

The John McEnroe Tennis Academy A Word from our Director

As the Director of the John McEnroe Tennis Academy, I occasionally hear observers, typically adult observers, watch a JTMA session in action and comment, “that doesn’t look like the tennis lessons I had as a kid.” And that would be an accurate statement. So too is it true that Novak and Roger and Rafa (and Serena and Maria and Victoria) don’t play much like the pros of the past. Here is a brief explanation of what we do at JMTA and why we do it.

First and foremost is our founder’s vision for how we develop players to reach their maximum potential. John McEnroe believes strongly **that young players do not have to leave home or to train full-time at an academy in a location with warm weather.** Family and familiar surroundings are important to the overall well-being of young athletes pursuing excellence. Juniors do not have to play tennis five hours a day, six days a week; Mac believes that the quality of time spent practicing is far more important than the quantity of time. Developing other interests, including participation in other sports, better molds the athletes of today. Finally, in the end, focus, dedication and hard work pay off - in tennis and in life.

Second is the overall program design of JMTA.

Our Coaching is Positive, Encouraging and Motivating. We believe that when kids are motivated and encouraged, good things happen. Our students work hard and are held to a high standard of attitude and effort. Our coaches challenge players in a positive, supportive way. We know that self-confidence is absolutely essential in building a successful competitive player in an individual sport. And building self-confidence comes from hard work on the part of the player, encouragement from his or her coaches and the love and support of his or her family. When all three are in place, we believe that our students will have a strong sense of accomplishment regardless of the ultimate level of play they attain.

Tennis is an Open Skill Sport. This means that players are constantly confronted with changing situations that require the players to adjust and adapt: what you do affects what I do, and vice versa. For developing players, the majority of their time should be spent learning to understand and analyze what occurs prior to ball striking and what the tactical consequences of their shot selections will be, rather than focusing so much on the technical aspects of any particular stroke. Working on skills like movement, balance, court awareness, anticipation, situational perception and decision-making are critical in the developmental stages of player development. Teaching biomechanical techniques without due consideration of the open skills nature of the sport is not optimal or efficient.

It is almost impossible to focus on technique and tactics at the same time. Since we are trying to develop competitive players at JMTA, and since competitive players are best not being overly concerned with their technique while playing, our group sessions are geared toward developing our players’ tactical side, but do include carefully selected and timely technical corrections.

Too much teaching of the technical aspects of the game can result in tension, frustration and lack of ability to adapt to game situations. When too much attention and too much time are spent on developing a skill or skills, we send the wrong message to the player. Working on stroke *technique* in isolation of related tactics can create a “skewed perception of importance.” In fact, when a player makes a technical error, there can be numerous causes, including mental, physical and tactical. But if too much time is focused on perfecting strokes, over time, players and coaches create a **misconception** that all of their problems and solutions can be found in technical corrections, which is never the case.

Therefore, rather than giving instructions on proper stroke technique during point play, or during tactical games, JMTA coaches focus on helping our students with the challenges of successful point construction. Today’s modern methods recognize the essential value of having students play games as soon as possible. In the short term, this may sacrifice some technique in favor of helping students learn to play and compete. But over time, this allows for the development of players who maximize their potentials. Our coaches do make important technical corrections when necessary. But we do not want anybody to ever say about a JMTA player: “she has beautiful strokes but she does not seem to be able to win”. Our goal at JMTA is to develop players who know how to construct points, to compete and to win.

Players must be able to “play the game” while their technical aspects become refined. Our goal is to help students be players who are constantly improving, rather than to have them feel like “students” who will only become “players” sometime in the future. JMTA students are players.

JMTA creates an environment where students can reach their maximum tennis potential. Our students and coaches live by a written JMTA **Code of Conduct**. There is absolutely no moping after an error, no whining, and no quitting; no racquet throwing, curtain banging or ball slamming. Every student is held to an exemplary behavioral standard in practice at JMTA, and in competition away from the club. And we do not waste time! When it is time to pick up balls, we do it quickly. When it’s time to bring students together for whole group instruction, the students run in. When we switch courts, it is done fast. Our students are always moving their feet, ready to go. Again, we value the *quality* of time spent in our practice sessions over the *quantity* of time spent on court, so we are efficient and we work hard.

Our goal is to teach our kids how to play the game (the tactical side) and to give them the means to execute those tactics (the technical side). Teaching the technical side in a vacuum can many times result in players who look great in practice, but do not succeed in game situations. This can slow the developmental process and lead to frustration and underachievement. Our tactical games are designed so that students practice a particular tactic in a “live ball” point situation. The senior JMTA professionals, our Program Directors who oversee each bank of courts, are trained and able to see where his or her players need work: tactically, technically or both. Any technical issues are addressed as needed, but we always go back to the tactical games. By putting JMTA students in tactical situations over and over again, they learn point construction and then they expand their games to include additional ways to build and win points, giving them options to handle match situations.

It is a myth that the only way a junior player can get better is by ALWAYS playing with better players. Our experience tells us that if a player is constantly “playing up” in level, he or she gets very good at one thing: Losing! We make sure our students play “up” some of the time, to challenge them to raise their level. Some of the time they play at their level, to see how they compete on an even field. And some of the time they play “down”, which allows them to work on elements in their games that they might not try if the competition was at a higher level; this also allows them to “win.”. Since many students and parents believe that if they/their child is at the bottom of the skill level in a given group, he or she will benefit from the high level of competition, we need to challenge that perception, and to make sure that JMTA students toward the bottom of any group also get to play with weaker players to accelerate the development of their tactical skills and to boost their confidence. Many times that means having such students drop down a level at certain times and for certain drills. **This is definitely not a demotion;** it is an important process that we believe crucial to our students’ success. We attempt to provide the same mix of levels to our students at the very top of our skill range, or at the top of a group, and those at the top of a group will sometimes move up and back down, accordingly.

Our coaches know where each student is developmentally, where he or she is going and how he or she is going to get there. Our JMTA Program Directors have been carefully chosen and trained and have a keen understanding of what it takes to become a top player. They are expert in the tactical, technical and emotional development at all levels. Our professional staff consists of former world-class players and world-class coaches. Many JMTA professionals have achieved accreditations from tennis federations across the globe. Our curriculums are carefully designed for every stage of development and we tailor and update to ensure that our students receive the best instructional experience.

In our JMTA Programs, our coaches do not bark corrections after every shot or point. Our coaches are trained **not** to give technical or tactical feedback after every shot of every drill. I think that bears repeating: Our coaches are trained **not** to give technical or tactical feedback after every shot of every drill. According to renowned Developmental Psychologist Jean Piaget, "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." In programs where the coaches are trained to give constant technical feedback, the overwhelming majority of the time, the feedback is a correction (negative feedback). There have been many studies examining how children learn. While repetition is clearly a key component to reinforcing proper technique, barking at a child with corrections after every repetition is not recommended. Too much barking of corrections becomes annoying noise that students quickly tune out. Most successful coaches believe that feedback should be divided between negative and positive feedback, and most agree that there should be more positive than negative. At JMTA we believe the breakdown of feedback to our students should be: 10% negative feedback; 30% positive feedback; 60% NO FEEDBACK! We believe in letting our students have the benefits of discovery based learning. Therefore, a JMTA student might hit multiple shots or strokes in a game situation without a coach interrupting play to bark a correction. The basic question is: Do we want our students to be independent problem solvers or dependent on a coach's corrections to be able to play? Our goal is to give our students the tools that allow them to compete well, to respond to situations with multiple and adaptable tactics and choices, and to win matches.

I hope that this document helps to clarify JMTA's philosophy, our approach to player development and our beliefs about how junior players and their families can maximize the quality of their tennis experience and the overall enjoyment of our great sport.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact any of our JMTA Directors:

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