

USTA/Midwest Section Junior Tennis Pathway

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This month's USPTA Midwest Division Newsletter features the USTA/Midwest Section's Junior Tennis Pathway that will go into effect January 1, 2011. This pathway was created based on input from many of our top USTA/Midwest Section coaches. In January, the USTA/Midwest was informed that the USTA is considering to sanction play and provide competition for 10 & under players on 36' or 60' courts using the QuickStart Format. Many people were concerned with this proposal from a developmental standpoint, over which the USPTA National Board has recently voiced a concern. After many hours of discussion with our Midwest Section's coaches, the consensus was that it is important to develop a true junior tennis pathway to maximize a player's development.

Some of the key points that went into this decision were:

1. Kids that are being exposed to tennis through USPTA Little Tennis or through the Midwest Youth Team Tennis 10 & under program, which uses the QuickStart Play Format, need a venue to compete year round on proper courts and with proper equipment.
2. Players who currently participate in one of the above 10 & under programs would have no transition into a 12 & under, 78' court event which use yellow balls.
3. The USTA's recommendation to eliminate play on the 78' court for the 10 & under division would be developmentally harmful for our players.
4. Many of the USTA/Midwest Section's top 25, 10 & under juniors, already are playing up in the 12 & under division.
5. The need to provide a transition from one level to the next with the twin goals of injury prevention and preserving a player's developmental process.
6. Acknowledgment that players develop physically and technically at different rates.
7. The recognition that beginning junior high and junior varsity high school players might not be playing junior tournaments because they never get to play anyone of their own level and in turn, do not remain in the game.

Based on the above, the USTA/Midwest Section created the Junior Tennis Pathway that will go into effect January 1, 2011. The following will explain the key points of the pathway.

1. The USTA/Midwest Section has added Level 7 events to the previous Levels 1-6. As you can see from the chart on page 9, 10 & under Level 7 events will be using 36' and 60' QuickStart Play Format events. It is very important that we encourage and promote the 36' and 60' court events to all of our USPTA Little Tennis participants as well as the Midwest Youth Team Tennis 10 & under programs. At this time, these players do not have a venue in which to compete and offering the 36' and 60' events will help keep them in the game. The boys and girls 12-18 age groups will establish tournaments open only to players with less than 100 points on the USTA/Midwest Standing list. Also, at this level the above mentioned 12-18 age juniors will have the opportunity to stay in the game by giving them a venue to compete against their own skill leveled peers.
2. Based on the feedback from our coaches, there was strong belief that it is VERY important that we not eliminate 78' court events for our transitioning 10 & under players. We felt that removing 10 & under competition on the 78' court would hurt the development of tennis by forcing young juniors to jump from a 60' court using the orange tennis ball to a 78' court using the yellow ball against bigger, faster and stronger 12 & under players. A smoother transition could be accomplished by continuing to offer 78', 10 & under events, but with the use of the Stage 1 (green) tennis ball. It's felt that using the green ball on the 78' court would allow for a player to transition from the 60' court to the 78' court much easier and not affect their strokes negatively in a developmental progression. There was also a belief that the use of the green ball in the 10 & under level 1-6 events will promote overall better play at this age. There is also an understanding that due to different rates of development, some 10 & under players will need to "play up" in the 12 & under division.

3. The true junior pathway for our young players would be the following:
 - a. 10 & under Level 7 36' court QuickStart Play Format events
 - b. 10 & under Level 7 60' court QuickStart Play Format events
 - c. 10 & under Level 1-6 78' court Green ball events
 - d. 12 & under Level 7 78' court Yellow ball events
 - e. 12 & under Level 1-6 78' court Yellow ball events

(See page 9 for Points Per Round Ranking Levels chart.)

These levels will allow players to progress through this Junior Tennis Pathway at their own speed, which simply means some will progress faster than others.

There are several keys to the success of this progression:

1. We must encourage all of our USPTA Little Tennis players and Midwest Youth Team Tennis 10 & under program players to participate in our 36' and 60' events. We must offer these events on a regular basis to keep them in the game and to provide them with a competitive venue. If you are currently running a QuickStart Play Format-type program or tournament, please contact your USPTA State President so that we can identify you as a facility that is offering a program or tournament through the USTA/Midwest Section Web site. If you would like more information pertaining to the Midwest Youth Team Tennis Program for 10 & under players, go to www.midwestteamentennis.com.
2. If you are not using USPTA Little Tennis or USTA's QuickStart Play Format, you should strongly consider these to attract and retain more kids to the game. These along with other youth sport programs allow kids to experience success, have fun and in turn, keep them in the game. Equally important will be the use of the proper stage (red, orange and green) ball in training our junior players.
3. The gap that is currently present between high performance and recreational tennis must be bridged. We must all work together to provide tennis events that keep players in the game beyond their summer programs. The key is to see how each end of the tennis spectrum helps the other and build one solid program for the benefit of overall tennis development by providing a pathway for players at all levels.

The pathway is designed to include the best parts of the Midwest pathway without reinventing the wheel. We have followed the lead of other successful tennis countries that have instituted similar developmental pathways. No other USTA Section is using the QuickStart Play Format as we do in our Midwest Youth Team Tennis 10 & under programs, which puts the Midwest ahead of the curve and has created a natural feeder system for our players. So, if one takes what has been done worldwide and what we have put in place with the USTA/Midwest Section Junior Tennis Pathway, it seems like the most logical progression in accomplishing the three major goals of the USTA: getting more players into the game of tennis, keeping them in the game (community/recreational tennis) and developing the skills for the next American Grand Slam Champion (high performance tennis).