

Guide to Competition

Why Compete?

Competition is an integral part of player development and ultimately the end product of hours spent learning the game in coaching sessions and on the practice court. In competition players have the opportunity to test their skills and evaluate areas to improve which can be addressed on the practice court and through discussion with their coach. The difference between playing a practice match and a match in a tournament setting is huge due to the pressures faced (both external and internal). But ultimately, to avoid exposure to these pressure situations will potentially harm a player's development in terms of their mental and tactical skills. Tennis players must learn to perform under pressure and develop coping skills and strategies to deal with nerves, and as much as we can replicate these things to some extent in a training session, ultimately there is no substitute for a 'live' match in a knock-out tournament.

At what age is it good to introduce competition?

Through the years I have been coaching, one thing that has always interested me is the relationship between competition and interest levels in tennis. What becomes blatantly obvious is that those that compete tend to stay in the game, where as those that don't tend to lose interest. This is not always completely the case, as I have seen a few players who are content enough to continue just coming to coaching and never attend a tournament or matchplay, and have continued to play into teenage years, but this is a rarity. Ultimately, the purpose of learning the game in a coaching setting is to develop the skills necessary to play the game in all its glory! To this end, I would encourage players to start competing as soon as they are competent and confident enough, this can be from age 5 or older, it depends on the regularity and consistency of practice. This is why I often recommend players to look to attend 2 coaching sessions minimum per week as early as possible, so that they have the opportunity to develop the skills and confidence to begin competing, playing once per week is rarely enough to achieve this. When juniors begin competing what you will often find is a great deal more enthusiasm towards the game and their coaching sessions, they will be more engaged (as training will have a purpose), and they will tend to want to continue all the way through the year. This will lead to greater skill development and confidence. The big but however, particularly at a young age is to not focus on results and ensure that competition is sold as a learning experience and an opportunity to improve. Too much pressure on results will lead to an unenjoyable experience due to the feeling of external pressure and winning being the measure of success.

How to progress the levels of competition

It's important to establish the different levels of competition and how to best utilise them in a player's development. In progressive order, here is a guide to the differing levels:

1. Internal matchplay within a player's club or other local club (Chipstead, Helene's matchplay's at The Sennocke as an example).

2. Team competition representing club/school etc.
3. Local LTA graded knock-out tournament (Grade 5/4)
4. Regional LTA graded knock-out tournament (Grade 3)
5. National LTA graded knock-out tournament (Grade 2)
6. Top level National graded knock-out tournament (Grade 1)
7. International/ITF events

As demonstrated above, there is a difference between 'matchplay' and 'knock-out' events. Matchplay's give a set number of matches against players of a similar rating/level. They count towards a player's rating but NOT their ranking. Knock-out events count towards both a player's rating AND ranking. The higher the grade (4 being higher than 3 for example) the more ranking points a player will receive for progressing through the rounds (more ranking points for reaching quarter-finals of a Grade 3 than a Grade 4 for example).

In terms of a starting point for competition, matchplay's are perfect as they expose players to the pressure of a 'live' match, however players are guaranteed a set number of matches against players of a similar level, so in theory should get to play good quality, challenging and close matches, but there is no added pressure of the 'knock-out' element of a Grade 5 and higher. Team competitions are good for exposing players to the pressure of 'knock-out' events, but with the ability to experience it within a team/with friends, so the pressure is not solely on one player's shoulders.

The question of when to start playing Grade 5 tournaments and upwards is ultimately up to each individual player. But it's best to discuss readiness with the player's coach as they will have a sense of competence level and readiness.

What are the benefits?

- Develop tactical skills within a 'live' match environment
- Test skills and evaluate areas to improve on the practice court
- Develop mental skills and coping mechanisms for the pressures of competition
- Build self-confidence, assertiveness and independence through learning how to problem-solve and deal with difficult situations
- Make friends and meet like-minded people

What will harm player development?

- Focusing on winning over improving and results over learning
- Talking about winning and losing after matches rather than useful analysis of performance ('what did I do well?' 'What do I need to improve?')
- Focusing on ratings and rankings as a reason to compete over and above player development
- A lack of preparation/readiness for an event
- Not competing regularly enough
- Competing too much at the expense of the development of technical skills (often goes hand in hand with chasing ratings and rankings)

How to prepare for an event

There is a huge amount of depth to this category, but here are a few basic guidelines:

- In the approach to an event, focus on more 'live' match situations in practice and playing practice sets or practice matches
- If playing in a graded 'knock-out' tournament, try and program in some matchplays in the lead up to build confidence
- When playing graded tournaments, try and build up to the event with lower graded tournaments, e.g week 1- Grade 5, week 2- Grade 4, week 3- Grade 3 this way the player will progressively build confidence
- Look to practice the day before and on the day of the competition to focus on rhythm and timing, ideally on the same surface the tournament is being played on (Clay, Hard Court, Grass)
- Pack tennis bag the night before, get plenty of sleep and eat well.
- Stay hydrated with water, particularly on the day of the match
- Warm-up and cool down/stretch afterwards- try and have a routine you follow which stays the same

If you need advice, speak to your coach and they will always be happy to help!