

Cardio tennis: the advantage of play-based drills

by Bill Mountford, USPTA

I am very much a traditionalist. I love the customs and history of our sport. Cardio Tennis, on the other hand, is as modern an approach to spreading the popularity of our game that I have embraced, and my introduction to the concept was a revelation.

In 2004, I ran the New York City Marathon for the first time. I became accustomed to wearing a heart-rate monitor during my training and, for curiosity's sake, wore it while playing tennis one day. I was absolutely amazed by how high my heart rate got while hitting balls – considerably higher, in fact, than it ever got on a stationary bike or other cardio machines in my fitness club. Frankly, I had never considered tennis to be exercise. It was always my favorite sport, but to “exercise” I would go to the fitness club or would take my daily run. I have been trying to spread this message ever since.

So, what is the best way to get more people to realize the remarkable health benefits of playing tennis? To my mind, it is to have them take a play-based Cardio Tennis class. It is great exercise, but it is *not* hard work. The class is fun, so the time flies by. I have run a *lot* of miles on a treadmill, and *never* has the time flown by while I was on one of those!

There are two primary approaches for running a Cardio Tennis class. The first is to offer **drill-based exercises**, where the instructor gets students moving briskly by feeding balls rapidly from the teaching cart. The alternative, and the mode I prefer, is to offer fast-moving **play-based drills**. The class agenda for Cardio Tennis might vary widely from place to place, but one constant is the importance of offering consumers what they are seeking. Of course, there are many programs that offer a combination of play-based and drill-based exercise, but here I am focusing on why I like the play-based approach better.



A huge benefit to offering play-based Cardio Tennis classes is that people feel like they are *playing tennis*, and not simply exercising like mad. One of the darndest things about competing in our sport is that half the players lose every day. In Cardio Tennis, you (and your teammates) might win or lose a game to 10 points, but within seconds you are playing another fast-paced game. While it might get competitive at times, it is definitely an exercise-based class when compared to a skill-based clinic. Frequent players love getting their exercise on a tennis court, and they leave feeling motivated because no one has lost.

This is also a *great* class for beginners. I have found that new players actually improve their tennis games quickly while taking part in these classes. Admittedly, in our Cardio Tennis classes there is no formal instruction on technique or traditional tactics. Without instruction, how do the players get better then? They improve by

Cardio Tennis workshop schedule

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| City | Location | Date | Contact No. | Coordinator | Time | e-mail |
|----------------------------|---|-----------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Chicago | Midtown Tennis Club | June 28 | (773) 235-2300 | Jeff Long | 1 – 4 p.m. | |
| Philadelphia | Greenville Country Club | July 8 | (302) 654-8691 | Mark Centrella | 5 – 9:30 p.m. | |
| Baltimore/Washington, D.C. | Bare Hills Sports Complex | July 9 | (410) 296-2100 | Lynn Morrell | Noon – 4:30 p.m. | lmorrell@tennispatrons.org |
| Cincinnati | Western Tennis and Fitness Club | July 10 | (513) 451-4233 | Angela Wilson | 10 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. | angelawilson@westernttfc.com |
| Stanford, Calif. | Taube Tennis Center (Stanford Campus) | July 23 | (510) 748-7373 | USTA Nor Cal reception | 10 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. | |
| Los Angeles | Los Angeles Tennis Center (UCLA Campus) | July 24 | (310) 208-3838 | Martha Katsuftrakis | 2 – 6:30 p.m. | marthak@scta.usta.com |
| San Diego | Barnes Tennis Center | July 25 | (619) 221-9000 | Steve Bickham | 2 – 6:30 p.m. | |
| Orlando, Fla. | Mission Inn | July 30 | (352) 324-2024 ext 7145 | Cesar Villarroel | 9 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. | |
| Fort Lauderdale, Fla. | Jimmy Evert Tennis Center | July 31 | (954) 828-5379 | Whitney Kraft | 8 a.m. – Noon | |
| Indianapolis | Barbara S. Wayne Tennis Center | Aug. | (317) 259-5377 | Spencer Fields | TBD | |
| Atlanta | Crooked Creek Tennis | Aug. 5 | (770) 569-1401 | Heather Silvia | 10 a.m. – 2:30 p.m. | |
| Houston | Royal Oaks Country Club | Aug. 6 | | Craig Pendry | 9 a.m. – 1:30 p.m. | cpendrys@royaloaksc.com |
| Seattle | Robinswood Tennis Center | Aug. 13 | (425) 452-7690 | John Soriano | TBA | |
| Minneapolis | TBD | September | | | | |

Note: schedule, locations, and times may change

Tennis fun

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momentarily, then start talking again with increased anticipation.

ASU coaches Sheila McInerney, Lou Belken, Laurie Warder, Paul Reber and the men's and women's teams are ready for the kids. The children surround the court and become mesmerized as a couple of players are hitting back and forth, rarely missing a shot. Groups of the children will take turns touring the sports complex and participating in on-court activities.

Sheila and Lou introduce their teams and talk a few minutes about how education is a top priority for the ASU student-athletes. They describe the Sun Devil mascot and show the children how to make a devil's fork with their hands. They answer questions the children have.

Sheila and some team members guide the students to the arena and watch the men's basketball team practice. They yell "Beat U of A" while showing the team their devil's fork gestures. They walk through the weight and training rooms. Sheila politely asks them to be quiet as they tour the computer and study rooms; the children respond in revered silence. They visit the football locker room and talk with some players, and finally run down the football tunnel into the stadium. One can only imagine what goes through the children's minds as they explore each area of the complex.

We smile as the children take to the courts like fish to water. Most have never been on a real tennis court until today. The fences, windscreens and court lines could be distractions but the kids are more intrigued with the ASU team.

The players make personal introductions and quickly bond with their new friends. The kids are all smiles as the team conducts a clinic of drills, activities and games for them.

Lou, Paul and Laurie coordinate court rotations and circulate on the courts, calming over-excited children. They comment on the outstanding tennis skills the kids display after just six lessons.

The team's impact on the kids is dramatic. The interaction between the young adult role models and the PASS kids is magical. With each encouraging and affirming remark, the kids come one step closer to envisioning themselves playing for ASU. The kids have new heroes and are tennis fans for life.

As the day comes to an end, each individual class takes a group picture with the team. Every child receives a souvenir picture of this special day. The children also receive goody bags of school supplies and a new tennis ball. They rush to get their balls autographed by the players.

Thank-yous and goodbyes are said. Sheila remarks on the good behavior of the students and how much the ASU teams enjoy playing with them. Laurie gives each child five used balls to take home and practice with.

On the bus ride home, Coach Carr and I talk about the start date of the next session so we can repeat the program with a new group. The kids look exhausted, peaceful and content. A few take out their autographed balls and examine them, their minds recollecting and digesting the day's events. After a few moments, they safely tuck these special souvenirs in their backpacks.

The bus is gone, the children are heading home and I load my truck with racquets. I am smiling because I know what the students will dream about tonight. ☺

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hitting a lot of balls, by being on the court in "play situations," and – perhaps most importantly – they learn through trial and error. It has been great to see brand new players, who otherwise would get all of their exercise at a fitness club, recognize the health benefits – and the fun – in playing Cardio Tennis games.

On a broader scale, it seems easier for the teaching professional to learn how to cleverly run "team games," with perhaps six to eight players on a court, as opposed to feeding balls endlessly. The on-court stresses are less physical for teaching professionals when they offer back-to-back play-based classes.

It is important to understand a few elements that make the play-based Cardio Tennis class vital. Be sure to prevent one player (or one duo) from dominating the action. Give more experienced players the most challenging balls to play off the first ball feed and give the less experienced players easier balls to manage to start a point. This evens the playing field when players of varying ability levels share the court. I will caution you that with a play-based approach it is more difficult to put true beginners on the court with a few 5.5 level players. Be certain to keep things moving briskly. There is plenty of built-in exercise in our sport, but this can be undermined if the teaching professional opts to talk too much out there. Instead encourage and motivate, but do not lecture or choose to teach the way you might during a typical clinic. We tend to use "transition balls" frequently, even with better players. Utilizing these balls lengthens the points and – in effect – forces players to hit more shots.

Finally, I have embraced this play-based model due to a comparative study we did last winter at the USTA National Tennis Center. We offered Cardio Tennis classes that were entirely play-based and those that were completely drill-based simultaneously. During these sessions, we measured the average heart rates for the participants, the length of time players were in the training zone, and the number of calories burned during the one-hour session. Interestingly, the statistics were virtually the same on all counts for both styles. However, there *was* an intangible difference that has shaped my philosophy. Those who took the play-based class *loved* it and couldn't wait to do it again. Meanwhile, those who took the drill-based class *liked* it, but found it "not as fun."

Ultimately, participants in either class got excellent exercise. In fact nearly all of the players were in their cardio training zone (which is 65 percent to 85 percent of their maximum heart rate) for nearly 45 minutes of the hour-long class. That is very good. Getting them to want to continue, or maybe even to play more often, boiled down to how much they enjoyed their experience.

In the end, it is up to the teaching professional to successfully deliver the Cardio Tennis class. I believe the advantages of the play-based model outweigh those of the drill-based style. It is important to understand and experiment with both models before you reach your own conclusion. Either way, the message is crucial: Tennis is the best form of exercise.

To view various Cardio Tennis play-based drills, go to Partners.CardioTennis.com. Then go to Curriculum, View Drills. Bill Mountford is the director of tennis at the USTA National Tennis Center and the president of the USPTA Eastern Division. ☺