

Tennis Coaching – Applying the Game Sense Approach

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Tennis Coaching – Applying the Game Sense Approach

Abstract

The instructional practices of tennis coaching internationally have been characterised by high levels of explicit verbal instruction with a particular emphasis on developing technique in isolation and prior to the tactical aspects of the game (Crespo, Reid & Miley, 2004). However, in recognising that players should be exposed to planned activities that foster development in four central domains – the physical (technique), social (interaction), cognitive (decision-making) and affective (fun and enjoyment) domains, the Game Sense approach (den Duyn, 1997) for sport teaching acknowledges the benefits of incorporating a more athlete-centred teaching style within a game-based practice environment. This paper will demonstrate the Game Sense approach for teaching tennis to novice players. In a Game Sense approach learning is positioned, at least initially, within modified games to emphasise understanding of the way rules shape game behaviour, tactical awareness, decision-making and the development of contextualised stroke mechanics (technical skill) – similar to other ‘tactical models’ (Metzler, 2011). This paper will present a variety of tennis games and play practices adhering to the guiding principles of the Game Sense approach. In this approach players develop their technical skills with understanding by being actively involved in game play in an inquiry environment distinguished by the pedagogical use of questions to shape the complementarity of technical and tactical game components at all levels of game development (Smith, 2014).

Key words: Coaching, racquet sports, instruction, sport pedagogy

The Game Sense approach – athlete centred coaching

The Game Sense approach was developed from the field of sport coaching pedagogy. It adopts similar pedagogical characteristics of the ‘Teaching Games for Understanding’ (TGfU) model that emerged as a pedagogical response to issues associated with the educational rigour of the games curriculum and the engagement of students in secondary physical education (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982). However, unlike

traditional pedagogical framing of sport teaching as a technical-to-tactical progression, and the 6-step TGfU model describing a tactical-to-technical progression (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982), the Game Sense approach highlights the complementarity of tactical and technical components of skilled performance at all levels of game development. The original Game Sense equation is: technique + game context = skill ('game context' refers to elements such as pressure, decision-making, timing, use of space and risk) (den Duyn, 1997). The key conceptual elements of the Game Sense approach have assisted the successful implementation of Tennis Australia's (2012) modified tennis program – Tennis Hot Shots. The activities illustrated in this paper come from the Tennis Hot Shots manual. Each activity attempts to promote the central feature of the game of tennis – the rally (projection and reception), in combination with technical skills and relevant tactical elements. In this way, all players 'play with purpose' (Pill, 2013a) and develop their skills by:

- Knowing what to do in the context of play (decision-making);
 - Knowing how to do it (movement knowledge); and
 - Being able to execute the 'how' and 'what' successfully (movement capability)
- (Pill, 2013a).

It is relevant to note that the Game Sense approach does not 'rule in or out' any particular instructional strategy, but suggests a focus on an inquiry-guided discovery style and a game-based practice environment. In this way, it is proposed that players learn how to search and select information from the game environment and to solve problems and explore solutions to various movement challenges. As a result, tennis coaches and teachers are encouraged to adopt a variety of instructional strategies or a 'toolkit' of teaching processes (Pill, 2011).

The key conceptual features of the Game Sense approach adopted in the Hot Shots program are summarised in Figure 1. The variety of instructional styles that can be used within a Game Sense approach will be highlighted during the explanation of the games to follow.

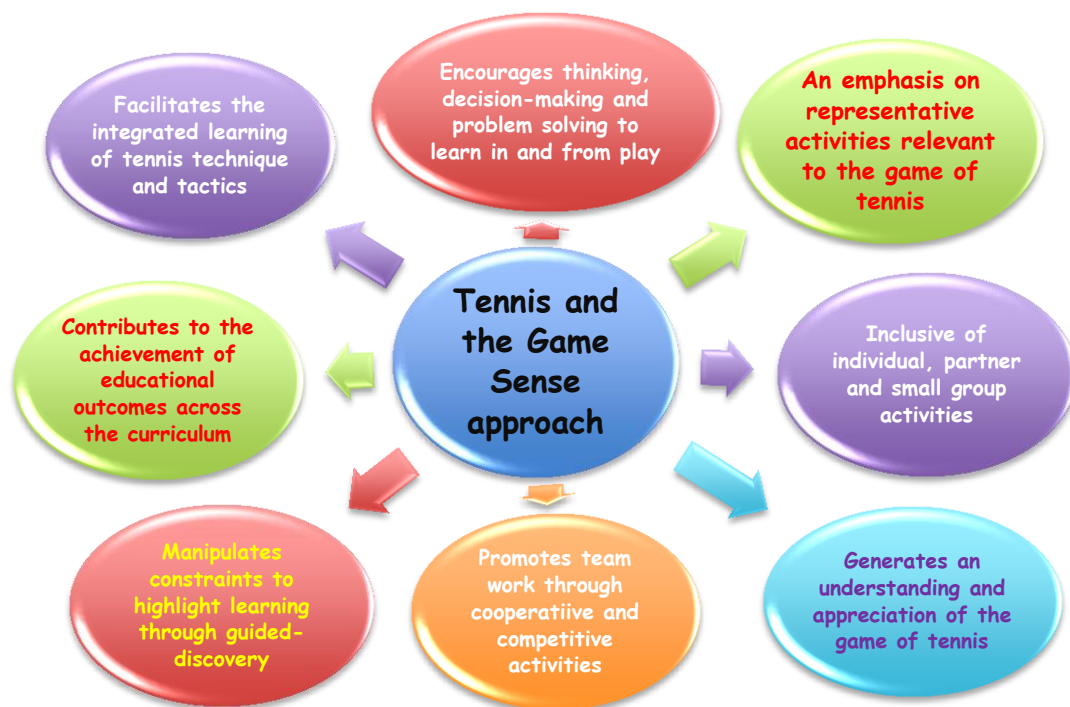


Figure 1. Key conceptual features of the Game Sense approach.

Game Modifications

The pedagogical feature called game modification that occurs by exaggeration or reduction of game elements has been explained by the CHANGE IT formula (Schembri, 2005). The CHANGE IT formula describes the different task, performer and environment constraints that can be modified by “eliminating, refining, or adding to game rules and playing conditions to focus attention on specific technical or tactical game understanding” (Pill, 2013, p. 9). For example, tennis coaches and teachers may modify the game by adapting the playing area (e.g., making the court smaller or larger), changing the equipment (using a variety of sized balls with varying compression levels and different sized racquets) and changing the rules (e.g., permitting the ball to bounce twice). The CHANGE IT formula is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. The CHANGE IT formula.

C	coaching style
H	how scoring occurs or the scoring system
A	area or dimension
N	numbers of players
G	game rules
E	equipment
I	inclusion by modifying activities for learning needs
T	time of the game or time allowed in possession

For example, the environment constraint of court size can be modified so novice players have less space to defend during a rally and therefore be more likely to get to the ball and be able to keep it in play. This constraint change can also be used purposefully to increase practice volume. Practice volume is one of the concepts promoted in the development of skilled performers (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch–Romer, 1993), and it is now emerging that players that make the elite sport level are frequently characterised by higher volumes of play based practice opportunities in their early game development. Figure 2, below, illustrates how the tennis court can be constrained to different sizes according to the playing ability of the participants.

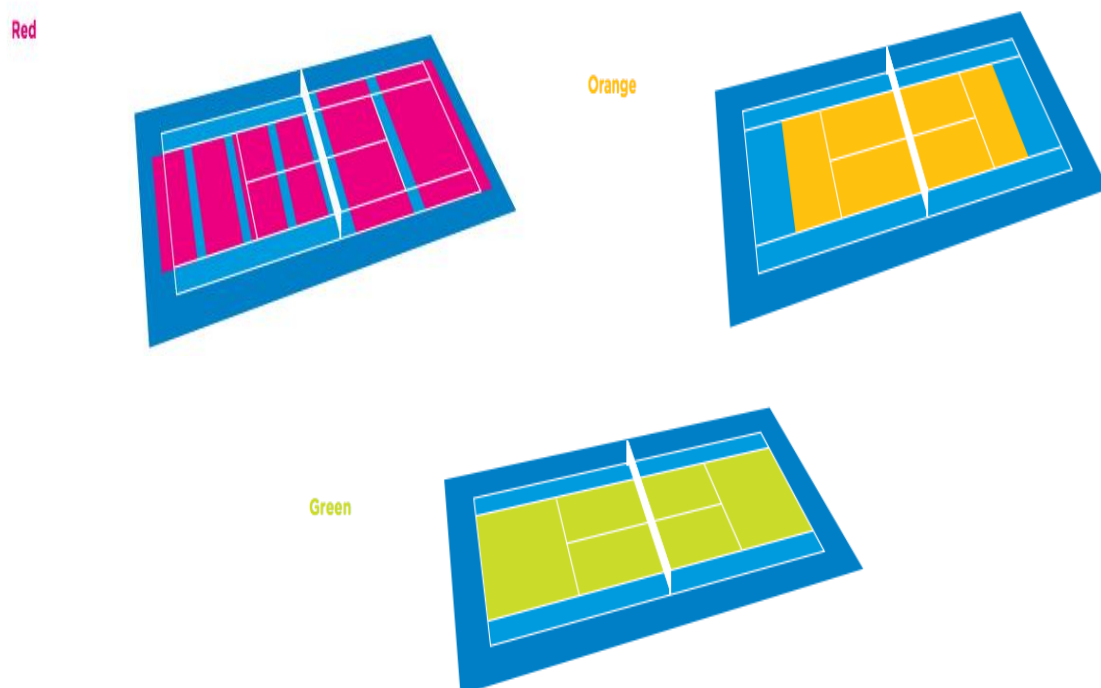


Figure 2. How the tennis court can be constrained to create different sized playing environments

Developing ‘Thinking Players’

It is, however, the pedagogical emphasis on developing ‘thinking players’ through the teacher’s use of well-considered questions to create reflective moments, the debates of ideas, and the guided discovery of tactical and technical concepts that distinguishes the Game Sense approach from the more historically common ‘sport as sport techniques’ (Kirk, 2010). This historically common ‘physical education method’ (Metzler, 2011) foregrounding reproduction of sport as techniques is frequently characterised by the dominance of directive and command style coaching/teaching. It is thus commonly referred to as coach-centred or teacher-centred. However, the purposeful use of questions to create a player dialogue with the game foregrounded in the Game Sense approach makes it an athlete-centred approach (Kidman, 2005).

The Game Sense approach we illustrate next in the paper is consistent with international developments in tennis coaching. For example, in 2010 the International Tennis Federation (ITF) approved the use of compression balls to slow the game for beginners, the reduction of court size for young novice players, and reduced sized tennis racquets for beginners under the Play and Stay (ITF, 2007; 2010) initiative. Task modifications to reduce the technical complexity by changing the nature of the tennis equipment used by young novice players and the application of a game-based approach in tennis has been promoted as a “modern teaching methodology” (Crespo et al., 2004, p. 30).

‘Athlete-Centred’ Tennis Coaching/Teaching – In Practice

The game ‘Red Hot Rafa’ illustrated in Figure 3 shows the key conceptual features of the Game Sense approach applied to a tennis play practice. The central feature of the game of tennis – the rally (projection and reception), in combination with the technical skill of striking as a hit with a racquet and the relevant tactical elements associated with returning the ball and winning the point are represented. Consistent with the Game Sense approach, 1. The serve is simplified to a drop and hit, the play space is reduced to make it easier for players to get to the ball and return it by using a red court space (Figure 1); 2. The racquet is modified to make it lighter and to bring the contact point closer to the hand with a shorter head stem than a full sized racquet; and, 3. A low compression ball that is bigger and bounces more than a

full compression tennis ball while also not being able to be hit as far as a full compression ball represent the task and environment constraints modified to reduce the complexity of the game. The pedagogical use of questions to guide tactical and technical game development is also illustrated.

GAME 1: Red Hot Rafa

Equipment Per pair 1x  2x 

Layout Players form pairs and are positioned at opposite ends of the court

Instruction Players are aiming to win the point from a groundstroke using the width and length of the court

1. Players form pairs and are positioned at opposite ends of the court
2. Player 1 commences the rally with a drop hit or overarm serve (serve/rally rule)
3. Players rally the ball until an error is made
4. Players are not permitted to volley the ball (i.e., the ball must bounce prior to contact)
5. The rally continues until the ball bounces twice before being hit, the ball lands outside the court space, the ball hits the net or a player volleys the ball
6. Players alternate commencing the point
7. Play first to 10 points or teacher nominates time

Pause for reflection - focus questions

- Identify the type of shots and positions on the court you can hit the ball to attack?
- How can you reposition your opponent to win the point?
- Where are the most desirable positions on the court to hit the ball? Why?
- If your opponent is forced wide on the court, where might you hit the ball? What about if your opponent is close to the net?
- How do you position your body to control the direction of the ball?

Figure 3. ‘CHANGE IT’ - Modifying task, performer and environment constraints

The pedagogical use of questions to guide tactical and technical game development illustrated in Figure 3 is indicative of the use of ‘tactical time-outs’ during games or in reflective moments created at the end of a defined period of play practice to debate ideas (Grehaighe, Richard & Griffin, 2005). This is not unlike the description of Style H – Divergent Discovery by Mosston that emphasises the use of participants experience to discover multiple solutions and try out the suggestions made by players (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). The use of questions in preference to directive instruction is perhaps the pedagogical

distinctiveness of the Game Sense approach and what makes it athlete-centred by shifting the cognitive load for ‘thinking’ to the player (Light, 2003).

The explicit process of using questions to purposefully build conceptual understanding of tactical concepts in a Game Sense approach (and other tactical approaches) has been described as guided discovery (Hopper & Kruisselbrink, 2001; Hubball, Lambert & Hayes, 2007; Light, 2014; Pill, 2008). Guided discovery is often connected with Mosston’s description of Guided Discovery Style-F (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). In this style, the development of questions proceeds from the general to the specific, relating specifically to a selected subject matter, such as pre-determined learning objective or an identified principle of play, strategy or technical aspect of movement performance. In this way, the use of questions can be seen as an example of explicit teaching when combined with the purposeful constraint on play to deliberately design the game as a perceptual workspace that brings about both player awareness and understanding of an aspect of play that the coach/teacher wants further developed.

GAME 1: Red Hot Rafa

Practice task

- Team target tennis (place cones in corners for points). Teams attempt to rally and ‘hit’ the targets

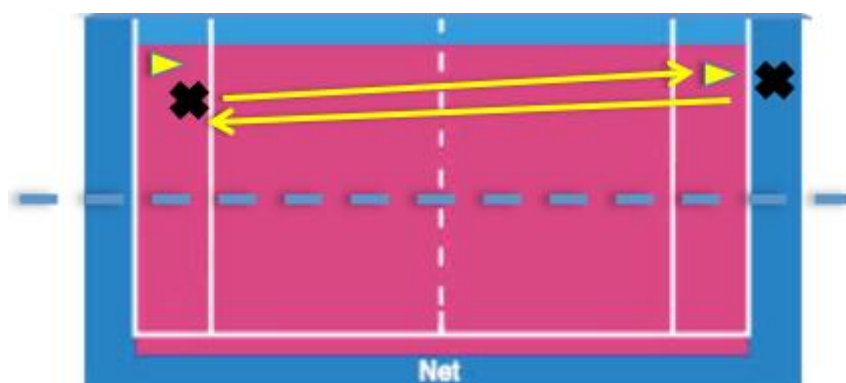


Figure 4. The use of practice tasks in a Game Sense approach

The Game Sense approach does not ignore traditional notions of ‘skill’ development – it is not a ‘game-only’ teaching approach. Teachers and coaches of tennis must still “determine if guidance from them

will assist players become more skilful” (Australian Sports Commission, 1996, p. 50). Therefore, directive ‘command’ and ‘practice’ style teaching, as is illustrated in Figure 4, still feature in the Game Sense session plan. Typically, the need for this style of instruction emerges from the play and the awareness of players and coaches/teachers of the benefit of this instructional strategy to improve an aspect of play. Crespo et al (2004) explained this session menu for tennis practice as Game-Practice-Feedback-Game. In a Game Sense coaching scenario, we would suggest this description by Crespo et al (2004) would be slightly different, and look like: Game-Reflection-Practice (if required)-Reflection-Game.

The game of Red Hot Rafa can have the task complexity reduced by playing the game as ‘Roll and Splat’ tennis where players are at the stage of developing coordination and control of the fundamental movement skills of tracking a moving ball, trapping a moving ball, and pushing a ball with an implement. In this scenario, the simplification of the game sees the net replaced as a barrier to be a line mid-court, and the racquet used to stop the ball with a ‘splat’, and then to push the ball to create a rolling ball along the ground into the opponent’s court space. Again, the key perceptual-workspace feature of the rally is retained even though the pedagogical principle of game simplification has been applied to reduce task complexity, so that an essential representative feature of tennis is retained.

The game of Deep Trouble illustrated in Figure 5 includes the same pedagogical features of questioning, manipulation of task, performer and environment constraints to develop play with purpose, and game simplification while retaining key representative features of the full rules of the game of tennis. However, in this game, tactical appreciation of ball placement deep in the opponent’s court, and then further development of understanding of when to place the ball deep, is fostered through manipulation of scoring. For example, a point is won during the rally if the ball lands deep in the court, identified by markers highlighting the target area.

GAME 2: Deep Trouble

Equipment Per pair 2x  2x  6x

Layout Players form pairs and are positioned at opposite ends of the court

Instruction: Players are aiming to win the point as a result of a deep ball

1. Players form pairs and are positioned at opposite ends of the court

2. Player 1 commences play with a drop hit or overarm serve (serve/rally rule)
3. The rally continues with both players aiming to hit the ball deep past the yellow markers
4. If the ball lands shorter than the yellow markers the opponent wins the point
5. Volleys are not permitted
6. Players alternate commencing the point
7. Play first to 10 points or teacher nominates time

Pause for reflection – focus questions

- How do you prevent your opponent from attacking?
- What are the benefits of hitting the ball deep?
- What options are presented by hitting the ball deep?
- What are your best options when defending a deep ball? Where should you return the ball?
- How can you reposition your opponent to win the point?
- How do you hit the ball deep?

CHANGE IT

- Change the depth of the yellow markers
- Players substitute racquets for hands
- Player choice (racquets or hands; single or double bounce; trapping – Inclusion style)

AIM

- One point is scored each time a team member hits the ball deep

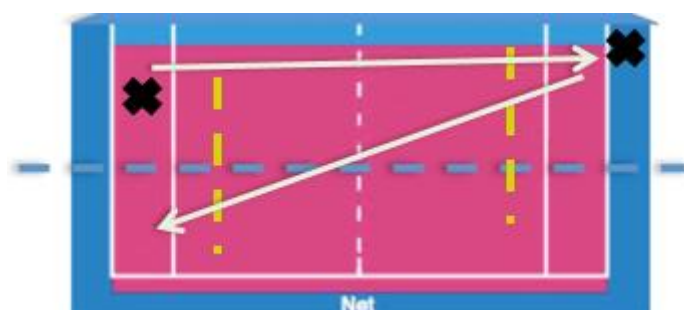


Figure 5. Using the pedagogical feature of exaggeration to focus tactical appreciation of ball positioning

Pursuing the pedagogical concept game modification by manipulation of task constraints to develop play with purpose, the scoring system can be varied to include (for example) an exaggeration of scoring whereby 3 points are accrued if the player wins the rally from a shot that lands in the target area, maintaining one point for a shot landing elsewhere in the court. This constraint invites a debate of ideas around the strategy of going for a one point play and a three point play, and the potential for tactical ‘if-then-

because' thinking becoming encouraged. Bell and Penney (2004) explained that this type of thinking is encouraged when the player is able to be involved in problem solving where there is an appropriate association between certain game conditions and an action (solution).

Tennis coaches and teachers are also able to apply an inclusive instruction style by differentiating the constraints placed on the players within the task. For example, in the game Deep Trouble the players could be offered the choice of creating their challenge point around the bounce of the ball. Whereas in the common form of tennis the ball is only permitted to bounce once in court, players may be offered the choice of one or two bounces to play the ball based on whether they believe their challenge point lies in the game. Mosston's Inclusion Style-E describes this differentiation of challenge point as learners making decisions about task entry level starting points by having the ability to make decisions where they select the level of task performance (Mosston & Ashworth, 2008). This inclusion style applied to the game Deep Trouble might alternatively be that players have the option of first tapping the ball with the racquet to first control the ball, with or without letting the tapped ball bounce after being hit for control, and then hitting the ball to play it back over the net.

Game 3 Forehand Frenzy or Backhand Blitz (Figure 6) illustrates the constraint on player behaviour to force the rallies into a particular technical reaction by limiting the choice of action response in the game to cross-court hits. Again, we see the representation of the central feature of tennis as a net-court game, the rally started by a 'serve', in a game simplified (the serve can be a drop and hit) and modified (only one type of technical response (eg. only forehands cross-court) to couple the game condition to a solution (an action) through play with a directed purpose.

GAME 3: Forehand Frenzy/Backhand Blitz

Equipment Per pair 2x  2x  4x 

Layout Players form pairs and are positioned at opposite ends of the court

Instruction Players are aiming to return the ball cross-court

1. Player 1 commences the point with a drop hit or overarm serve (serve/rally rule)
2. The rally continues in a cross-court direction only
3. Players alternate commencing the point
4. Play first to 10 points or teacher nominates time

Pause for reflection – focus questions

- What are the benefits of hitting the ball closer to the sidelines as opposed to the middle of the court?
- What options are presented by hitting the ball wide (deep and short angle?)
- What are your best options when defending a wide ball? Where should you return the ball?
- What are benefits of hitting the ball cross-court?
- How do you hit the ball cross-court?

CHANGE IT

- Make the target area smaller (narrower)
- Place markers or zones for players to aim at
- Players substitute racquets for hands (task reduction/regression)
- Player choice (racquets or hands; single or double bounce; trapping – Inclusion style)
- Half-court-Full-court game
- Option to play down-the-line if the rally has not been won after(eg.) eight cross court shots in a rally

AIM

- One point is scored each time a team member hits the ball wide in court and the opponent is unable to return the ball

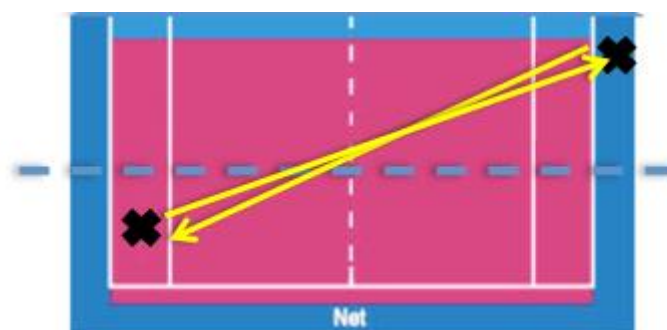


Figure 6. Constraining the actions of the player to one shot option

Conclusion

Reid, Crespo, Lay and Berry (2007) suggested that historically, tennis practice has typically consisted of activities devoid of discernable specific goals or objectives and unlikely to optimise a player's long term performance development. Generally, drill-practice based activities where sport is essentially presented as sport-as-sport techniques (Kirk, 2010) is problematised for its potential to engage, sustain and hold enthusiasm for sport participation in the long term (Pill, 2013b). In this paper, we have argued for play

with purpose to guide the tactical and technical development via a practice workspace that is game-based and athlete-centred. This is achieved via the pedagogical emphasis of guided discovery and the fostering of player reflection through the well considered use of questions to develop tactical and technical game performance. Using the example of the Game Sense approach that emerged from the field of sport pedagogy, we have illustrated the central pedagogical features of the Game Sense approach applied to the game of tennis for play with purpose with novice and beginning players. While we have focussed on tennis in this paper, the pedagogical descriptions provided in this paper can be applied to other games in the net-court category, such as badminton and volleyball.

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