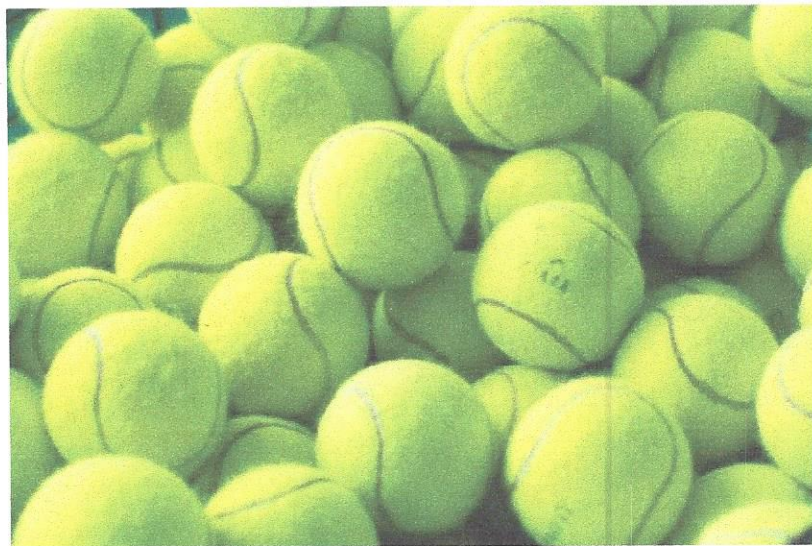


# Teaching Tools



## Tech Support

Teaching pros should view technology not as competition, but as a tool that will grow revenue and help players improve. *By Stan Oley*

**T**hroughout the 43 years since I first picked up a racquet when I was 8, I've noticed that lesson programs at tennis clubs have not changed much. In a private lesson, the teaching pro still stands at the net, feeding an easy ball, followed by some hitting with the pro. Group lessons are similar: The pro feeds multi-line drills, yelling a bunch of clichés or continually saying the same thing.

I've talked to and worked with hundreds of club players over the last few years. They want to be cared for, and they want to get better. But the way we've been teaching them is not helping them get better. When that happens, there's a good chance they may leave the game.

This is a real concern, as overall tennis participation has barely grown over the last few years. We're having trouble retaining players—for all the new players we get in, we're losing just as many existing ones.

As teaching pros, we have an obligation to help turn this around. But to help our players get better, we have to

be creative and innovative. We have to be willing to change and to accept technology as a tool, not competition. Here's how we can do it.

### ► **Stop Feeding From The Net!**

When you feed from the net, you're giving players a ball they never get in a match. A player who is successful in this environment rarely has solid receiving or ball-recognition skills.

In clinics I give around the country, we ask players many questions to better understand what their "tennis IQ" is. Out of 857 players, not one knew where their preferred strike-zones were for particular shots. How can a player best function technically if they don't know the desired zone in which they should play the ball?

Continually feeding from the net is the main contributor to this problem, and it also contributes to the player having only a one-dimensional groundstroke or volley. The club player rarely understands how to add "shape" on the ball or play a low volley because they are micro-managed on a specific low to high

groundstroke, as well as a neutral volley.

Even if the pro is able to feed the correct ball from the correct spot on the court, he or she is concentrating on the feed and can't focus on what the student needs. The pro can't stand next to the player to observe, analyze and comment—in short, the pro can't teach.

Using a ball machine in a private lesson gives pros the ability to actually teach and to help students improve. The pro can be right next to the student, demonstrating shots, offering advice or recording strokes on video. Ball machines can allow the pro to create shot sequences. There are apps available to control the machine and save data on phones and other devices.

### ► **Continual Assessment**

If you work with a personal trainer at a fitness club, the first thing they do is an assessment and goal-setting process. When a player books a tennis lesson, he or she usually calls the club and makes an appointment. Upon arriving, the player generally begins rallying with the pro, who then starts feeding balls.



Using a ball machine allows the pro see his student's shots up close, analyze them and offer tips in a short amount of time.

If a tennis program is going to remain healthy, it needs to include assessment and goal setting. The pro needs to find out why the player is taking the lesson and assess the player's game. The player needs—and will appreciate—a program designed specifically for them. The assessment and goal process should be updated frequently to show progress.

A ball machine and video are great tools to use as part of the assessment process. The machine allows the pro to quickly get through a number of different shots while recording the results.

#### ► Post-Lesson Curriculum

Golfers routinely go to the driving range to work on shots or practice what they learned in a lesson. And they have plenty of company at the range; often 15 or 20 other golfers are there, too.

Tennis clubs, though, generally have only one ball machine that is used by beginners, or players who can't find a match. Ball-machine use is typically not encouraged as part of the post-lesson curriculum, as many pros view it as competition.

In reality, if the ball machine were prescribed as part of the post-lesson curriculum, the player's learning experience would be accelerated, and there's a good chance that the player would become motivated to become even better. Today, some ball machines have apps that allow the pro to share post-lesson drills and allow students to show the pro that they actually did their homework. It helps augment the previous lesson and paves the way for a future visit.

What I find effective is that, if a player takes one lesson a week, they should hit off of the ball machine twice in between lessons. If they take two lessons a week, they should use the machine once in between. When the player gets better, everyone wins—and the pro makes more money!

#### ► Teaching Pro Health and Injury Prevention

The average age of teaching pros in the U.S. is around 50. Many of my teaching pro friends who are my age have suffered major injuries due to constant

court time with their students over the years. Many pros have created a lesson culture where their students love to hit with them, but don't like hitting off a ball machine. But if those pros would have originally focused on teaching rather than hitting, their lesson culture would probably be quite different—and they may not be afflicted with so many physical ailments.

I recently did a clinic for eight members of a club. Through my ball machine app I was able to see that in one hour we threw 901 balls of all types of shots. I was able to stand on the same side of the court with the players, demonstrating shots and giving them meaningful corrections. When the clinic was over, I realized that was 901 balls I did not have to feed myself. If we extrapolate, in an eight-hour day that would be 7,208 balls, or 36,040 balls a week, a total of 1.8 million balls a year!

Some of the best testimonials about using a ball machine have come from teaching pros who were injured and had to teach with the machine. They noted how much better their students got with a ball machine.

It's simple. We have to stop seeing technology as competition, and instead see it as a tool to improve the overall lesson and player experience. For this industry, your business—and you personally—to succeed, we need to get uncomfortable at times and try new things. If our industry is going to turn around, it will depend on teaching pros embracing change and technology.

The result? More players stay in the game, and tennis pros increase their revenues! That's a win-win. ■

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