

## **Tennis Connecting Recreation, Schools and Clubs**

We all dream of an ideal world. In the LTAD universe, we dream of an integrated sport system, physical literacy for all, and life-long engagement in physical activity. This dream is coming true for Tennis Canada.

Over the past 10 years, Tennis Canada has created and been implementing a strategy that is inspiring the growth and development of tennis in Canada by fostering integration at all levels of the tennis "system" and focusing on physical literacy. Through the Building Tennis Communities (BTC) strategy, Tennis Canada has increased linkages between clubs, schools and community recreation in communities across the country, and it's paying big dividends through larger player numbers and revitalized popularity of the game.

"Like many sports, we've always been strong at the club level from the intermediate to elite stages, but we have been much weaker at the introductory levels," explains Robert Bettauer, Director of Regional Tennis Development in BC, ex-pro circuit player, high performance coach, tennis TV commentator and all-round Canadian tennis guru for the past 25 years. "There are many people who try tennis once or twice a year, but we would see very few of them continuing at the club level."

After reaching a zenith in popularity during the 1970s and 1980s, recreational tennis declined significantly in Canada through the 1990s. While clubs remained generally healthy, vast numbers of community courts became vacant, ghostly reminders that there was once a racquet sport that commanded much larger attention in the public consciousness. What happened?

"For one thing, we recognized that cost had become a barrier for many in entering the game," says Bettauer. "We decided the best way to grow the sport was to branch out beyond our inner circle, and that meant getting into communities and fostering the game through schools, recreation departments and local tennis groups. We want to help communities to establish or revitalize their community tennis associations, with the idea that the tennis association is not just about having a club, but building links between schools, parks and recreation and clubs."

The BTC strategy is about branching out. Through BTC, Tennis Canada first identifies Community Champions who can promote the game at their local level. They might be teachers, volunteers, entrepreneurs, tennis coaches or retirees with a fervent interest in the sport. Tennis Canada provides them with three years of funding to establish community tennis programs. Afterwards, they work together to find resources to continue the programming at the community level with community partners ranging from church organizations and local businesses to aboriginal groups or organizations such as the Girl Guides.

A key component to the success of BTC is the progressive Tennis Pathway developed by Tennis Canada: Try, Learn, Play and Compete. Tennis is not a game that people simply pick up and start playing. Children ages 5-12 years especially need some sort of introduction to the skills and rules.

"To learn the game, we have developed a much more effective and pleasing mechanism called Progressive Tennis that we promote in schools and recreation centres," says Bettauer. "You don't need a huge indoor tennis club. We start with mini tennis, where we use different sized racquets, smaller nets, softer balls, and different court sizes to get started. You can set up inside a school gymnasium if you want, and it's more game-

based, because that's what kids want to do – they want to play games. We can put up to six mini courts onto one regular tennis court.

“With mini tennis, they are having a lot more success at the entry level and they want to continue in the game. We oblige them by connecting the school and recreation programs with club programs.”

BTC has increased program registrations in tennis, but it's the productive relationships and cooperation between schools, community recreation and clubs that will provide the lasting legacy.

“When we partner with schools and parks and recreations, we use the language of Physical Literacy,” says Bettauer. “It's starting to become a common parlance, so when we go to schools and parks and recreation groups and say we are using tennis to build Physical Literacy, we are striking the right message for the times. We are meeting multiple needs: building Physical Literacy and promoting active citizens, but we are also building our numbers in tennis.”

Bettauer now lives in Penticton, BC, where he has been promoting community tennis for four years already. After starting with a few dozen children and youth registrations, programs are now bursting at the seams.

“We introduce school kids to tennis through the TRY program,” explains Bettauer. “This year we are going to five elementary schools where we will offer four sessions over 2 to 4 weeks. We come in and set up mini nets, bring all the equipment, and match kids to the right size racquet. Last year we saw about 700 kids and now our programs are overflowing. The parents are raving about it, and the recreation programs are asking us, can you add more spaces for kids? Can you add more spaces for seniors?”

According to Bettauer, the BTC strategy has established over 100 tennis communities across Canada over the last five years, and most of them are outside major metropolitan areas. In addition to growing player numbers, the increased interest has meant that tennis groups have been better able to negotiate the redevelopment and resurfacing of many community tennis courts.

Different aspects of the LTAD model take greater or lesser prominence for different sports. Some discover they need to focus on shaping their high performance pathway, others governance, and some their overall competition structure. In the case of Tennis Canada, an LTAD approach has fostered vital linkages between community recreation, schools and clubs – a smashing success in the realm of sport integration at all levels.