



## **Adaptive Coach Training Essentials, Wayne Lilley, Public Tennis**

Hello Adaptive Coaches! Thank you for your commitment to coaching athletes with disabilities!

**This is a good place to start your training or to review and rethink adaptive coaching.** It covers essential topics and provides context for more detailed training materials, videos, and on-court learning!

### **Topic One: The Adaptive Mindset for Productive Coaching and Learning**

Any preconceptions you may have about what it means to learn to play tennis can go out the window in favor of two principles. First, all activities and skills are valued equally. And second, lesson plans should be inclusively-designed so that each athlete can participate in each lesson's theme and goals in their own way and using their own ability.

That's it! Any engaging activity is *success*! Inclusive participation in today's themes and goals, however adaptive, is *success*! For example, if serving is broadly defined as no-bounce contact with the ball lands in the service box, everyone can enjoy learning to serve together. As another example, if cooperative rallying is today's theme, and rallying is broadly defined, we can all learn to keep a ball in play, whether it's a throw and catch or a handoff or a racquet-to-racquet exchange or a rally using racquets and balls.

### **Topic Two: Structured Lesson Plans**

Consistently-structured, inclusively-defined lesson plans are productive for both coaches and athletes. Lesson plans allow coaches to prepare and keep the group focused. Lesson plans create a healthy routine for coaches and athletes. All lessons should include 5 sections: a preview of learning objectives, a warmup, a skills & activities section including a demonstration, a game (or two) to make it fun, and a concluding review and cheer.

### **Topic Three: Safe, Positively-Charged Experience**

Simple things first -- smile, be engaging, show some personality, use coach and athlete names frequently -- if you're having fun, your coaching team will have fun, and most importantly your athletes will have fun!

Medical safety is your top priority -- be mindful of weather conditions, court conditions, hydration, and pacing -- particularly on a hot day. Make sure you are made aware of noteworthy athlete health issues. And keep scanning your athlete group to make sure everyone looks okay -- if anyone looks unhealthy in any way, be sure to involve caregivers, parents, teachers, aides or anyone else who knows the athletes better than we do as coaches.

Physical safety depends on coaches to remind athletes frequently to look out for others and use adequate spacing for running and swinging racquets.

And finally, pay attention to any conditions which might threaten the emotional and mental safety and comfort level of athletes (and coaches) on and off of the courts. While not required for our Special Olympics programs, recommend the USTA Safe Play program as a free opportunity for related high-quality training. For more info, please visit [usta.com](http://usta.com).

Note that for the protection of the athletes, most programs require coach registration, background checks, and in some cases additional training courses regarding prevention of misconduct. In our case, all Special Olympics program coaches must register as Class A Volunteers. Please follow this link: <https://publictennis.org/special-olympics-volunteer-coach-registration/>

### **Topic Four: Two Essential Skills Development Pathways**

There many skills development pathways, but two are essential -- they are distinctly different, and yet both are essential. The first focuses on stroke and movement technique training, and the second focuses cooperation and rallying. Finding balance between these two paths is essential, especially in coaching adaptive tennis.

The tendency of many programs is to emphasize the stroke and footwork technique pathway. Typically, some of this technique training is feed-based and some is “live” ball (more like point play). However, the cooperative rallying pathway provides opportunities to reinforce healthy interaction, provide repetition, and to create a foundation for playing games which are fun! We can inclusively-define rallying as cooperative activities which keep a ball in play between partners. More in-play rally balls means more tennis and less time picking up balls!

It’s really important to find a balance between rallying activities and stroke and footwork technique training. All coaches should review our video on Instant Rally Progression to see how this works at all levels and how the rallying path focuses less on perfect strokes and more on partner success – for example, hitting up instead of hitting out. The video can be found here: <https://publictennis.org/instant-rally-progression-video/>

### **Topic Five: Understanding Essential Equipment**

At a minimum, all programs should have a couple of types of (low compression, soft) special training balls, ball hoppers, a variety of racquet sizes, rubber spots, and cones.

As far as training balls go, there are a variety of options which slow the game down and make it easier to have success and learn. Red sponge balls are oversize, they’re the slowest and they work well on a gym floor. Red felt balls are the next slowest ball – also oversize, easy to see and hit. Orange balls are a little quicker. Green dot balls look like a regular yellow ball but move slower. And then of course, we have yellow regulation balls. A great side effect of slower, softer training balls with less air in them is that they travel less far and they hurt less when they hit someone – including you as a coach!

As far as racquets go, smaller racquets are not necessarily for smaller people, although they do have smaller grips suitable for players with small hands. The rule of thumb here is, again, use whatever works! Shorter racquets generally make it easier to make contact with the ball as there is less distance from hand strings -- however, smaller racquets have less power than larger -- so we generally recommend that athletes use the largest racquet which gives them success and control.

Spots and cones are really useful teaching accessories -- spots can be used to position players, as bounce targets, and as footwork targets, among other things. Cones are also great for positioning, as targets, and as obstacles and paths for warm up activities, to name just a few uses. They’re also great for defining a limited size playing area to make it easier to play games or score points with limited skills.

### **Topic Six: Organizations and Teams**

All coaches should be knowledgeable about the organization they are working with. As an example, in our case, our coaches work with Public Tennis ([publictennis.org](http://publictennis.org)), a 501c3 charitable organization serving Beaufort and Jasper Counties in South Carolina. Our adaptive program delivery partners are Special Olympics South Carolina ([so-sc.org](http://so-sc.org)), SOAR Special Recreation ([soarspecialrecreation.org](http://soarspecialrecreation.org)), the school districts in our area, and the County disabilities and special needs facility. Coaches should take a closer look at their organization and partner websites to understand who these entities are and what they do.

### **Topic Seven: On Court Coaching Skills – Preview**

We’re big fans of video-based learning, but there is no substitute for on-court, interactive learning when it comes to a few essential physical coaching skills. When you go to the courts for in-person coach skills training, you’ll be learning and practicing how to feed balls properly, how progressions work, and how to do simple, visual, and memorable skill demonstrations.

**See you on the courts!**

**Coach Wayne Lilley, Executive Director, Public Tennis Inc.**

**For more information:**

Public Tennis Website: <https://publictennis.org/>

Spring Special Olympics School Program Spring 2025: <https://publictennis.org/special-olympics-school-program-spring-2025/>