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Let's Play Tennis...

By Ernestine Bunnell

Instructor, Physical Education

PEOPLE learn to play tennis in one or both of two ways, through their eyes and through their ears. Children can usually imitate much more successfully than adults but on the other hand, adults can listen to or read directions and then go out on the court and execute them much more satisfactorily than children. A boy or girl may be able to develop a very nice game by imitating some of the better players, while the adult may develop just as good a game by reading his instructions.

Just go ahead and get equipment. Of course the first essential, taking for granted there is already a desire to learn, is a racket. For beginners, whether they be ten years old or twenty, a fairly light weight racket is desirable because it is the least tiring. This may vary slightly with the strength of the individual but usually one not over 135 lbs. is most satisfactory. The majority of rackets now, however, are marked “light,” “medium,” and “heavy” and for children I would recommend the “light.”

The second necessity is a pair of sneakers. Most people, especially beginners, are prone to neglect this item and actually believe that any kind of shoe will do so long as it is comfortable on the foot. This is far from true. It is not so much the comfort of the individual as it is the preservation of the court that is considered. If any kind of heel is worn on the court it will leave its mark in the form of slight depressions and uneven ridges which all go to ruin the smooth surface of the court, therefore, making the bound of the ball very uncertain. Consequently, it is extremely difficult to judge an accurate return.

Dress is an important item, too. I have often seen girls unable to return many balls simply because of tight skirts which hindered them in covering space in a short period of time. A little forethought would remedy these undesirable situations.

The next factor to consider is actual learning the game itself. If you are one of these individuals who can imitate it is up to you to find your model and then practice. If you are the second type who can transfer words into actions you must find someone or some book that can tell you how to begin. And may I say here, that it is extremely important to learn the fundamentals correctly from the beginning. Good form is just as essential in tennis as it is in swimming or golf. It is far easier to learn correctly in the beginning than it is to learn simply to hit the ball over the net at first and later decide that you want to play correctly because all those old poor habits you inevitably form must be broken and new ones formed before any further progress is made. This process of breaking old habits and forming new ones is discouraging because it is so slow, and because your game simply goes to pieces until the new methods you are trying to use become habits.

Let us consider a few characteristics of the average amateur player. In general he is one of two types, either one who hits the ball with all his might every time and plays in good and bad streaks, or one who concentrates on accuracy and steadiness first, subordinating speed. If the hard-hitter is enjoying one of his good days there is nothing more to be said, he will probably win against his opponent. If he is off his game, he will probably be just as consistent in losing. If his good and bad shots are fairly evenly distributed he has a fifty-fifty chance. If he wins a few spectacular shots or an important game he will probably win the match; if he loses those spectacular shots or the important game he will go to pieces. The steadier, more accurate player will not be confronted by these difficulties. Because of his type of game he is much more apt to use his head than lose it. Tennis, whether it is amateur or professional, is more than just merely getting the ball across the net. It is a game matching wit against wit, strategy against strategy. It is not in the least unheard of that an inferior player as far as actual strokes is concerned will defeat his opponent simply because he can outwit him.

I believe that present day junior players will make our future champions. A champion is not created over night or even in a year. Tennis is one of the most difficult games to learn to execute. It is almost impossible to start too early. Henri Cochet, the Frenchman, who gained such a decisive victory over Tilden in the Men’s National Singles in 1926, is the example I have in mind. He started tennis at the age of seven. His father was then manager of the Lyon Lawn Tennis Club and Henri liked the game so well he acted as ball boy, chasing all the balls for the tournament players. After the matches were over he would take a racket and practice against a backboard.

“Tennis is the best way to learn strokes,” he said. He was a winner as a youngster in his first important tournament. In 1921 he won the National Championship of France. In 1923 he was chosen by Suzanne Lenglen, one of the world’s greatest women players, as her partner in the mixed doubles national tournament which they won. Then in 1928 his superb tennis against Tilden took away from the United States a championship that Tilden had won for six years.

If it were possible to find out from each of the leading players of the world when he started to play, the answer would be much the same in every instance. It is the colleges and universities who supply nation with promising young players but those boys and girls do not rise from the bottom of the ladder during their four years of college.

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I have already mentioned that young players should find someone to imitate and if possible someone who will actually help them with their game. It is not always possible to do this and some can take advantage of better opportunities than others. In the very recent years there have been two outstanding figures who have acted in the capacity of coach, one Mrs. George Wightman, the other William Tilden. They are both former amateur champions. Mrs. Wightman plays very little now and Tilden has given up the amateurs for professional tennis. An extremely fortunate few have had the opportunity to be advised and coached by Tilden, who is one of the world’s most famous tennis players.

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“I consider wall-practice the best way to learn strokes,” he said. He was a winner as a youngster in his first important tournament. In 1921 he won the Regional Championship in Lyon and that same year he also won the Military Championship of France. In 1923 he was chosen by Suzanne Lenglen, one of the world’s greatest women players, as her partner in the mixed doubles national tournament which they won. Then in 1928 his superb tennis against Tilden took away from the United States a championship that Tilden had won for six years.

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It is the high school, preparatory schools and grade schools which each in turn do their share in producing the championship players of the present and future. Because people like Tilden and Tilden realize this fact they are doing all in their power to give the youngsters every opportunity. It is because officers of clubs, interested parents and experienced players realize this fact too that we have so many tournaments in which the youngsters may take part.