

VISION & MISSION STATEMENTS FOR PLAYERS—PART 3

ATHLETE

Nearly every company and organization has a vision and mission statement. In our programs at NVTC, we have harnessed the power of vision & mission statements to direct our player development. I have created a performance player vision statement and targeted mission statements to help all our coaches and players get on the same page about where we are going and how we intend to get there.

This vision statement is my version of some original work by top international coach Louis Cayer:

"A Performer who is an Athlete that Plays Smart with Functional Shots."

In this article, we will explore the **'Athlete'** component.

Most of our work at NVTC is with U12 junior players, so everything in this article will be done from that perspective.

If you work with older athletes, you may choose to make your 'Athlete' Mission more suitable for their age and stage of development.



Our Mission Statement for developing U12 athletes is:



'ATHLETE' DEVELOPMENT MISSION

The PLAYGROUND:

"Develop Fundamental Movement Skills (FMS) and coordination & perceptual motor skills in a gamified and competitive environment."

Our definition of an 'athlete' is: ***'Possessing the physical abilities to play effectively and efficiently.'***

One doesn't have to watch much tennis on TV to see that tennis is athletically demanding. Today's tennis players have taken it to a new level. At the highest levels, every shot is an athletic adaptation to balls coming wider, harder, and sometimes, with more spin than ever before.

Athletic development is important to play successfully at higher levels. There is a lot of information and resources out there about developing physical capacities, which include:

- Strength
- Speed
- Endurance
- Flexibility
- Agility
- Coordination

This article will explore developing the initial physical foundation required for long-term tennis success. However, before jumping into the details, there is one developmental principle that over-arches everything else:

KEY PRINCIPLE: Develop an athlete first

It is better to build an athlete first and a tennis player second for long-term performance player development. For example, keeping kids in other sports as long as possible is advantageous. Specializing in tennis early doesn't mean they will be better players later on. Players who specialize early risk not having the athletic skills to win at higher levels when athletic adaptation is required. Also, a developed athlete is far more resistant to injuries and can recover faster if they do occur.

Players who specialize too early (before U14) typically win in the younger age divisions because they have hit more balls than their opponents. In older divisions, where everyone has hit thousands of balls, and the challenge of the shots requires more athleticism, they get left behind. Trading some hitting time for athletic development with younger players in every performance training session is never a waste of time.

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Let's jump into looking at the components of the mission statement:

'GAMIFIED' & COMPETITIVE ENVIRONMENT

Physical training can be hard work. Young players may lack the appropriate motivation to see the benefits and dislike the experience. The solution is to saturate the environment with activities constructed as much for an enjoyable experience as physical training.

This principle is so essential our athlete development Mission is labelled '**The Playground.**' At NVTC, we make physical training a daily 'carnival.' This is done through constructing various **obstacle courses**. These include team competition which helps young players learn to compete with pressure and stress appropriate for their age. I will outline the setup for such courses at the end of this article.

“Saturate the environment with activities constructed as much for their enjoyable experience as physical training.”

-Wayne Elderton-Coaching Educator

FUNDAMENTAL MOVEMENT SKILLS

Just like literacy (ability to read and write) is the foundation for academic learning, physical literacy is the foundation for athletics. Physical literacy for sport requires developing **Fundamental Movement Skills** (FMS). These include:

- **Locomotion Skills:** Jumping, hopping, running, bounding, as well as tennis-specific shuffling, crossovers, and back-peddalling.
- **Manipulation Skills:** Throwing, catching and tennis-specific reception & projection racquet skills.
- **Balance & Stability:** Maintaining and re-gaining static as well as dynamic balance.

COORDINATION

Of all the physical capacities, coordination is identified by motor learning experts as the primary one that determines success in tennis (The German Tennis Federation has a good body of work on this). Not to say that a player's size, strength, etc. are not considerations, just that coordination should be a priority for tennis athletic development. All too often, the majority of physical training for tennis is about making the strongest and fastest players (who are not automatically the most successful in tennis). Neglecting coordination is missing the main point.

“Coordination has been identified by Motor Learning experts as the the primary capacity that determines success in tennis.”

One of the reasons coordination is underdeveloped in physical training programs is coaches don't have the understanding and tools to develop coordination. Coordination is not just one singular element but a bigger capacity with seven key components. To develop it well, all the components need to be considered and incorporated:

- **Reaction:** Speed of response to the perception of a situation
- **Dissociation:** Separation of body parts to function independently but work toward a common goal
- **Balance:** Maintain appropriate line of gravity
- **Rhythm:** Executing motor actions faster or slower
- **Differentiation:** Perceive differences and adapt motor action
- **Orientation:** Aligning the body and movement according to space and time (location on court, ball, opponent, partner)
- **Dexterity:** Using hands with precision, finesse and speed

However, it is not only about training these coordination elements generally but training them for **tennis**. The first half of this Tennis Canada U10 Development video is a great resource. It also includes several sample exercises:

<http://www.tpacanada.com/U10-Development-Tools>

PERCEPTUAL MOTOR SKILLS

In motor learning, tennis is classified as an 'Open skill' using 'Perceptual Motor Skills.' ([For an article on Open Skills, click here](#)) Game sports like tennis use skills that must adapt to the situation. This is in contrast to sports like gymnastics or diving, which use 'Closed' skills. ***The critical goal of coordination development for tennis is to make a player who is technically highly adaptable.***

Top Belgium coach and athletic development expert Kenneth Bastiaens calls it '*Adaptive power.*' Adaptive power is created by placing players in a constant state of challenge. Once they can do a particular coordination exercise adequately, rather than continuing to master that exercise, the coach/trainer must throw in variation and additional challenges. They can even attach 'reading' cues to initiate actions.

The critical goal of tennis coordination development is a player who's technically highly adaptable, can problem-solve, has good decision-making, and can read situations quickly and accurately. All to successfully adapt to whatever the situation throws at them.

“The critical goal of coordination development for tennis is to make a player who is technically highly adaptable.”

For example, since the most important 4-5 milliseconds in tennis is the moment the ball contacts the racquet, timing is critical, and coordination is the key requirement for good timing. The coordination-rich element of timing should be a priority over other fundamentals (e.g. swing shape).

After years of development observation/experience, I have concluded that a masterful player **will always sacrifice their swing for their timing**. That is how pro players play. A less effective player **will sacrifice their timing for the sake of their swing 'Form.'** This is what you see many juniors do (and especially club adults). They are all about trying to perform the swings taught by their coaches (with the resulting poor impacts). To me, this is a developmental disconnect.

Effective & Efficient:

Two additional benefits of this kind of training are it leads to technique that is 'effective' (Being able to make the ball do what you want) and 'efficient' (No wasting of energy, the ability to cover the court smoothly and to create, 'power without effort'). Effective and efficient players are not 'victims of the ball.' They play the ball and make it their slave instead of allowing the ball to play them. They can hit just as hard in the final set tie-breaker as in the first game of the match. Playing efficiently also means less stress on the body, translating to less potential for injury.

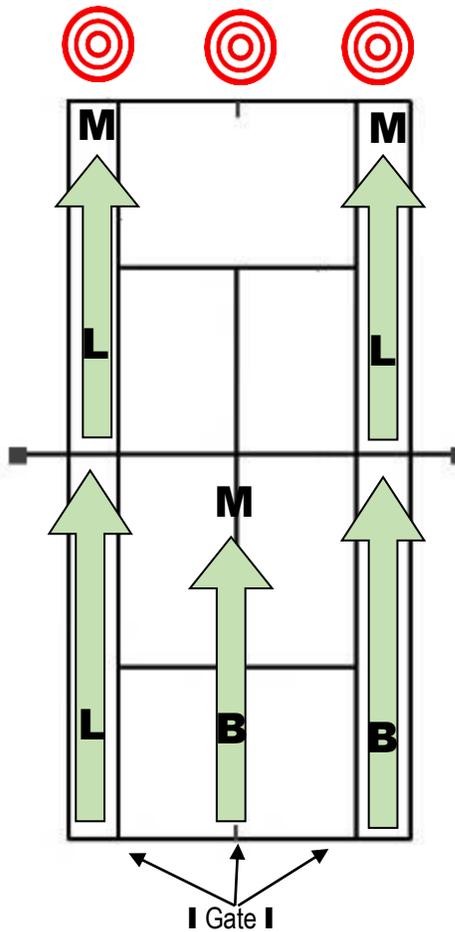
CONCLUSION

Keeping with the principle, '*Build an athlete first, a player second,*' we must keep in mind that we are not just building *any* athlete but a *tennis* athlete. To lay the groundwork for a long-term foundation for U12 players, we must prioritize the #1 capacity for tennis, which is coordination. Coordination will allow them to handle the demands of the open skill/perceptual-motor skill of tennis. They will gain a solid base for highly adaptable technique that is efficient & effective, allowing them not to waste energy and minimize injury.

NVTC OBSTACLE COURSES:

We have found that placing coordination activities in various Obstacle Courses enhances a fun environment with lots of variety. There are dozens and dozens of potential activities to use. However, since listing them all is beyond the scope of this article, we will only outline the structure of the courses. The only limit is the coach's creativity. They do take time to set-up but, once the players get used to the course, the set-up and running become much quicker.

Obstacle Course Structure:



Lanes & Legs:

Every court includes three 'lanes' running the length of the court. The two outside lanes include two 'legs' (an activity from baseline to net, and continuing from the other side of the net to the baseline).

- To allow for some autonomy, players start at a 'gate' and choose which lane to enter. Make a rule to never do the same lane twice in a row and to complete all three lanes.
- For safety, the centre lane only has one leg running from the baseline to the net (Players don't go to the other side of the net from the centre). Players return to the gate after each activity on the outside of the court (Except for the centre lane players).
- Each leg targets a specific Fundamental Movement Skill. Activities can include FMS combinations however, a leg should prioritize one FMS category. A coach can also choose to target any of the coordination elements as they see fit:
 1. **(B) Balance & Stability Activities** (E.g. Hopping on one foot while balancing a ball on the strings, etc.)
 2. **(L) Locomotion Activities** (E.g. Side shuffling, crossovers or ladder work, etc.)
 3. **(M) Manipulation Activities** (E.g. Serving or throwing a ball to a target. Dropping or hitting a ball to a target, etc.) 
- We recommend maximum 6-10 players per one court course.
- Time: A course should last 10-15 minutes maximum. Ideally, change the lane & leg activities up every 4-5 weeks.

Gamification:

Split the players into two teams (one team per court if you are using more than one court). At the end of each lane, have a Manipulation Skill (Throwing, serving, drop-hit, etc.) to a target. Achieving the target gets a point for the team or an attempt at a game. Three examples of games are listed below:

- **'Tic/Tac/Toe'**: Make a Tic/Tac/Toe board with drop-down lines. Each time players achieve a target, they get to place a cone on the board. Teams that win the game receive a point.
- **'Tug o' War'**: Make a ladder on the ground with five rungs. Place a cone on the centre rung. If a player achieves a task, they move a cone one rung along the ladder towards their team's side. If a player from another team achieves a task, they move the cone towards their team's side. The team that gets their cone to their team's side of the ladder wins.
- **'Finder'**: Place 10-15 dots on the ground. Place a small paper star under one of the dots. If a player achieves a task, they get one chance to uncover the star. Uncovering the star gets their team a point.

In Part 4, we will look at the **"Plays Smart"** characteristic.