this age group.

#### Yellow for 11 year olds

Once players become more proficient, they can use a normal ball on the full size court. The same principles apply as for the green ball (advanced court positioning, playing on the rise etc). The heavier ball will create a bigger shock at impact. This requires sufficient forearm action, grip strength and an appropriate racquet (both in size and weight) in relation to the physical capacities of the players. Taller and/or stronger players are able to use a 27 inch racquet. It generally takes 2 to 3 years of play on this court before the total tennis game that players could implement on the orange court becomes feasible again.

#### CONCLUSION

Finally there is no need to rush through the different stages. Each stage has great benefits with regard to the development of a player in all aspects of tennis play. When players are given sufficient time in each stage to firstly adapt to the new different playing condition and then discover and implement new technical and tactical tools their progress will be greatly enhanced.