



## Teaching Tennis to Individuals With a Learning Disability

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### Introduction

The practice of tennis has grown considerably in the last few years, and as a consequence, tennis is being played by a greater diversity of people. Among them, people with a learning disability practice tennis and/or compete with little or no adaptation in the rules.

Usually, when we talk about tennis for this specific population we refer to wheelchair tennis (for people with physical disability), as it is better known and receives more media attention because it is a Paralympic sport. However, we should also consider that tennis is played by people with mental, visual and hearing disabilities, all of which we are focused on in our work.

People with hearing disabilities have played regularly without the need of alteration in the rules, since the only necessity would be the referee indicating the score or possible code violations through some sort of visual aid. Wheelchair tennis also uses the official rules and the only difference is that the ball is allowed to bounce two times on the court surface.

People with mental disabilities participate either in regular competitions (against opponents without a disability, following ITF rules) or in competitions offered by the International Special Olympics programme, where there are regular modalities (singles, doubles or unified doubles) and individual skills, for those who cannot participate in regular matches. Tennis for people with a visual impairment, called "short tennis", is not as common and the only reference we have to it is about its practice and research in Japan.

Further to the groups described above, people with mental disabilities have played tennis and have shown improvements in their daily lives and in the psychiatric treatment, resulting even in a decrease in medication. This experience in adapting tennis teaching-learning practice and in adjusting tennis to such different people motivated us to share this study in order to make tennis even more accessible and inclusive.

### Methods

This is a qualitative research study based on theoretical reference, with the application of practical activities on public courts in the city Jundiaí, state of Sao Paulo, Brazil, with a group of 34 students with a mental disability, 2 with a mental illness, 2 with a physical disability, 1 with a hearing disability, and 3 with a visual disability, between 7 and 48 years of age. Classes were 45 minutes long, twice a week and grouped based on the type of disability and level of motor skill. Many of them also participated in local, regional, state and national competitions.

### Results and Discussion

As we had predicted, some adaptations were necessary, either due to communication problems or to physical limitations. In the case of wheelchair players, what was more difficult, especially on clay courts, was the movement of the wheelchairs by those players who are more physically disabled, since the wheelchair used was not developed specifically for playing tennis, and was not individualised.

People with a mental disability sometimes needed equipment adaptation, further to a greater variety of activities and a great number of repetitions, since most of them presented attention deficit, due to cognitive compromise. Some of them, who do not participate in regular competitions as described above, can participate in the individual skills category, that is scored in a specific manner but include tennis fundamental skills (serve, forehand, backhand, and volley) and prepare them for playing at the next level.



In this case, they all have the perspective of participating in a competition. A regular match (singles, doubles and unified doubles) consists of only one set, based on ITF's rules but using the no advantage system.

Short tennis was played on a mini tennis court, with a foam ball that is bigger than the usual tennis ball, which has rattles inside. The ball may bounce two times before being hit. The most difficult part is the hitting movement, due to the height of the ball, the direction of the racket and that the distance of the bouncing ball were not easy to assimilate.

Furthermore, we used clay courts where the noise of the bouncing ball was not as perceptible. Another limitation was that the environment was not as quiet as desirable. Even so, through differentiated strategies we obtained good levels of learning and practice of tennis.

## Conclusion

We may conclude that this work, besides being relevant for all of those who play tennis, and especially those with a physical, mental or sensorial disability, is useful in expanding awareness and practice possibilities, since the events have extensive media coverage and more and more people get to know the game of tennis. In addition, one of our students is the only tennis player with a mental disability in Brazil to participate in 'normal' competitions organised by the state federation, and he was even promoted to a higher class last year. That fact was of great importance for him, for his family and for us, because in the game of tennis he shows ability and not disability.

Also as a result of works like this, equipment is becoming less expensive and more accessible in Brazil. There are now more public courts being built and new tennis idols are emerging, all of which has led to an increase in the number of players.

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