

Bob Brett Interview # 2 on Progressive Tennis - 2007

Bob, could you please give an introduction to progressive tennis as it relates to a child's development?

Progressive tennis provides an excellent point of entry to the game. We, at Tennis Canada, are concerned about the development of all children playing tennis. We see progressive tennis as an opportunity for the beginners to enjoy their play through the learning of technical and physical skills, the method of practice and the art of competition. Smaller courts and softer balls make it easier to learn these skills.

With all this said, we must not lose sight of the long term goals. We need to bring more people to the game of tennis, have them enjoy the experience, and maintain their interest/pleasure for a lifetime while at the same time developing champions who are at their best, competing in the global arena on a full size court. Progressive tennis is about progression, the development is what we are looking for in every child. We are responsible for their development, giving them tools for continued success and a way to enjoy the game regardless of which direction they choose to take; some may be professional and some may be club players.

I do offer a warning to all and that is: all the issues of development that have existed prior to the introduction of progressive tennis will still exist and should not be camouflaged due to a "boom" in children's tennis. By and large technical skills have been poorly taught in Canada compared to other countries, far too technical, lacking efficiency, authority and variety. The technical skill development will remain an issue unless coaches pay attention to laying a solid foundation and don't have 6/7/8/9 year olds trying to imitate the professional players. Then, and only then, our Canadian juniors shall be able to develop all-court skills and their strokes will not fold under the pressures of competition.

Is my child being held back by playing ½ court and ¾ tennis?

Playing ½ or ¾ court tennis will definitely not impede but can enhance the progress of a child or adult for that matter. All children, up to a certain age, begin by playing within a shorter area in order to be able to develop simple technical aspects plus, very importantly, the feeling of success in hitting that first ball over the net and in the court.

Working within a smaller zone is a necessity for a coach as they work on technical movements before power can be developed as well as building a stronger relationship with the player due to the close proximity of the instruction. Developing a solid contact with the ball plus the technical efficiency is a pre-requisite for later success.

Another advantage of the progressive tennis program is the use of softer balls, sponge, winners and the Easy Play, which have a lower bounce thus enabling the youngsters to play the ball at waist height, rather than above the shoulder which happens frequently with regular balls.

It is important that coaches, parents and players see progressive tennis as a process towards play on the full court with regular balls. The process is quite delicate in that rushing or delaying too long a step to the next level can result in a change in momentum that is difficult to correct. Unfortunately there is often an emotional aspect for all in the desire to move to the next level however if possible step aside from the emotions, evaluate the situation and listen to the experts. I am sure that when a child has the

appropriate skills no one will stop the wheels of progress.

Shouldn't my child be allowed to play real tennis?

The advantage of using $\frac{3}{4}$ court, mini tennis, and the different kinds of balls is that the children can often play with each other, have longer exchanges and are able to construct points which enhances their overall long term development. Playing with regular balls provides an irregular bounce, relative to height of the child, which unless carefully supervised makes it difficult for the youngsters to implement the techniques they have been taught in their lessons. A coach feeding the ball at an ideal height is completely different to competing with the regular ball.

Naturally there are some young identified talents who have either moved rapidly through the progressive tennis levels or manage the full court with regular balls exceptionally well. These players are able to cover the court from side to side and baseline to net while still adjusting to the various heights of the bouncing ball.

Is this the best way for my child to develop into a high performance player?

It would be too long to discuss in detail the issues here of the development to a high performance, but put simply sound technical development, good athletic skills, competition, repetition and more repetition are consistently the priorities for high performance. Each player starting at a young age should begin with mini tennis and use the progressive tennis method. The player's adaptation to the various required skills at each level shall then decide how quickly they move through the levels until reaching the full court and regular balls.

A coach's vision, eye for detail, patience and passion for the "player project," the player's ability to learn and athletic gifts will be some of the determining factors in the move to high performance and the full court. If the coach is primarily concerned with the development of baseline skills then that's where the children will play. Age is not of primary importance as you might find that some children at 7 or 8 are really gifted and able to play the full court where as others need to be at age 9 before they can go to full court. Age does not stop them from becoming a high performance player at a later date.

Do other countries use this approach?

Yes there are several. Belgium has really been the first one to embrace this method of development. Players who have come through the Belgian program are Olivier Rochus, Christoph Rochus, and Justine Henin. They each found a way to develop their skills through progressive tennis. Belgium has a full program, whereas other countries use it in different ways but there are very few countries that have taken the concept and said "yes," although the progressive tennis concept is gaining momentum globally. At Tennis Canada we support progressive tennis because we believe it is an excellent program which will enhance the development of our young player's technical skills, plus providing a competitive structure that provides more opportunities and allows for continued enjoyment.

This was not how I was taught or the way it used to be done?

Certainly tennis is not taught the same way as it was taught 40 years ago and we shouldn't expect it to be. We all must make attempts to move forward. Tennis coaching has evolved, some aspects are definitely better while others may rightfully be questioned.

The fact that children are playing on smaller courts with the different balls doesn't mean that it is not an improvement. We have seen children experiencing difficulty in managing the various aspects of the game, thus become frustrated, leave the sport and move to other activities. Tennis is and should be a game for a lifetime regardless as to how a player shall use the benefits.

Now, at a young age, players are competing, attempting to implement their learned skills and having fun.

At what point should a player ideally be at full court?

I wouldn't say there is an ideal time, it depends on their physical, technical skills and how one may look at or evaluate the players. Some children are small for the age of nine and some might be big for the age of eight, some are slow learners while others develop skills easier.

Normally we are looking at players between the ages of 7-9 to be playing on the full court. There are several options for players moving through the program before participating on a full court however as I mentioned earlier the process should not be rushed nor for that matter delayed to the point where it actually hinders development.

Is the goal to make my child a ¾ court champion?

Definitely not. Tennis Canada and I believe coaches around the country are working to produce champions at a much later age as well as retaining participants in the sport for a lifetime.

How do I know when my child should progress to the next level?

Well it's being able to hit the ball to certain targets with some degree of consistency, being able to cover the full court, and being able to use the skills that they already have. There are some that are playing with the foam ball and also training with the winner's ball. You also might find that when a player is moving faster going from winner's ball to the easy play ball there might be some training where you can mix the two.

Keeping out the emotion is critical when it comes to that good decision making and this is no exception when deciding whether a child is ready to move up to the full court. In the decision making process parents can be a tremendous asset and must be respected in that way. A coach needs to be able to understand what everyone wants and why. If a coach can understand the way a parent feels the decision making process will become that much easier.

Can you provide some advice for coaches who are presently running progressive tennis programs?

Your vision for the next 10 years of the player's development is critical. If you embrace these challenges you shall be rewarded. The progressive tennis program can be a great inspiration for both players and coaches. The players shall find new inspiration by not being disadvantaged when playing an attacking game and will see the urgency and advantage of learning sound attacking skills while coaches have the challenge in teaching these "new" skills.