

Throw Tennis: Teaching tactics through game play

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As early as grade 3 or 4, students can begin to play throw tennis. Up to this point students have experienced throwing and catching with various equipment and have used hands as paddles, and likely lollipop paddles too. Essentially there has been some skill development work. Students can now learn the basics of all net/wall games through the integration of both tactical knowledge and skill development into very basic game play. *Basic* is a key word here, beginning with cooperative play and over time moving into more competitive play when students are ready. Pacing and flow of lessons depends on students. Don't feel the need to push through each lesson each day or to move to competitive play too soon (and forget scoring!); adjust to your kids and repeat when necessary.

What's the benefit of teaching tactically? Students learn tactics (strategy is the overall, um, well, strategy) of the game – those moment to moment decisions during game play that make the game more fun, increase their understanding of the game and ultimately improve play. And you really can do this and teach for skill development at the same time! What's more, students can transfer learning from throw tennis into wall ball, pickleball, badminton, tennis, racquetball and volley ball because the tactics of the game are so similar even if some of the skills are not! What's the fundamental tactic of net/wall games? Hit it where they ain't!

Modifications: smaller court space outlined by cones, jump ropes for nets, and volleyballs or playground balls. Rules are few – all throws must be underhand; throw from where you catch (no moving with the ball); the ball must clear the 'net' and bounce only once on the other side; play begins with underhand rainbow toss to partner. When students are ready (and maybe it's only a few), put up a very low net and adjust accordingly. Court size can also be modified (long and narrow; short and wide) to extend the game and accentuate particular tactics.

Lesson	Tactical Problem	Lesson Focus	Objective
1	Maintaining a rally	Court space, rules & etiquette, cooperative play	Students learn to recognize court space, play cooperatively within basic rules of the game.
2	Maintaining a rally	Court space, rules & etiquette, cooperative play	Students play cooperative game while keeping ball in defined court space. Students learn the basic skills of throwing forehand and backhand, with deliberate skill practice.
3	Maintaining a rally & setting up the attack	Game rules & use of court space in the attack	Students play an increasingly more competitive game, within rules. Students move their opponent along the baseline at the back of the court. Students learn how to create open space and use that open space in the attack.
4/5	Using space in the attack	Using a drop shot	Students learn to use the space in the front of the court in order to win the point. <i>Lesson 4 & 5 can be switched in order if so desired.</i>
5/4	Defending space	Recovering to base / home position	Students will learn to move back to home position between throws.
6	Using space in the attack	Using a lob shot	Students learn to use the space in the back of the court in order to win the point.
7	Using space in the attack	Using a lob shot	Students learn to use the space in the back of the court in order to win the point.

Tactical Games Format

- Game 1*: sets the tactical (and likely skill too) problem to be solved for the lesson
- Question series by teacher (but questions can and should be used throughout)*: helps students think through and begin to solve those problems (without the teacher telling the answer); also connects the problem to the following practice task or continued game play
- Practice task (or continuation of game play)*: the skill/drill portion of the lesson where students may have multiple repetitions of a particular skill element essential to their success; the tactical element may or may not be immediately present in the task

4. *Game 2*: is an application stage, where students get to try to apply their understanding of the tactical element in combination with their newly acquired (albeit rough possibly) skill

Sample lesson: Follow this structure for all lessons. It is okay to expand on students' answers, and don't forget to use closing questions to get students ready for the following lesson.

Lesson 2

Tactical problem: Maintaining a rally

Game: singles

Lesson focus: Court space, rules & etiquette, cooperative play

Objective: Students play cooperative game while keeping ball in defined court space

1. Game 1: Throw & catch over the 'net'

Conditions: All throws underhand and upward, throw from where you catch, throw over the net, ball must bounce only once on the other side, game play begins with underhand rainbow toss to partner

Goal: Rallies of 10 throws keeping ball in court

Questions:

Q. *What makes it easier to keep the ball in court when you throw?*

A. Using one or two hands (this all depends on what ball they choose)

Q. *What should your throw look like? (maybe present options)*

A. Wind up, step as you throw, eyes on target....(use what students give you to illustrate just a couple of critical elements)

Q. *What makes it easier to catch the ball? Where should you be?*

A. Watch the ball into your hands, wait for the ball to begin to drop down so you have more time to get to it, move your feet to the ball.... (again, a great time to get into a few critical elements; feel free to repeat this segment)

2. Practice task: Partner throw and catch over the net

Goal: Rallies of 10 throws while keeping ball in court

Critical elements & cues:

Throwing: wind up, step with opposite foot, follow through

Catching: watch the ball into hands, move feet to ball, let ball drop after bounce

3. Game 2: Same as game 1

4. Closure: Discuss width of court (in line with cones) and depth of court

Q. *Where would you throw the ball if you wanted to make it harder for your partner to get it before it bounced twice?*

A. Away from your partner into space

All lessons follow a similar format (game, questions, practice task, game). Devise questions to illustrate the tactical and skill problem, allowing students to answer questions by thinking critically about what happened in game one and how to solve that problem. Once students have started to figure out the problem, teachers can then provide a bit of additional information (remember, too much teacher talk reduces MVPA, motivation and listening skills) prior to moving into the practice task or another game.

Please reference the following books for more information on teaching tactics through game play:

Mitchell, S., Oslin, J., & Griffin, L. (2006). *Teaching sport concepts and skills*. (2nd ed). Human Kinetics
The third edition, which includes elementary lessons, should be out by summer 2013.

Mitchell, S., Oslin, J., & Griffin, L. (2002). *Sport foundations for elementary physical education: A tactical games approach*. Human Kinetics

Throw tennis comes from the elementary book, and transitions into other net/wall lessons.

Lauder, A. (2001). *Play practice: The games approach to teaching and coaching sports*. Human Kinetics.