

Serial Drillers... How group lesson programs are killing American Junior tennis.

By Jorge Capestany, PTR & USPTA Master Professional

I have been teaching for over 30 years and have logged over 55,000 hours teaching on the court and another 15,000 hours watching my players compete in either tournaments and/or league play. Something has changed. Today's junior players are not playing enough sets. I am fortunate enough to travel the world as a speaker and coach and everywhere I go American coaches tell me they have the same problem. Kids that take drills (group lessons), private lessons, special events, but avoid **match play** like it was the plague. In my own program I have seen the shift as well. When I taught players in the 1980's, they could not wait to get out on the court and **PLAY** sets. Drilling was only one part of their overall training regimen and it comprised 2-4 hours per week at the most. Back then, the good players additionally took a private lesson and played tournaments on the weekend, or if there was no tournament, they played practice sets.

Recently I was sitting with a several fellow teaching professionals discussing this very topic. Many of them were expressing frustration in their inability to get their own players to play more sets. I asked this group of teaching pros a question... "How many of you took a bunch of lessons when you first started in tennis and how many of you just played a bunch of sets? I knew what the likely answer would because most of this group played as competitive juniors in the 70's and 80's. But I was surprised by the overwhelming lopsidedness of their response. Not a single pro from this group had taken **any** group lessons. They all played sets and a few of them took an occasional private lesson. After all, the only options for training back then were to play with a friend on some public courts or join a club and play matches there.

I got wondering about this this whole paradigm regarding the way that tennis is taught and learned here in our country, including by myself.

Could it be that group lessons have become the enemy of match play? I know I have a ton of kids in my own program that take groups lessons, private lessons, and just about any clinic or special event that is offered, but they stay away from match play. Playing in tournaments or just calling a buddy to play a few sets seems to be a thing of another era. Perhaps we need to repurpose the job of the tennis pro in our country from one who teaches tennis to one who sets up play opportunities and from those opportunities, players can learn (from actual experience) what they really need to work on and then take lessons on that later.

Do we have the order right?

I was discussing ideas with my own pro staff and we realized that one of the problems is that group lessons are ultra -convenient. At our club we feel like we do an excellent job with our group lessons. In fact, I own a website with more than 1,000 drills so you would expect that we run great drills. But in analyzing our own players, we really feel that since they know the group lessons (drills) are going to be well run, organized, and have a purpose, that players feel like drilling is all they need. They get to hit a ton of balls, get great instruction, and hear some awesome advice on strategy. Besides, playing sets would require them to book other times in the week that may be different each week and also securing an appropriate opponent to play. These two realities are having a negative effect in our club and I suspect other clubs as well.

The end result is the development of an army of American kids that can strike the ball beautifully but cannot seem to win a match... **If the game is the best teacher, then match play is the best game.**

“Each time one prematurely teaches a child something he could have discovered himself, that child is kept from inventing it and consequently from understanding it completely.” -- Jean Piaget.... Match Play can help players achieve this

So what is the proper role of group lessons? Like I said earlier, we have a great junior group lesson program. And these classes in and of themselves are not the problem. They are only a problem when they are the **only** thing that players do to train. Group lessons **should** be a part of a player's overall training regimen, but I feel that for every hour of drilling that happens an equal number of hours of match play should happen.

So what is the solution for getting out of this mess? I feel it is in helping players develop an effective overall training regimen. I have started doing **private lesson for families** at my club where we simply meet for an hour and they can hear my thoughts on the importance of match play and what exactly their kids should be doing each week to get better. Families are eager to get this right, but many do not know they are doing anything wrong in the first place so I started emailing our families making them aware of these new family private lessons which, by the way, do not take place on the court. I am serving as the family's tennis consultant and helping them get their kids on a proper training regimen. Often they are surprised that I am recommending less drills and more use of their walk-on passes, which actually allows them to spend less at the club.

Below are some ideas to help you help your families understand what they should be doing. I believe it all starts with the big question... **What do you want to do with your tennis?** That is the opening question I ask the player in our family meeting and from there we discuss the options as I have laid them out below.

PLAYER REGIMENS – GETTING IT RIGHT

One of the most common questions we receive from parents is what kind of commitment is needed to get to a specific level. Below we have defined some general guidelines for what it usually takes to get to various levels of tennis competency. Please note that these are not guarantees to reach a certain level, rather are to be used as guidelines in determining your practice regimens

USTA Non-Ranked Player:	HS = JV or low Varsity player
<p>These players usually drill once per week, but not year round. They typically do not take private lessons on a regular basis. They play less than 5 USTA tournaments a year and rarely play practice sets on their own. These players do not have any off-court training program nor do they practice their serves on their own. They normally drill one time a week on a seasonal basis. These players usually do not specialize in tennis and often play other H.S. sports.</p>	
USTA District Ranked Player:	HS = Low to high Varsity player
<p>These players typically drill 1-2 times a week and may or may not take a weekly private lesson. They play between 5-10 USTA tournaments a year and rarely play any practice sets on their own. Most do not have any off-court training program nor do they practice their serves on their own. These players usually take drills year round and play 2-3 days per week.</p>	
USTA Sectional Ranked Player	HS = High singles on Varsity
<p>These players typically drill 2-3 times per week and take 1-2 private or hitting privates per week. They play roughly 10-12 USTA tournaments per year and play 2-4 practice set per week. About 50% of these players are on an off-court-training program and practice their serves on their own. These players usually take drills year round and play 3-5 days per week.</p>	
USTA National Ranked Player:	HS = High singles - State Champs
<p>These players typically drill 2-3 times per week and take 1-2 private or hitting private lessons per week. They play about 15 USTA tournaments a year and also play 6-8 practice sets per week. About 90% of these players are on an extensive off-court-training program that includes weight training as well as speed and agility training. They almost all practice their serves on their own and play about 5-6 days per week</p>	

There are 2 important issues that can be learned from this page:

- 1) It is important that the parent have the same goals for the player that the player has. Many times frustration sets in when the parent's expectation is higher than that of the player.

- 2) The player must be aware of the above information and avoid the trap of having a certain level as a goal while doing the "workload" of a lesser goal. It is not uncommon to see players that say they want to be nationally ranked while going through their entire junior career doing the workload of a sectionally ranked player.

In summary, I hope this article sparks a discussion of how your players are doing in this important area. I would suggest holding an internal pro staff meeting where this can be discussed and reviewed as staff and specifically for your own program. If you find that you have a lot of kids that have fallen into the habit of being **serial drillers**, then perhaps starting to offer family private sessions would be a great first step towards righting the ship at your club.



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Jorge is a 30 year veteran of the tennis industry and is one of only ten people world-wide that has earned the Master Professional distinction with both the PTR and the USPTA. Jorge has developed many nationally ranked players including 3 USTA national champions.

Perhaps Jorge is best known for developing the website TennisDrills.tv which has more than 1,000 videos of tennis drills and tips and more than 700 subscribers world-wide in more than 54 countries.

Jorge has appeared on the Tennis Channel as a featured pro on the ***OnCourt with USPTA*** show series.