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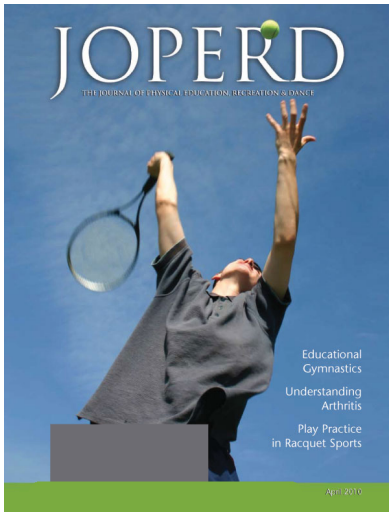


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# Teaching and Assessing Racquet Games Using "Play Practice"

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# Teaching and Assessing Racquet Games Using "Play Practice"

## Part 1: Designing the Right Games

*STEPHEN HARVEY* *HANS VAN DER MARS*

*Using modified game play as a form of practice can enhance the acquisition of both technical and tactical skills.*

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This is the first of two articles that will highlight design and assessment aspects of racquet game play. This article's content is based on the principles and strategies that are central to games-based approaches to instruction, specifically the use of "play practice" (Launder, 2001). The authors provide a brief introduction to the goals and key strategies of games-based instruction and highlight the care that teachers must take in designing game forms when teaching racquet games such as tennis, pickleball, or badminton. The latter will be accomplished by offering several examples of play practices in which racquet games are designed so that students get to practice specific tactical aspects of racquet game play. Play practice is one of several games-based approaches to teaching sport games. In addition to developing some technical competencies, such approaches emphasize students' understanding of game play by focusing on tactical dimensions of game performance.

The second article, next issue, will highlight the need for ongoing assessment as a central teaching function in the context of teaching racquet games. Assessment (both formal and informal) helps teachers to gain knowledge about students' incoming performance levels, as well as their relative progress throughout a unit of instruction.

### The Emergence of Games-based Instruction

Since the introduction in the early 1980s of the teaching games for understanding (TGFU) approach by Bunker and Thorpe (1982) in Great Britain, several variations have emerged, such as the tactical games model (TGM; Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2006), the tactical decision learning model (TDLM; Gréhaigne, Wallian, & Godbout, 2005), game sense (den Duyn, 1997), and play practice (Launder, 2001). This article highlights key features of play practice and how they can be applied to teaching racquet games (i.e., tennis, pickleball, and badminton) in school physical education contexts.

Games-based approaches to sport/games instruction have been used in several parts of the world (e.g., Europe and Australia) for well over three decades. Only in recent years has its popularity increased significantly in North America, as evidenced by the increasing number of professional publications—including textbooks and journal articles—and of practical application sessions at conferences. Proponents of TGFU are now strong enough in numbers to hold international conferences. In

2008, the fourth International TGFU Conference was held in Vancouver, Canada. In addition, there now is a small but growing research base that offers at least partial support for the use of games-based teaching approaches. It includes research from sport pedagogy, motor learning, and sport psychology perspectives (e.g., Chow et al., 2007; Gréhaigne, Richard, & Griffin, 2005; Griffin & Butler, 2005; Harvey, Cushion, Wegis, & Messa-Gonzalez, 2010; Mandigo & Holt, 2004; MacPhail, Kirk, & Griffin, 2008; Mitchell, et al., 2006; Passos, Araujo, Davids, & Shuttleworth, 2008). What is more, Dyson, Griffin, and Hastie (2004) argued that games-based teaching may offer the potential for meaningful, purposeful, and authentic learning activities to be presented to, and practiced by, physical education students. The fundamental goals of games-based instruction are to have students become better at game play and to foster their understanding of and appreciation for game play.

By emphasizing the tactical dimensions of game play through the use of modified game-play conditions, games-based instructional approaches such as play practice expand the type and amount of content being covered beyond the practice of technique via repetitious drills. In games-based instruction, teachers design games or "game forms" that offer students opportunities to solve tactical problems (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Launder, 2001). Thus, games-based approaches to teaching recognize the importance of simultaneously developing students' decision-making and technical execution skills relative to the "what," "how," and "when" of game play. Even more importantly, in order for students to develop knowledge of "why" these skills are needed in the context of a game, the game can be modified in such a way that it exaggerates certain tactical components and the associated on- and off-the-ball skills (Mitchell et al., 2006) while still being representative of the parent game (Holt, Strean, & Bengoechea, 2002). Moreover, since every move in game play has certain consequences, getting students to see the results of their decisions may help them make better game-play decisions in future play (Gréhaigne et al., 2005). These choices may include what shot to hit, how to hit it, where to aim, where to move on the court after the shot, and so on.

Hopper (2003) described this as a four-stage "game-performance movements" process consisting of (1) read, (2) respond, (3) react, and (4) recover. In the context of racquet games, this means that students practice navigating the tactical demands of racquet game play in addition to practicing techniques such as forehands, volleys, serves, and backhands. Indeed, tactics are linked to techniques and vice versa. For example, from an offensive point of view, students practice deciding what they need to do in order to score a point (i.e., hit a winner) and executing shots to move their opponent(s) out of position by varying the shot selection and placement. From a defensive perspective, students get to practice the moves necessary to prevent the opponent(s) from scoring, including using proper footwork between each stroke to get to a base position in order to maintain good court coverage.

## Play Practice

Play practice, first conceptualized by Alan Launder (2001), is similar to TGFU in that one of the original ideas was to give beginning players the opportunity to enjoy sport and games by playing appropriately modified versions of the game, while helping them develop sufficient levels of skillfulness to continue playing the game or sport in the future. As Werner, Thorpe, and Bunker (1996) noted about TGFU, "The primary purpose of teaching any game should be to improve students' game performances and to improve their enjoyment and participation in games, which might lead to a healthier lifestyle" (p. 30).

Thus, play practice, like TGFU, aims to bring the joy back to playing games and sports and to improve instruction in both school physical education and sport programs. However, in contrast to TGFU, play practice is based on the concept of pickup games and games that children and adults "make up" when they have limited space and equipment, few players, and no officials.

One of the major concepts that Launder (2001) derived from analyzing pickup games is that failure has to be legitimized if a learning situation is to be useful. Pickup games give the players opportunities to experiment and try out new techniques and moves. Due to the modified play conditions of pickup games, players try using different strategies and tactics and, given the absence of authority figures such as coaches or teachers, there is no threat of criticism. Thus, the concept of "play" and of playing games within modified conditions is central to Launder's conception of play practice. In essence, similar to the original intentions of Thorpe and Bunker (2008), the game becomes the teacher.

However, in physical education class, teachers have the professional responsibility to help students become better game players. Consequently, teachers must "teach through and in the game" (Launder, 2001, p. 55). It is not enough to explain or demonstrate key techniques of a sport, present some drills for practice, and then let students play the parent game (i.e., full-court singles play). Teachers' real instruction should occur during students' game play. As rightfully noted by Launder (2001), the context of physical education programs (i.e., limited class time and large class sizes) simply does not allow for the extended practice of techniques in drills.

Play practice involves three fundamental processes proposed by Launder (2001): (1) shaping play, (2) focusing play, and (3) enhancing play. These three processes are analogous to Bunker and Thorpe's (1982) notions of "representation" and "exaggeration." Explanations and various examples of how teachers can shape, focus, and enhance play in racquet games are discussed next.

## Shaping Play in Racquet Games

Table 1 includes examples of shaping play in racquet games to make game play either easier or more challenging. Shaping play highlights specific tactical problems and the associated moves. As shown in table 1, teachers can employ countless combinations of variables that can be modified. For example,

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teachers can modify the physical layout or size of the court, the equipment used (i.e., implements and balls), how points are scored, or what strokes (i.e., volleys, down-the-line strokes, etc.) are allowed.

*Cooperative Play.* In racquet games, learning to control and direct the object is critical to students' success. Rink, French, and Graham (1996) argued that beginners likely need more time practicing the techniques in cooperative play contexts (i.e., a student playing with another student to keep rallies going). Such practice conditions will help them move toward making decent contact and being able to direct the ball with more consistency. Rushing students into games where they play against one another will prevent them from getting a good game going.

Teachers can shape numerous play-practice games that call for students to keep a rally going. Such games should be played on decidedly smaller courts with modified nets or other types of barriers (e.g., a line on the floor, a jump rope strung between two 18-inch cones, or a lined area on the floor). Balls hit out-of-bounds or in the net would require the start of a new rally. Such rules are simple enough for children as early as fourth grade. Cooperative rally games can focus on any combination of specific strokes (e.g., alternating forehand and backhand, backhand only, volley only, or

## Table 1. Examples of Shaping Play in Racquet Games

### Playing Rules

1. Cooperative-rallying games using just the forehand, just the backhand, or just volleys, or any combination thereof.
2. Two-bounce games (for tennis or table tennis).
3. Use of cooperative serve or a hand-feed serve.
4. Hit past the service box at all times.
5. Serve-volley game.
6. Cross-court vs. down-the-line games.
7. Rally cross-court and a hit down-the-line starts the game.
8. Play/catch games or throw/catch games using beach balls, balloons, quoits (small rubber rings), bean bags, etc.
9. Use of a minimum number of cooperative shots before players can begin to rally for points.
10. Use "target games" (and variations thereof).*

### Scoring Rules

1. Hitting a specific target area on the court (e.g., back third of the opponent's side of the court) or playing a type of shot (e.g., a volley for a winner) results in a 2-point score.
2. Double points gained during certain times in class (i.e., near the end of class).

### Physical Court Layout

1. Use badminton courts (for tennis and pickleball).
2. Alter nature, height, and position of the net. For example, 1 vs. 1 games may be played over a line or moat (moat width/length can be varied as well) marked by cones; the height of the net can be lowered/raised to give more/less time to the participants; the position of the net in relation to each participant may be changed to reflect the ability level of each of the participants or to develop understanding of game concepts, such as length and width, use of angles, etc.
3. Mini-games or short tennis (i.e., short/wide or long/narrow). Examples might be service-box singles games for tennis, or half-court singles in badminton, without using the back tram lines.

### Equipment

1. Bigger ball or foam balls (can also use balloons, rings, bean bags when first introducing racquet game concepts)
2. Modify racquet head size or allow choking grip on the racquet throat.

**Note:** More than one shaping technique may be used to "get a good game going." For example, modified equipment may be used when the playing area is also restricted. However, teachers must be aware that manipulating too many variables at once may confuse students (i.e., make the game too complex). Teachers need to be pragmatic in how they adapt the game to the needs of their students in their own teaching contexts.

** Target-type games may also be considered a form of "enhancing play" based on Launder's (2001) definitions and conceptions of focusing and enhancing play. Target game examples have been included in this shaping play section, but the utility to teachers remains the same (i.e., the game is modified and helps teachers emphasize certain tactical components associated with the racquet game being played).*

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free choice of strokes). Such play-practice games maintain the competitive aspect in that playing partners are competing with themselves.

A more advanced version of a cooperative play-practice game would be a cross-court and down-the-line game where the object remains the same: to keep the rally going as long as possible (see table 1). In this game, one player would rally using just the former stroke and the other player would only use the latter stroke. This constraint would not only focus students' attention on these two types of strokes, but would also get them to practice the footwork associated with covering the court.

The cooperative games form the foundation for the subsequent step of directing students to focus on the more tactical aspects of game play. For years the United States Tennis Association school curriculum has included such games for beginners. They offer students frequent opportunities to practice, help them develop their visual tracking and hand-eye coordination, and allow teachers to focus on the rudimentary aspects of technical execution.

*Equipment Modifications*. Slowing down the speed of the game is critical for teaching the game to beginners, because it gives them more time to make adjustments in positioning, preparing to hit the object, and executing the shot. This can be accomplished by using a slower, soft foam ball (which may also be larger in size than a traditional ball). Most equipment companies now market a variety of balls that travel significantly slower, which gives players more time to strike it.

Other equipment modifications include increasing the racquet head size or shortening the handle length (Gagen, 2003). This may help students to experience more successful touches early in the learning process. Allowing two bounces per side is another way of creating more time for players to decide their next move, shot selection, and shot direction (table 1).

*Modifying Court Shape and Size*. Adjusting the court dimensions can help students to focus on game play aspects such as court coverage and "returning to base" after each stroke (i.e., returning to the middle area of the court; table 1). For example, a shorter but wider court accentuates the need for players not to linger near the side line, because it would leave extra space on the other half of their side of the court for the opponent to direct the subsequent shot. From the viewpoint of offense, this court shape directs players to consider how to make best use of the available space to set up the attack to score points. Conversely, a narrow but longer court naturally highlights the need for players to focus on when to employ short shots (volleys/drop shots) or long shots (lobs) and on where and when to attack the net relative to the opponent's position on the other side of the court.

Launder (2001) suggested using the short or mini-tennis version of the game, where beginners play on a badminton court with the net lowered to 80 to 90 centimeters (32-36 inches). Conversely, perhaps for more advanced levels, a higher net may be used to focus on other aspects of play,

Stephen Harvey

Reducing the game's technical demands by playing on a badminton court, and by using a low net and a "sponge" tennis ball, this student can focus on accurate shot placement.

such as the players' ability to apply "topspin" to the ball (Launder, 2001, p. 124; table 1).

A game can also be shaped to highlight the need for students to practice and improve at selecting certain shots and directing their shots to areas on the opponent's side of the court that increase the chances of scoring that move the opponent out of position to set up the next shot. This can be accomplished by employing scoring rules that reward players for directing shots closer to the opponent's baseline and sidelines. For example, when using badminton lines for a pickleball game, shots that are hit in the court's tram lines on the side could be worth additional points, or winners scored in the non-volley zone or back third of the court could result in bonus points (table 1).

A specific shaping play example is provided in figure 1, which shows a game card that uses some of the suggestions mentioned above and in table 1. Such game cards can be developed to enable students to set up the game themselves, with limited assistance from the teacher. Game cards provide the rules of the game, scoring procedures, and possible questions that the teacher may ask or that students may try to answer while playing. Game cards also provide information about the central tactical problem of the game (e.g., attacking or defending space in the court; Mitchell et al., 2006) and about how the game can be altered to suit the developmental needs of the students. This extra information can be placed on the back side of the card or, if the teacher prefers, such information can be left off altogether and the students can determine for themselves what tactical problems to highlight in that particular game.

It is critical to make variations to game conditions based on where the students are from a physical, cognitive, and emotional perspective. Recently, Thorpe and Bunker

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Figure 1. Game Card

**Team Practice Card**

**Practice Game: Target Pickleball**

**What tactical problem is the focus?**

*Offensive*—Creating space (i.e., move opponent out of position) to set up an attack shot?

*Defensive*—Defend space, to prevent opponent's scoring?

**What tactical moves are emphasized?**

*Offensive*—Decision making (i.e., when to use the assigned stroke, ball placement, remembering to return to base)

*Defensive*—Decision making (i.e., where to move, covering the entire court). Maintain/return to base position?

*Both*—Seeing your opponents' moves, anticipate their possible next action.

**Possible questions to ask:**

- What might you do to increase your chances of hitting a target?
- When would it be better to try to score deep? What shot might be effective then?
- How does the fact that there is no net affect the types of shot that you can play?
- How can you decrease your opponent's changes of hitting a winning shot?
- What tactic might you apply in this game and why?

**If/when using time-outs:**

- Ask him/her what might be done differently to use more effective shots.
- Be sure to give feedback on what is going well!

**Teacher or team coach:**

- Look to see if and how players are trying to move their opponent out of position.
- What might you ask players regarding court positioning?
- Check to see what is or is not working well.
- **Let them know!**

**Target Pickleball**

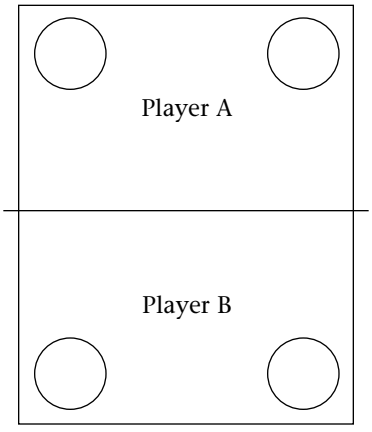
| Name: | Name: |
|---|---|
| | |

**Players:**

- Regular scoring

**PLUS**

- Winners hit the opponent's targets result in 2 bonus points.
- Teacher may modify size and location of circle targets.




**Officials, remember:**

- Record regular points plus any bonus points scored!
- Balls on outside lines are in.
- Winners on circle target lines get the bonus value.

**Advanced Game Variation:**

- Only winners in the circular targets count.

**Scorekeeper:**

- Keep score as you would a regular game, plus any bonus points.
- Game goes to 10, 12, or 15 points, or it may be timed.
- Call out the score before each serve!

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(2008) highlighted the importance of this, in order to get the game right.

## Focusing Play in Racquet Games

Teachers may design a game that (1) highlights a specific tactical aspect of game play and (2) is appropriate for students' level of play. However, simply letting students play in a particular game context does not automatically result in game-play improvement. This is where teachers must "focus play." Focusing play consists of the teachers' skillful use of questions, verbal and visual prompts or cues, specific positive feedback, and encouragement.

The natural flow of action in racquet games offers teachers many opportunities to focus play. The time between rallies can be used to engage students in a short question-and-answer discussion that can help students to make better tactical decisions and develop their understanding of game play. It is essential not to let these instructional "interruptions" take up too much game time. Teachers will find that students will generally want to get back to play sooner rather than later. So, "be quick, be clear, and be gone."

*Questioning*. Teachers can use questions to direct students' thinking toward specific aspects of their play and have them consider their actions and decisions. For example, by asking such questions as "When might be a good time to approach the net and volley?" or "What might you do to try to get your opponent out of position so you can attack the open space?" students focus on the decision-making aspects of game play. Teachers can provide cues and prompts in multiple ways. Examples of questions that can be used appear in figure 1.

*Prompts/Cues*. In addition to asking questions, it is appropriate for teachers to be direct in telling students what to do. As Metzler (2000) noted, teachers and coaches must be prepared to know when to ask and when to tell. Teachers can offer brief reminders that will help students to recognize relevant visual cues from their opponent when he or she plays a shot (e.g., body shape, stance, contact point on the ball, movement after a stroke). For example, beginners will often return a shot from a deep corner on their side of the court and remain there after the return. Teachers can help them learn to recognize the wide open space on their side of the court by pointing out the opponents' open space. Conversely, the player who fails to move back to the middle of the court after the return could benefit from brief teacher verbal prompts such as "Stroke and move!" or "Back to base!"

Prompts are essential in the early stages of learning, but they should be faded out gradually as students start to recognize "what to do." Teachers who carefully observe and analyze game play will be able to recognize when students have made "returning to base" a more automatic part of their game and that such verbal prompts are no longer needed.

*Feedback and Encouragement*. Teachers can use natural breaks in game play to provide students with feedback about their performance. The feedback can focus on the students' technical execution of the various shots, as well as on their decision making relative to shot selection, shot placement, and movement on the court. That is, if the student makes the right decision on where to place a shot but shoots too long or into the net, the teacher should still commend the student for making that decision.

Stephen Harvey

A student receives feedback from a peer coach during a play practice focused on improving court movement in tennis.

Even beginning players might learn to take advantage of game situations, if they can learn to track the opponent's movement on the court. Although tracking both the ball and the opponent at the same time is a complex task, teacher cues on this aspect of game play can help students to become smarter players.

*Getting the Game "Right."* How will teachers know that they have chosen the most appropriate game conditions for their students? That question is best answered through careful observation and analysis of students' play. Students likely need some time to get a feel for the game's set-up. If, after a while, players seem to navigate the scoring and playing rules successfully, teachers can be confident that the game design was appropriate. Conversely, if students do not progress after some extended game play and begin to lose interest or get frustrated, teachers can consider other shaping options such as those suggested in table 1. Thus, teachers' knowledge of racquet game content is important because it enables them to make better decisions about what aspect of game play to highlight through appropriate modifications.

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Figure 2. Action Fantasy Game Card

**Action Fantasy Game**
**Doubles Pickeball/Tennis**
**Davis Cup Final**

**USA vs. Great Britain**

Basic pickleball rules in effect (best of 3 games)
Rally scoring/games go to 15

***Match status:***
*Each country has won a game.*
*Third game score: USA 10 Sweden 11.*

**Team Practice Card**

**Action Fantasy Game**
**Singles Play**

**Overall game plan (i.e., strategy) for each team?**
*If ahead*—More or less aggressive attack? Take more or fewer risks? Play more from the baseline?
*If behind*—More or less aggressive attack? Go for more risky shots? Attack the net more?

**What tactical moved might be critical?**
*Offensive*—Decision making (i.e., when to go for the net, what shot to use, ball placement, remembering to return to base)
*Defensive*—Decision making (i.e., where to move, covering the entire court). Maintain/return to base position?
*Both*—Seeing your opponent's moves; recognizing opponent's strengths and weaknesses; anticipating his or her possible next action

**Ask yourselves:**
- What will the opponent's game plan most likely be?
- Given the game's score, what should you focus on?
- What seem to be your opponent's stronger areas of play?
- Which shots seem to cause more difficulty for your opponent?

## Enhancing Play in Racquet Games

When students show progress in controlling the ball or shuttle and employing certain tactical moves, teachers can enhance play in several ways. Enhancing play includes using action fantasy games, placing time constraints on games, handicapping individuals, employing differential scoring procedures, or allowing tactical time-outs. Enhancing play can motivate and challenge students to improve their game play.

*Action Fantasy Games.* Action fantasy games are patterned after the games that children pretend to be in when they play pickup games or when they practice on their own, such as pretending to be playing in the tennis final at Wimbledon. Such games can also be incorporated in physical education to set up situational tactical problems that the students can think about and discuss. Figure 2 includes samples of an action fantasy game with the United States and Great Britain tennis teams playing a Davis, Federation, or Hopman Cup Final (i.e., the team tennis events for men, women, and mixed teams). This example can be used in

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either tennis or pickleball contexts and may be enhanced further by downloading action photographs of real players and adding them to the game cards.

Students in the class could be assigned to a team (e.g., United States and Great Britain), and they would then play out the fantasy game to see which country wins. This allows the games and skills to be contextualized and creates authentic scenarios for the students. Students also learn the rules of scoring and rotation. Teachers can still employ modified court sizes, modified equipment, and so on. Students can be presented with countless scenarios that focus on the early, mid, or late stages of a match. Pedagogically, this allows teachers to focus and enhance the play, and thus "teach through and in the game" (Launder, 2001, p. 55).

*Time Constraints*. To increase the urgency of play, teachers may use time as a variable. For example, instead of playing a game to 10 points, it can be played for a specified amount of time (e.g., 8 minutes), and whoever is ahead at the end of the time wins the game. Former Wimbledon champion Pat Cash created Turbo Tennis (a recent addition to the ATP Tennis circuit), which incorporates this time feature: whoever is ahead after 30 minutes of play, wins the match.

*Handicapping Individuals*. Teachers can handicap the play of certain students (e.g., the more skilful ones) by not allowing them to employ certain techniques or to enter certain areas on the court. For example, returning a serve is a difficult and more advanced technique that is a challenge for many students. Teachers can handicap the more skilful players by allowing them to use only a drop-and-hit serve. This allows the opposing player to focus on getting stronger at returning serves and it enables the serving players to concentrate on other aspects of their game.

Another handicap could consist of not allowing students to move into the front half of the court. Teachers can help the opposing player to learn to take advantage of such a restriction by recognizing when to approach the net and employ a drop shot or volley. The other consequence of such a movement restriction is that the handicapped player is now forced to concentrate on keeping the opposing player from approaching the net. The opposite—restricting players by not allowing them to move into the back third of the court—can develop other skills. Teachers could also increase the depth of that side of the court. In this case, the opposing player is encouraged to learn when the lob shot is the right shot to use. Once again, the player being handicapped can concentrate on preventing the opposing player from employing a lob. A scenario in which one player's scoring area is limited to the opponent's area between the tram lines would give the opposing player the opportunity to concentrate on playing the angles better and more often.

*Differential Scoring*. One of the quickest ways to encourage the use of certain techniques is to incorporate them into the scoring rules. For example, a point scored by way of a volley, might be worth two or three points. While initially students may attempt the volley at the wrong time (i.e., without setting up the situation), teachers can help them focus with quick cues or brief tactical time-outs. Or a point scored in the tram lines or in the back third of the court could be worth extra points. The goal here would again be to get students to recognize when and where to employ certain shots, make better decisions, and monitor the movements and actions of the opposing player.

*Tactical Time-outs*. Because of the natural breaks in the action between rallies, racquet games lend themselves very well to the employment of "tactical time-outs." These are much like the 20-second time-outs used in basketball. In racquet games, teachers can use a tactical time-out to ask one or two questions to get students to recognize what just happened in the game. However, the key is for teachers to avoid dominating the brief discussions. Letting students develop their own possible solutions is an integral part of becoming a more informed player. Effective use of tactical time-outs is an instructional skill that requires practice on the part of the teacher. Teachers must come to recognize when and where to jump in and should not overuse this instructional skill.

*Altering the Player Ratio*. In badminton, a half-court game of two versus one may be played with one person on one side of the net, and two players on the opposite side (one patrolling the front court, and one the rear). This restricts the time the one player has to play his or her shots and pressures the quality of the single player's shots. Moreover, restricting the types of shots the two players can use (i.e., they always have to play downward shots and they cannot lift the shuttle) focuses attention on the attacking shots of the two players, and on the defensive shots of the one player.

## Conclusion

A games-based approach to instructing racquet games enables teachers to be deliberate in creating authentic learning conditions that allow students to practice both the technical and the tactical aspects of game play by *shaping play*. In addition, it encourages teachers to facilitate students' understanding of game play, through the use of *focusing* and *enhancing play*. Therefore, employing play practice still allows teachers to encourage the proper execution of the pertinent techniques, but it also broadens the content to include more tactical dimensions of game play.

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