Hybridized Tennis Games for Utilization-Level and Higher Learners

by David Kahan

Over the past 10 years a number of articles pertaining to teaching tennis to elementary and middle school students have appeared (see Resources at the end of this article). These articles have focused on topics such as tactical play, basic skill instruction and drill, teaching progressions, organizational methods, and fitness development. While they provide a solid foundation for planning, instructing, and assessing a developmentally appropriate tennis curriculum, articles that present innovative tennis games and activities appear to be missing.

According to Graham, Holt/Hale, and Parker (2004), racket skills at the utilization level “enable children to strike with an implement in dynamic environments that involve partners and striking from different positions in relation to the body” (p. 560). Students at this level may still not be capable of playing tennis games that require rallying. As such, alternative games, focusing on skill application and refinement, should reinforce basic groundstroke and service skills that are the foundation of more advanced game play.

A recent article in TEPE (Lichtman & Avans, 2005) introduced readers to the concept of games hybridization, in which elements from two or more familiar games are blended to create an innovative new game. Based on this premise, five tennis targeting games are presented in this article. They are hybrids of tennis and other sports/activities. A common feature of each game is that play is discontinuous (i.e., rallying is not required); variations in court dimensions, scoring, and how the ball is introduced into play are all at the instructor’s discretion.

Tennis Golf

The premise of this game is to accurately utilize a variety of shots to different areas on a single court. If the “golfer” is skilled enough, play for each hole is initiated from the baseline or deep backcourt, and the golfer continues shooting until he or she holes out. As in golf, a low score is desirable. A sample scorecard is provided (Figure 1). It depicts the numbered hole, par score, and the type, location, and initiation of the stroke (teeing off). In other words, each hole is created by combining a skill (e.g., forehand, backhand, volley, lob), court area to target, and tee option. Options for teeing off for any hole vary in degree of complexity and can be used to establish a par score: golfer begins with ball in hand, golfer is tossed a ball from a partner, golfer returns a ball struck by a partner from the other side of the net. Higher par scores correspond to more difficult skill combinations. In Tennis Golf, the student completes a hole with a successful attempt, unlike regular tennis where a point ends on an error or miss.

Under The Line

The premise of this game is to hit ground strokes deep in the opposite court, but under control so the ball does not cross the baseline and go out. The game is patterned off various carnival games and bocce, which require a player to get an object nearest to a target line without going over. Hitting deep ground strokes helps a player pin an opponent back. This makes it difficult for the opponent to get in position to volley. It also allows the player time to reposition for the next volley.

Higher skilled players might be challenged to stand on the baseline/backcourt and initiate volleys from a self- or partner toss. Players alternate hitting a ground-
stroke, attempting to make it land closest to the baseline without going over. If a ball goes into the net, provide additional turns until the player has established a mark on the court or hit over the baseline. After each player has established a mark, visually determine whose ball was closer to the baseline. The player who hit closest to the line is awarded a point. The game ends when one player has reached 10 points. If a visual determination cannot be made, call a draw and continue playing with no point scored in the round.

**Tennis H.O.R.S.E.**

The premise of this game is to accurately utilize a variety of strokes to various areas of the court. The game is analogous to the basketball version of H.O.R.S.E., in which players attempt to match shots made by an opponent. If a match shot is missed, the shooter acquires a letter toward spelling H.O.R.S.E. If the match shot is made, the game continues with neither player acquiring a letter.

In the tennis variation, before shooting, a player calls the type of shot to be attempted (e.g., forehand, backhand) and the area of the court in which the ball will land. For example, a player calls “Backhand, backcourt,” then proceeds to hit. If the player makes the shot, his or her opponent must match the type and outcome of the shot to avoid acquiring a letter. The name of the game can be changed to match tennis terminology, maintaining (e.g., S.M.A.S.H.), abbreviating (e.g., L.O.B.), or lengthening (e.g., V.O.L.L.E.Y) the game’s duration.

**Around the World**

The premise of this game is to make shots to various areas of the court while moving from one spot to another on the service court until a player has completed a trip “around the world.” The game is analogous to a basketball game known by the same name.

Mark the tennis court with numbered spots. This designates a sequence of locations from which to hit. Write combinations [a specific skill/stroke and landing area] on index cards and affix them to the spots. Play begins on the first spot (see sample progression below). Each time the designated shot is made, a player continues to the next spot, continuing to shoot from different areas of the court, progressing “around the world.”

In one basketball version of Around the World, players who miss a shot must return to the first spot and start over. To be fair, the consequences for missing shots should be modified to the students’ level of skill and motivation. For example, the missed shot contingency might only apply if the previous shot during a player’s turn was made. Or, a player may elect to pause in the sequence and wait at a particular spot until the following turn so as not to risk missing and having to go back one or more spots.

**Sample Sequence Around the World**

The following sequence offers one example for setting up an Around the World course. For Conditions 3-6, players strike the ball after a self-toss.

1. Start from right baseline and overhead serve into
   - Right service court
   - Left service court
2. Move to left baseline and overhead serve into
   - Left service court
   - Right service court
3. Move to intersection of left service line and singles sideline and hit forehand into
   - Left doubles alley
   - Right doubles alley
4. Stay at intersection of left service line and singles sideline and hit backhand into
   - Left doubles alley
   - Right doubles alley
5. Move to intersection of right service line and singles sideline and hit forehand into
   - Right doubles alley

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![Figure 1](image-url)  
**FIGURE 1** Sample Tennis Golf scorecard.
• Left doubles alley
6. Stay at intersection of left service line and singles sideline and hit backhand into
• Right doubles alley
• Left doubles alley
7. Move back to right baseline. You’ve now made it around the world.

Tennis Baseball

Originally called Doubles Tennis Baseball (Wright, 2002), the premise of this variation is to hit shots with pace away from your opponent. This is similar to the major offensive goal/strategy in baseball: score runs by hitting the ball hard and in locations not occupied by fielders. The game is organized by having two teams of between two and three players on opposite sides of the net. The offensive team has a batter positioned at the center mark on the baseline and a teammate catching ~10 feet behind. The defensive team has a pitcher in the forecourt on the opposite side of the net who pitches the ball at a pre-agreed upon speed. Teammate[s] cover the backcourt area. The batter uses a groundstroke to hit the pitch into play over the net and away from the defense. If the ball stays in bounds and is not caught by the defense, a run is recorded for the offense. Differential scoring may also be employed (e.g., credit two runs a ball landing in the doubles alley). Caught balls or balls hit out of bounds result in outs. Balls struck into the net or swing-and-misses are considered strikes. Three strikes count as an out.

Offensive and defensive players may rotate roles (e.g., batter for catcher, pitcher for backcourt fielder) after each out, or, as in the game of cricket, a batter may remain at bat and continually score runs until retired. After three outs are recorded, a half-inning has been completed and the teams switch roles. Games may be played for a set amount of time or innings.

In conclusion, tennis is a valuable lifetime physical activity that develops motor- and health-related fitness. Because it requires using a long-handled implement to project objects into a finite space, it is one of the more difficult games for students to master. While acknowledging the necessity of practice and modified game play, hybridization of tennis with familiar games provides an alternative means of reinforcing skill development and application in fun and novel ways.

References


Resources for Teaching Tennis in Elementary and Middle School Physical Education