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# Tennis professionals can help motivate young athletes

by Katrina Perlman, MS, USPTA, and Dana J. Perlman, Ph.D.

**T**ennis professionals throughout the United States are given a daunting task of meeting the diverse tennis needs of their athletes. Athletes populate tennis centers with various reasons for playing. For instance, some may want to play at an elite level, while others may desire to simply hit three balls in a row. These diverse motives for participation also apply to youthful athletes. Young tennis players take part in practice sessions and programs for various reasons. Some are made to attend while others possess a perception of being the next Roger Federer or Kim Clijsters.



An optimal motivational climate that focuses on personal growth is critical in enhancing athlete interest, motivation and learning.

Each tennis professional must understand these motives when designing and implementing appropriate instructional experiences for young athletes. A common assumption is that activity difficulty will meet the needs of the high-skilled and provide a level of challenge for those who lack such ability. In addition, tennis coaches, similar to education professionals, teach the way they have been taught. Many tennis professionals have had success within their career and thus rely on this elite or competitive style of instruction. This approach typically allows higher-skilled athletes to dominate and develop, while the lesser-skilled become marginalized and blend into the background. As a result,

athletes who do not perceive any success will become more likely to lose their desire or motivation to play.

Tennis is a lifetime sport that can be and should be enjoyed by everyone. Youth programs, such as tennis, that overemphasize elite competition have a negative impact on motivation, skill development and overall enjoyment of the sport (Coakley, 2007). In addition, young athletes report motivations for participation can be attributed to having fun, being with friends, learning skills and being active (Coakley, 2007; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982). As a result, youth tennis programs may need to provide players with extra motivation.

## Understanding motivation

Motivation is an important aspect for tennis professionals to understand. Evidence supports the connection between motivation and continued participation in activity (Ntoumanis, 2005). Individual motivation is commonly viewed as being influenced by an athlete's perception of success (Ames, 1992). Success can be evaluated through social aspects, such as beating an opponent, or through personal development, i.e. hitting three balls over the net without an error (Ames, 1992). Of importance with youth tennis is the focus on success through personal growth, due to the positive aspects associated with a variety of positive outcomes including increased effort (Xiang, et al., 2004), motivation (Cury, et al., 1996) and learning (Chen, 2001). Understanding motivation is the first step, and tennis coaches must be provided techniques and strategies for influencing athlete motivation.

A coach's ability to motivate young athletes can be influenced through the development of what is termed a motivational climate. An optimal motivational climate which focuses on personal growth is critical in enhancing athlete interest, motivation and learning (Ames, 1992).

## Motivational climate

Design and development of a motivational experience can seem quite difficult. Tennis professionals must understand that the goals and focus of each lesson (i.e. working on forehands) do not need to change. Implementing motivational instruction can be achieved for all program and lesson goals, with high-skilled and low-skilled, competitive or recreational players. The key for developing and implementing a motivational climate should focus on the coach's ability to keep athletes on TARGET. This originally developed within the educational setting and was adapted for use

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within sport. It is an acronym that stands for Task, Authority, Recognition, Grouping, Evaluation, and Time (Epstein, 1989).

### Task

Each lesson should provide athletes with a variety of activities that work on one concept, such as the volley. Variety can be associated with task difficulty (harder or easier) or number of activities (three different tasks that work on volleys). For example, if an athlete is working on his/her volleys, design three different activities that work on volleys. In addition, during each activity, change the difficulty through an increase or decrease in the number of successful volleys the athlete must hit or by the speed at which you hit the ball to each athlete.

### Authority

During group or individual lessons, athletes should be provided the opportunity to voice their opinion or exercise some control over part of the lesson. For example, the tennis professional may allow students to make a decision about which type of warm-up to conduct. It should be noted that the tennis professional is the leader of the lesson, but a degree of inclusion can facilitate motivational change in each athlete.

### Recognition

Another important aspect is recognizing athletes' accomplishments, such as celebrating when someone keeps a rally going. Try to avoid congratulating the winner of the match, while the rest of the group is provided nothing. Winning is important, but not the only aspect of success. If the coach focuses on personal growth, as will the athlete.

### Grouping

Athletes can work in cooperative and/or mixed-ability groups. This decision should be made to meet the goals of the lesson. For instance, if a tennis group has a mix of high- and low-skilled athletes, a beginner may end up with an advanced player. On a positive note, this situation may lead to peer teaching and/or social interaction that may not have occurred with traditional grouping.

### Evaluation

Each athlete should be assessed for progress and growth. This is important to both the

athlete and tennis professional in evaluation of individual and lesson success. Evaluation should be self-referenced and based on personal improvement. Professionals should be able to prove to athletes, parents and themselves that each athlete has improved during every lesson or program.

### Time

Adjust the length of activities to allow each athlete to demonstrate success. A tennis professional may need to let athletes stay in an activity for longer or shorter than planned.

In addition, utilizing TARGET components for youth tennis instruction, coaches may need to ask themselves the following questions before walking onto the tennis court:

- What is the goal of this activity or lesson?
- Is there enough task variety (number and difficulty)?
- Can athletes and tennis professionals challenge themselves during the lesson?
- What if this activity is too difficult or easy?
- Am I providing athletes a chance to voice their opinion?
- How does the athlete or tennis professional know if each athlete has been successful?
- Is success personal (individual) or social (group wide)?
- What would be the best way to group athletes (i.e. by skill, randomly)?
- Is there a social aspect that I want my group of athletes to learn?
- Can I prove to the athletes, parents or myself that the participants have learned or developed their skills?
- Do I provide enough time in practice for an athlete to learn and be successful?

Youth tennis programs can provide a quality experience that meets the diverse needs of each young player. It is difficult to meet these needs from a competitive or elite-athlete viewpoint, due to the lack of success among *all* athletes. No matter what reason an athlete has for participating, each player can be assisted in meeting his or her goals within a motivational environment. Motivation is an important instructional

component within a youth tennis setting. As such, tennis professionals can utilize the acronym TARGET to evaluate their lessons or programs to support player motivation. It should be noted that TARGET is not the silver bullet for influencing athlete motivation. Tennis professionals should evaluate and utilize TARGET or components that are deemed important for their athlete(s). When using TARGET, start with one concept, such as "task," and build your instructional techniques from this base. Do what is right and best for your athletes. Good luck and remember to keep your young athletes on TARGET. ☞

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