

Essentials for Coaching Special Olympics Tennis Groups

Wayne Lilley, Public Tennis Inc., 978-571-1475



Success in coaching is built on a complex combination of technical and interpersonal skills, tied together by motivational ability rooted in belief in individual and group achievement.

Coaching is a lifelong pursuit ... the learning process is ongoing for part- and full-time coaches. The elements of Special Olympics **group coaching** include the disciplines of coaching individuals and managing group dynamics, with the added challenge of addressing the diversity of special athletes.

Many of the coaching skills described here are acquired or developed over time. However, all coaches must have safety skills, “safe play” skills, basic on-court skills, positive attitude projection, and a basic understanding of optimal challenge and how to create it through progressions.

Group Coaching Player & Group **Success**

- Fun, passion, **actively engaged** (as individuals), **everyone engaged** (as a group, inclusion)
- Adoption progression: casual recreation to lifelong enjoyment ... “tennis is *my* sport!”
- Advancement progression: skills, mastery, proficiency
- Group and individual growth, cohesion, sense of identity and team
- Physical fitness, wellness, and mental health benefits
- Safe, physically, mentally; Healthy level of exercise, hydrated

Group Coaching **Expectations** for Success

- Essentials expected of coaches *and* players
 - Respect, positive attitude, effort, cooperative effort, teamwork
 - Communication, listening
 - Addressing each other appropriately, by name, title
 - Punctuality, attendance
- Safety first!
 - Physical on-court safety
 - Basic first aid, first aid kits, emergency procedures
 - Hydration, exertion level consistent with fitness
 - Safe Sport/Safe Play child safety
 - Covid safety
- Leadership, preparation, lesson planning, sense of direction
- Knowledge of tennis skills, non-tennis athletic skills
- Translation of knowledge into productive instructional and educational activities
- Creativity, personality, enthusiasm, positive vibe, fun
- Motivational skills, constructive/positive attitude projection, confidence-inspiring
- Tracking and documenting progress, player development plan
- Watchfulness, awareness, and responsiveness to individual, group, and sub-group needs

- *Anticipating and creating optimal challenge opportunities based on progressions*

Group Coaching Activities for Success

- *Optimal challenge activities based on progressions* which take group diversity & range of skills into account
 - Positively challenging (not daunting)
 - Aspirational, with a sense of direction, anticipating what's next
- Inclusive activities which foster teamwork and fellowship (sense of group, everyone is valued)
- Activities which creatively recognize all aspects of individual growth, improvement, achievement, and contribution to group success (not limited to technical skills)
- Free-play and player-initiated activity opportunities, group-initiated variations of activities, discovery
- Motivational, engaging activities which foster group cohesion and ownership of group practice and play
- Activities which encourage self-assessment and individual ownership of self-development plans
- Skill training activities which develop and reinforce essential tennis-specific techniques, patterns, and biomechanics
- Cross-training activities which develop athleticism and athletic diversity, agility, balance and balanced fitness
- Activities which impart knowledge of the sport/game of tennis, including historical and current information, and activities which encourage further independent discovery

Group Coaching Lesson Planning: Elements of a (typical) Structured Training Session

1. Set-Up, Check-In
2. Introduce a lesson theme
3. Warm-up activities
4. Theme-reinforcing Skill & Drill activities
5. Theme-reinforcing Games
6. Review & Celebrate what the group learned

Note: "Themes" can be skill-based (e.g. stroke, technique, footwork), fitness-based, learning principle-based (e.g. "practice makes perfect", "walk before you run"), life skill-based (teamwork, respect, decision-making, listening, negotiating), or simply fun (dancing, acting, celebrating a holiday or a tradition or an event)

Sport-Specific Tennis Coaching Skills

- Dead ball, live ball
- Progressions
 - Soft/hard, slow/fast, low/high, short/long, spin/flat, static/dynamic, simple/complex, etc.
- Feeding skills
- Drill and Game setup skills
 - Court equipment, teaching accessories, player positioning, etc.
- Cooperative/partner practice skills and progressions
- Footwork technique
- Swing technique (stroke-specific essentials)
- Athletic stance, hitting stance
- Racquets, strings, balls
- The physical court
- The scoring system, the game, rules, competition
- History, context
- Strategy, playing to strengths

- Mental skills
- Player assessment, levelling groups efficiently

Non-Tennis-Specific Athletic Coaching Skills

- Agility, balance, dexterity, speed, fitness
- Coordination, hand-to-eye, proprioception
- Strength, flexibility
- Biomechanics, ground force, leverage, eccentric plyometrics
- Throwing
- Swinging
- Acceleration, deceleration
- Knowledge of anatomy
- Diet, nutrition

Coaching Skills Checklist

Get a Grip on these Skills

1. Feeding

- Basics: hand feed, racquet feed, loft, location of bounce relative to player
- Adding challenge: speed, direction, distance, spin, deception

2. Stroke Technique

- Basics: forehand/backhand/serve/volley, swing pattern, racquet face awareness (more important than grips!), backswing & follow-through, how throwing relates to swinging

3. Footwork Technique

- Athletic stance, side shuffle, movement, large step acceleration, small step deceleration, adjusting steps, creating ground force and weight transfer

4. Progressions

- Slow/fast, short/long, low/high, flat/spin, near/far, static/dynamic, simple/complex, individual/cooperative partner, Quick Start balls and racquets

5. General Athletic Skills

- Agility, balance, dexterity, speed, strength, flexibility, fitness, coordination, hand-to-eye, proprioception
- Biomechanics, ground force, leverage, eccentric plyometrics, acceleration, deceleration
- Throwing, swinging

6. The Court

- Names of lines and areas, net

7. The Game

- Scoring, line calling, strategy (depth, angles, spin, power)
- Local and regional teams and play opportunities, USTA

8. The History

- Amateur, professional, slams, players, icons

9. Communication

- Name memorization tricks, “court persona”: projecting voice & personality & enthusiasm

10. Safety

- Activity-related safety, Safe Sport, First Aid, Covid safety