

Parents Survival Guide to Junior Tennis

Finding the right coach and navigating
tournaments while supporting your whole child.

By Page Bartelt

Foreward



Welcome to this guide, crafted with both tennis parents and junior players in mind, aimed at helping you navigate the intricate world of competitive tennis while preserving your passion and drive. Tennis, as one of the most demanding individual sports, presents unique challenges, especially during tournaments where coaching and support are often absent. Yet, within these challenges lie opportunities for personal growth, resilience, and self-discovery.

Throughout my journey, from competing nationally at the tender age of 8 to securing a college scholarship and a professional ranking, I faced formidable opponents like Lindsay Davenport and Jennifer Capriati. Each match demanded relentless development and adaptation, molding me into the player, coach, and parent I am today.

Drawing from over 25 years of coaching experience and my own trials as a player and parent, I aim to equip you with strategies to navigate the complexities of junior tennis. This guide offers insights into common pitfalls, practical solutions, and essential tips to foster progress, maintain a healthy parent-child relationship, and cultivate a growth mindset that extends beyond the court.

For two decades, I've worked alongside parents dedicated to their child's tennis journey, understanding the weight of their aspirations and the challenges they face. In this guide, I address pressing questions and provide tools to optimize coaching, manage tournament pressure, and safeguard mental well-being.

My hope is that these pages spark meaningful dialogue between you and your child, empowering you to build a robust support system conducive to success on and off the court. May you glean valuable insights, cultivate resilience, and forge a path marked by growth, unity, and unwavering determination.

Page Bartelt – Founder and Director, Better Under Pressure

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A Great Coach

There are great tennis instructors out there, but they are more rare than common. Often there can be a lot of physical activity in a lesson but not much learning. Here are a few things that you can look for right away that tells you the coach is a good one:

- They ask questions about your player's experience to tailor their coaching approach.
- They welcome the parents into the initial lessons and process, fostering a team environment.
- They encourage questions from both players and parents to clarify goals and expectations.
- They seem happy and engaged themselves, indicating they enjoy their job and can connect with children effectively.
- They cover all the shots in the game, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of tennis beyond just groundstrokes.
- They provide hands-on demonstrations and use teaching aids to enhance learning, showing they're invested in their students' improvement.
- They have invested in teaching tools besides a basket of balls to enrich the training experience, showing a commitment to varied and effective teaching methods.

TIP: The biggest misconception out there about tennis coaches from parents that I see is that the coach needs to be playing with your child and hitting every ball. Lots of fantastic instruction is happening when a teacher is tossing balls, or not playing with the student at all. A lot of crucial technical learning can be happening even if your child is not running corner to corner. Some of the biggest breakthroughs I had when training came with a coach who only dropped and tossed balls to me for weeks before a tournament refining my strokes.

Having a coach actively playing against or with your child can be great if needed but it is not necessary and does not guarantee that they are even a great instructor. I have found that many coaches who lack the verbal skills to communicate or explain technique to players of all levels will just run around and hit balls with their students instead of properly coaching. They tend to be the least verbal and the least engaged.

Finding the Right Coach

Finding the right coach involves understanding their expertise, level of engagement, and passion for the job, all of which are crucial for inspiring young tennis players. Here's what to look for in a good coach:

- 1. Solid Background:** A good coach should have a solid background in coaching players at your child's level.
- 2. Hands-On Approach:** Look for coaches who are hands-on and willing to demonstrate techniques on the court. Teaching and not just hitting with your child.
- 3. Passion and Enthusiasm:** A great coach should show genuine enthusiasm for coaching and enjoy working with children.

When evaluating potential coaches, ask about their coaching philosophy, the types of players they typically work with, and what they love about coaching. This information can give insight into their commitment and how well they might connect with your child.

As someone who has been involved in junior tennis for over 25 years, I understand the importance of finding the right coach. Growing up as a competitive player myself, I know the value of having a coach who can meet your needs and help you develop as a player.

It's essential to ask questions when meeting a potential coach. Inquire about their background, level of training, coaching style, and what they love about coaching. This information can help you determine if they are the right fit for your child.

A great coach will exude happiness and demonstrate a genuine love for their job. This enthusiasm is contagious and can inspire young players to excel. On the other hand, an uninspired coach can lead to frustrated and uninspired players.

In addition to passion, a good coach should be hands-on during lessons. They should actively participate in drills and provide physical corrections to help players improve their technique.

When considering a coach for your child, it's important to assess their ability to address specific developmental needs. Whether your child needs technical refinement, strategic guidance, or mental toughness training, make sure the coach can meet those needs.

TIP: Don't be afraid to ask your coach's commitment level. It's also crucial for the coach to be involved in tournament preparation and strategy. They should be willing to attend tournaments or watch videos of your child's matches to provide personalized feedback and guidance. This is crucial if your child wants to achieve their full potential in a tournament setting.

Every coach has their own strengths and specialties. Some may excel at technical instruction, while others may focus on strategy or mental coaching. It's important to identify what your child needs at each stage of their development and find a coach who can meet those needs.

As a parent, it's essential to observe some of your child's lessons and ensure they are engaged and making progress. Communication between coach, player, and parent is key to a successful coaching relationship.

Once you've found a coach that aligns with your child's needs and goals, you can decide whether to step back or remain involved in their lessons. The right coach will welcome your involvement and be able to articulate their short-term and long-term goals for your child's development.

In summary, finding the right coach is crucial for your child's success and enjoyment of tennis. By asking the right questions and observing their coaching style, you can ensure that your child receives the guidance and support they need to thrive in junior tennis.

Red Flags: Signs of an Ineffective Coach

Identifying a bad coach can be crucial in ensuring your child's tennis journey is positive and productive. Here are some red flags to watch out for:

1. Generic Instruction: One sign of poor coaching is when they use the same generic instructions for every player, regardless of their individual needs. Phrases like "Move your feet" or "Swing faster" may sound good, but they lack the specificity required for effective coaching. I've witnessed coaches who talk non-stop during lessons without providing meaningful guidance, leading to little improvement for the player. Tailoring instruction to each player's unique needs takes effort and attention, and not all coaches are willing to put in the work.

2. Lack of Specificity: Tennis is a technical sport, and a great coach will provide specific guidance on racket placement, footwork, and stroke mechanics. Look for a coach who demonstrates all aspects of a stroke and speaks the language of process, not just generic outcomes like "hit more topspin." ***TIP: Process-oriented instruction is essential for developing a solid foundation in tennis.***

3. Anger Towards Players: If a coach displays anger or frustration towards your child during lessons, it's a major red flag. Coaching should be a positive and supportive experience, and your child will need a coach that can help them manage their own frustrations and emotions. A good coach will find constructive ways to motivate and communicate with players, rather than resorting to anger. I have heard many terrible things said to children while being coached so keep your communication open with your child about their experiences during the lessons.

As a coach myself, I've had honest conversations with players about their effort and commitment levels, but always in a respectful and constructive manner. ***TIP: On any given day, the players's effort level may not match their goals, so try your best to stay curious and ask your child what is going on for them.*** It's essential for coaches to communicate openly with parents about their child's progress and any concerns they may have.

In summary, be vigilant for signs of a bad coach, including generic instruction, lack of specificity, playing with and not instructing, and inappropriate behavior towards players. By choosing a coach who prioritizes individualized instruction and fosters a positive learning environment, you can ensure that your child's tennis journey is both enjoyable and rewarding.

How to Handle Cheating in Tournaments: Teaching Self-Advocacy and Building Resilience

Preparation

Cheating in junior tennis is unfortunately a common occurrence, ranging from intentional to unintentional acts. As a former player and coach, I've seen it all – from altered scores to questionable line calls. It's essential to prepare your child for these situations and teach them how to advocate for themselves effectively. Encourage your child to communicate the score loudly before each serve and ask their opponent to do the same. This simple practice can prevent disagreements over the game score.

Junior tennis tournaments do not provide referees for every match, leaving players to manage matches on their own. This setup can lead to disputes and unfair play. It's crucial to educate your child on proactive strategies to avoid or address cheating during matches.

For comparison, can you imagine asking a soccer team of 12 year old players to keep score, while calling and agreeing on all of the fouls with their opponents without a referee? It would never work and it doesn't work for tennis either.

Prepare your child for the inevitability of cheating and teach them how to advocate for themselves in emotionally charged situations. Establishing a familiar routine can help them stay grounded and regulated during matches. ***TIP: Try Role playing different scenarios with your child before it happens on court so they can practice asking for help from a tournament official.***

Cheating can disrupt a player's focus and confidence, leading to subpar performance. By teaching your child how to handle cheating assertively, you empower them to stay calm and confident on the court.

Plan

When faced with cheating, it's essential for players to know how to respond effectively. A common protocol involves politely questioning the opponent's calls and, if necessary, leaving the court to ask a tournament official for a linesman.

Encourage your child to use their voice and assertively address any questionable calls. If the behavior persists, they should not hesitate to seek assistance from a linesman or tournament official.

Prepare your child for the potential challenges of seeking help, as opponents may say unpleasant things and umpires may vary in their responsiveness and demeanor. Practice scenarios at home to help them feel comfortable advocating for themselves.

Self-Advocacy

While cheating can be frustrating, it's also an opportunity for your child to develop resilience and self-advocacy skills. Remind them that speaking up for themselves is an essential life skill. ***TIP: Encourage your child to stay focused on their strategy and not let cheating derail their performance. Seeking help from a referee can restore their sense of control and confidence.***

In extreme cases where no umpire is available, encourage your child to adapt their strategy and maintain their composure. Emphasize the importance of staying calm and not letting emotions dictate their play.

Going to Tournaments Without a Coach: Routines and Restraint

Protecting Your Relationship

Attending tournaments without a coach can be challenging for both parents and players. It's essential to establish clear boundaries and support your child's emotional needs without assuming the role of a coach. **TIP: Avoid offering unsolicited advice or criticism during tournaments, as this can strain your relationship with your child and prevent them from confiding in you after matches. Instead, discuss with them what type of support they prefer and respect their wishes.**

Help your child develop pre and post-match routines that promote focus and reflection. Encourage them to find strategies that work for them and support them in maintaining these routines. Remember to experiment with lots of different things from listening to music, juggling, visualization or journaling and let your child settle on what works for them.

Routine

Ask your child if they are ready to develop pre and post match routines. Building a consistent routine around match preparation and reflection can empower them to take ownership of their development. Ask their coach to address this in future lessons as your child will be generally more receptive to this information coming from an outside source than the parent. **TIP: These routines can support your child in developing self-reflection, focus and communication skills. These skills are invaluable both on and off the court.**

Restraint

If your child struggles with nerves or disappointment after matches, offer empathy and support without overstepping boundaries. Avoid immediately dissecting their performance and instead wait to discuss it with their coach.

Respect your child's perspective on their matches, even if it differs from your own. Trust in their ability to form strategies and learn from their experiences, and refrain from undermining their confidence with overly critical feedback. By practicing restraint and providing emotional support, you can strengthen your relationship with your child and empower them to navigate the challenges of junior tennis with resilience and confidence.

Handling Losses: Approaching Tournaments With a Growth Mindset

Every tennis player faces periods of losing and self-doubt. It's crucial to help players stay motivated and inspired, even when their rankings aren't improving or they're experiencing more losses than usual.

Setting Clear Goals

Start by clarifying why your child is playing tennis. **TIP: Ask their coach to help them identify and write down some short and long term goals. Goals should focus on specific areas of improvement, and be able to be measured independently of tournament results.** Goals should include both performance objectives and a genuine love for the sport itself.

Remember that in tennis tournaments, many more players lose than win. It's essential to have other measures of success besides rankings, such as skill development and personal growth.

Embracing Failure as Part of Growth

While winning is important, losing is an inevitable part of the game. Losing matches can provide valuable learning opportunities and motivate players to improve.

Encourage your child to focus on their progress rather than solely on match outcomes. Recording match statistics can help highlight areas of improvement, even in defeat.

Understanding Your Child's Needs

Every child responds differently to losing and tournament pressure. **TIP: Keep an open dialogue with your child about their feelings and motivation levels so you can track where they are at in regards to both the pressure and their confidence. Ask them what winning or losing certain matches may mean to them so you can help them craft a positive narrative that keeps them inspired.**

Adjust tournament participation based on your child's personality and work ethic. If necessary, take breaks from tournaments or compete at a lower level to rebuild confidence.

To Play a Tournament or Not?

Facing Tough Opponents

When considering whether to play a tournament, avoid withdrawing based solely on the perceived difficulty of the draw. Every match, regardless of the opponent's ranking, offers an opportunity for growth and learning.

Emphasize the value of challenging matches, even against higher-ranked opponents. Facing tough competition exposes weaknesses and motivates players to elevate their game.

Encourage your child to approach matches with a fighting spirit, regardless of the opponent's ranking. Every point won against a stronger player is a victory in itself.

Fostering Resilience

Avoid fixating on rankings and tournament draws. Instead, focus on your child's preparation, practice habits, and overall improvement. ***TIP: Ask your child to write down all of the things they did well after a tough loss, from attitude and effort to shot making or awareness of strategy. A lot can be improving despite the score.***

Resilience and self-confidence are built through competition in all circumstances, not by avoiding challenging matches. Base tournament participation decisions on readiness and opportunity for growth.

Coping With the Social Isolation of Tennis

Navigating Loneliness

Tennis can be a solitary sport, particularly during tournaments. Check in with your child regularly about their experiences and feelings of isolation. Extroverted players may find it more challenging to not have teammates or friends at tournaments than introverts and therefore every child is different and will require different support.

Encourage participation in group training sessions or local academies to foster social connections with peers. Consider arranging travel with friends to tournaments for companionship and support.

Managing Tournament Stress

Help your child find ways to manage tournament stress and loneliness, such as listening to music, spending time with friends, or taking breaks from the tournament environment. Maintain open communication with your child about their emotional well-being and provide support as needed. By addressing social isolation, you can help your child enjoy tennis more fully and thrive both on and off the court.

Conclusion

I hope this essential guide serves as a beacon of support and wisdom as you journey through the world of junior tennis and empowers you to get the most from your current coach. Remember, your dedication to your child's growth, both as a player and as an individual, is paramount. Should you need further guidance or support, I invite you to visit www.betterunderpressure.co. Together, let's continue to nurture the next generation of tennis champions with resilience, determination, and unwavering support.

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