

Tennis Coaching & Competition Update (October 2014)

In October 2014 Special Olympics Europe Eurasia held a Tennis Seminar at the prestigious Flamenco Tennis Club in Budapest, Hungary. Special Olympics GB National Tennis Coaching and Competition Advisor; Lesley Whitehead attended to represent our membership and learn about the **worldwide changes** that are being introduced and promoted to all coaches of Special Olympics athletes.

There were two main objective of the seminar:

1. To introduce new Special Olympics Tennis rules as part of the ITF 'Play & Stay' Youth Program involving smaller courts and softer balls for lower level athletes.
2. To discuss the new divisioning system for Special Olympics International tennis competitions.

ITF 'Play & Stay' Youth Program

This system provides tennis levels; red, orange, green & yellow balls which can be used by Special Olympics athletes so they can learn at their own ability level.

Although Special Olympics GB Coaches already use these adaptations with great success, many countries around the world still coach their lower ability athletes on a full size court with a traditional tennis ball. However for the Special Olympics World Games, Los Angeles in 2015 these different ability level rules will be followed and as such, the rest of the world will take a huge step forward in giving all athletes the opportunities they deserve to achieve their full potential.

Using 'Play & Stay' for Training

Below are the suggested areas coaches should be focusing on at each Play & Stay ability level.

Level 1:

Beginner rating number: 1.0 – 1.9

Court: 42' x 27` (service boxes) or Mini red court

Ball: **red foam ball**

Net: normal

Goals:

- Introduce athletes to the sport of tennis
- Teach athletes the basic strokes
- Strokes are taught using the game based approach
- Placement and control drills
- Lesson focus: balance, hand-eye coordination, racquet control, stroke production.

Level 2:

Better than beginners rating number: 2.0 – 2.9

Court: 42' x 27`

Ball: **red foam ball**

Net: normal

Goals:

- Athletes will learn to put basic strokes into match play situations
- Athletes will gain knowledge of rules, scoring and sportsmanship
- Athletes will expand static strokes into movement before and after each shot
- Athletes will learn simple doubles positioning and tactics

- Strokes and movement will be taught in the context of match play using the game based approach
- Providing meaningful match play in local LD tennis groups for athletes with limited mobility and tracking
- Lesson focus: movement, racquet control, tracking, rules and etiquette.

Level 3:

Advanced beginners rating number: 3.0 – 3.9

Court: 60' x 27`

Ball: **orange ball**

Net: normal

Goals:

- Provides meaningful tennis competition for athletes successful in level 2 and ready for the challenge of a slightly larger court and orange ball
- Athletes will successfully transition to 60 foot court with orange ball
- Athletes will develop racquet control skills while using orange ball
- Athletes will gain knowledge of readiness, preparation and recovery
- Lesson focus: sending and receiving skills, preparation, rules and etiquette.

Level 4:

Intermediate rating number: 4.0 – 4.9

Court: 78' x 27` (singles) 78` x 36` (doubles)

Ball: **green ball**

Net: normal

Goals:

- Provides meaningful tennis competition for athletes with ability for full court coverage with a slower paced ball
- Athletes will develop knowledge of shot selection
- Athletes will develop ball placement and racquet control with movement
- Athletes will gain basic knowledge of full court singles and doubles strategy
- Lesson focus: recovery, advanced strokes - overhead, drop shot, lob and approach shot, placement, doubles communication, tennis etiquette and strategy.

Level 5:

Advanced rating number: 5.0 – 8.0

Court: 78' x 27` (singles) 78` x 36` (doubles)

Ball: traditional **yellow ball**

Net: normal

Goals:

- Provides meaningful tennis competition and experience for athletes with the ability for full court match play with a traditional ball
- Athletes will develop spins, shot sequencing, and power strokes
- Athletes will develop control, power and placement with traditional yellow ball
- Athletes at this level are able to transition into community play
- Athletes will develop a match warm-up routine
- Lesson focus: speed, endurance and core training, spins, stroke sequencing for game strategy and power with placement.

Using 'Play & Stay' for Competition

Before Special Olympics athletes attend a competition, they should be rated by their coach using a Tennis Rating Form.

It is good practice that coaches rate their athletes twice;

1. Coach feeding or rallying with athlete. The coach should make sure that they challenge the athlete to really see their limitations.
2. In a short match play situation. This is often where a player's weaknesses are noted and allows for a more accurate rating of the athletes competing level of play.

If a competition only lasts a few days, divisions should be decided using the submitted ratings from the Tennis Rating Form together with previous competition results and knowledge of athletes.

At larger competitions (including international competitions), the ratings from the Tennis Rating Form should be used to preliminary division the athletes and then over one or two days athletes will play short matches to standardise the divisions before deciding on the divisions for the actual competition. *(For further details see the 'new Divisioning system' section below).*

Rating	Athlete should compete in
1.0 to 1.9	Level 1 LTA Mini Tennis Awards (Red 5) 42` x 27` court or mini tennis court Red foam ball Normal net height (3` at centre)
2.0 to 2.9	Level 2 LTA Mini Tennis Awards (Red 10, 15, 20) & local matches within group 42` x 27` court or mini tennis court Red foam ball Normal net height (3` at centre)
3.0 to 3.9	Level 3 Local, Regional & National matches 60` x 27` court (singles & doubles) Orange ball Normal net height (3` at centre)
4.0 to 4.9	Level 4 Local, Regional & National matches 78` x 27` court (singles) 78` x 36` court (doubles) Green ball Normal net height (3` at centre)
5.0 to 8.0	Level 5 Local, Regional & National matches 78` x 27` court (singles) 78` x 36` court (doubles) Yellow ball Normal net height (3` at centre)

Please note:

From 2015, at Special Olympics competitions;

- The height of the net at red & orange level will be normal (not lowered)

- The width of the court at orange level will be full singles width (no orange side lines)
- Scoring will be 1 Set. The first to 6 games by a margin of 2 games
- At 6 games all a 7 point tie break shall be played to determine the winner
- No-ad scoring may be used in match play if time is restricted.
- The umpire will use traditional scoring of love, fifteen, thirty, etc. If No-ad scoring is used, at deuce, the server serves into the side of the court chosen by the receiver. (Deciding point, receiver's choice)
- At international competitions played over several days the scoring will be best of 3 short sets – No-ad scoring.

The rating form is also a useful tool for coaches to be able to check that they are coaching athletes at the right level and it can also be used to measure an athlete's improvements too.

The new Divisioning system for Special Olympics International Tennis Competitions (The Swiss Ladder System)

The Special Olympics World Games, Los Angeles in 2015 will be the first to see athletes compete at their own ability levels rather than as in previous games where all athletes played on full size court with traditional yellow balls.

Following the steps to introduce smaller courts and low compression balls, athletes from around the world can now be coached and compete at their own ability level, using red, orange, green and traditional tennis balls. This is a positive step forward, and one that Special Olympics Great Britain has been doing for many years. *(For further details see the 'Play & Stay' section above).*

The Swiss Ladder System is a package that will be used in the divisioning of tennis at the Special Olympics World Games, Los Angeles in 2015:

- Athletes are initially divisioned from their Special Olympics Tennis Rating Forms submitted by Head Coaches.
- After the 1st round of matches, the results are inputted in to the system and the 2nd round of matches are produced which pairs up the winners from the 1st round and the losers from the 1st round.
- The results of the 2nd round are then inputted in to the system and the 3rd round matches are produced, again pairing winners with winners and losers with losers.
- This gives an order for the division which should be as accurate as possible.
- Using these results, the Tournament Organisers will assess the results and decide on the final divisions for competition.

This information sets out clearly the tennis coaching and competition pathways for Special Olympics coaches which should prove useful for the development of Special Olympics athletes but if you require any further information please contact Lesley Whitehead (Special Olympics GB National Tennis Coaching & Competition Advisor) on 07590 901678 or lesley.whitehead@ymail.com.