

# **The Importance of Competition for Teenage Recreational Players**

## **Introduction**

The objective of this document is to highlight the importance of organizing club competition for all levels and in particular, players in their teens.

## **Hindsight**

I'm sure the readers will agree that we have all gone through stages in our lives where we have said to ourselves that if we had a shot at doing something again, we'd do it differently. The beauty of experience I guess and it's something that can't be taught. We can, however, pass our experience onto others and we can learn from other people's experience if we are willing to listen.

As someone who is coming into my 32nd year involved in Tennis, I certainly would do many things a lot different if I were to start all over again. In fact, I've often thought over the years that if a handful of experienced coaches and administrators were given the task of introducing and developing tennis in a country for the first time, I have no doubt that the group would move the game well up the list of popular domestic sports and forward onto the world stage in a very short period of time.

## **Why?**

They wouldn't have to argue and fight with people who are opposed to change. For me, the biggest challenge for anybody involved in tennis development and administration is changing people's attitudes.

Take Mini Tennis as just one example. Many of you may not be aware, especially the younger readers, but Mini tennis was first introduced to Ireland as far back as 1981. It was only 19 years later at the turn of the century that coaches, volunteers and administrators began to take modified versions of the game half serious.

## **Coaching versus Competition -**

Before I expand on the above I want to share a first hand experience I had which I hope will solidify some of the points I want to make about coaching and competition.

My son, a 16 year old footballer who would play a maximum of 4 games of tennis per year, last summer, during his football off-season had a friend from his team come and stay with him for a few days.

They had what they were going to do each day well mapped out in advance.

Among the activities chosen were, golf, swimming, tennis, snooker and football with the mates from the road on the local green.

When it came to organize their tennis I was the first stop.

Because they were not members of any tennis club the choices were limited to Malahide Castle or Portmarnock Leisure Centre.

As swimming was on their list of things to do they decided to kill 2 birds with the one stone and go for the Leisure Centre where they could swim and book a court for tennis. I provided them with a loan of two rackets and 4 green spot balls.

My wife left them up for their swim at 3pm and they had a tennis court booked for 5pm. I arrived at 6pm expecting them to be finished but something happened with the court booking and they were only going on to play when I came.

I went upstairs in the Clubhouse to do some work and left them at it.

They were on the first court and unknowns to them I could see them play.

On a very good day, if the lads were to do an on-court assessment, they would probably get at a guess, an ITN 6 or 7 and on a bad day, an ITN 8.

### **So what did I witness?**

- There was no knock up
- They did 3 and over and play out the point to decide who gets choice of serve
- They were serving into the ad box on the even scores and the deuce box on the uneven scores
- They were serving with forehand grips at about 100 Kms an hour for the first serve with a percentage rate of about 2%
- For the 2nd serve, they were serving either under arm or a pushed serve with the frying pan grip
- I didn't need any level of lip reading skills to notice they were shouting obscenities when they lost points coupled with ball and racket abuse
- The decision making was terrible
- Their technique had some conformity but it was very raw.
- The change of end didn't happen until the sun came out

I sat there and thought to myself, if I was to witness what I was seeing in my early to middling years of coaching, for sure I would have intervened.

The intervention probably would have happened as far back as the stage where they didn't do a warm up. And of course, as I realize now, I would have spoiled all their fun.

### **Other very important observations that day were:**

- Every single point was extremely competitive with both players busting their gut to run down every ball and they were challenging each others line calling
- They were laughing and joking with each other in between points and at the change of end
- The points had anything between 4 and 10 stroke rallies which I put down to the fact that I gave them green spot balls and of course, they didn't and still don't know the difference

At 7pm it was time up and the next booking was heading in the gate of the courts. The

two lads came up to the car, dripping with sweat, still laughing and slagging each other. I didn't have to ask them if they enjoyed themselves. The expression on their faces and their conversation in the car on the way back to the house was enough to answer that question. Part of their conversation went something like this- " I used to think tennis was S\*\*\* but it's actually a F\*\*\*\*'n deadly sport. Let's play again tomorrow".

## **So what message can we take from this story?**

Talk to any club committee in the country and they will tell you that one of their biggest problems are maintaining teenagers as club members.

I believe that the main reason for this is that the only service that the majority of clubs provide for teenagers, if any, is Coaching.

From both my experiences working as a coach and parenting two grown up children, if I were to do it all again and if I were given the option of enrolling my children in a programme of coaching versus a competition programme in any tennis club, I would choose the latter.

Again, the benefit of hindsight.....!

In addition to back up this point of view, any of the readers fortunate to have had the experience of working as a Leader in the Dublin Parks Tennis Programme should understand this very well. Especially back when there used to be Inter Parks Leagues with 36 players from u10-u18 age groups on a team. In those days a Leader and an assistant had the responsibility of travelling with the children on public transport to away venues. If you can remember, however, it was only when the time came to select teams that the kids came from far and wide with the hope of getting selected to represent the Park. The demand was so great that some Parks Leaders had to field two teams.

The message I deduct from these experiences is that teenagers prefer to play rather than be instructed on the technical capacities of the game.

I firmly believe that if coaches and club committees devise strategies for incorporating graded competition into all coaching programmes, they will attract new and maintain the current teenagers in clubs.

I'm not for a minute suggesting that there should be no coaching programmes but that serious consideration must be given to include competition as part of the on court programme.

A well-prepared presentation at the start of the year to parents of children coming into club programmes outlining the programme and the rationale behind it should be enough to justify integrating competition into the coaching programme. In other words clubs should include competition as part of the overall fee package.

Volunteers or coaches involved in developing performance programmes may think, well competition for performance players has to be part of a periodized plan and performance players can't be playing competition every weekend like they do in football or other team sports. Of course, this is correct, performance players need to have their competition phases carefully planned out and this has to happen if they are to develop and progress through the ranks.

Performance players, however, are by far a minority of the tennis population and need to be catered for with a much different approach. It's the level of player like the two

footballers I mentioned earlier and a whole variety of other levels that need to be catered for as far as competition is concerned.

Don't forget, the majority of players in this category play team sports as well and have training twice or three times per week with a league fixture on the weekend. It's the competition that drives these sports.

## **The International Tennis Number**

The ITN can go a long way to assisting coaches and club volunteers in organizing their internal coaching and competitive programmes for juniors and seniors. It will also allow for open tournament organizers to run graded events for all age groups.

Speaking to an experienced Club Coach recently, he remarked that if there were graded open events for teenagers that gave an assurance that none of the "Big Guns" could enter. He'd guarantee at least 20 teenagers who would enter from his club.

## **Roger Geraghty**

### **Director of Development**

### **Tennis Ireland**