



Play the Long Game

If used and marketed properly, a ball machine can be an incredible teaching tool and a great source of revenue—and can help strengthen the game.

By Stan Oley

There it is, sitting out on a far court, with a tangled mess of an extension cord, filled with balls that are no longer good enough for the juniors. It hasn't been serviced since it was bought five years ago. Now it begins to rain, but it is left and forgotten because of its distance from the pro shop.

This is the typical scenario for most tennis ball machines across the country.

Often, the culture created at the facility by the teaching pro is that the ball machine is strictly for beginners—and that it presents competition to their personal lesson revenue. But this could not be any further from reality.

A ball machine is simply a tool for the teaching pro, not competition. It does not correct mistakes. It does not teach strategy. It provides a ball so the teaching pro can effectively coach.

In reality, if used and marketed properly, the ball machine can be an incredible teaching tool and a great source of revenue. And, it can be an effective way to separate the teaching pro from his or her competition close by.

The Lesson Culture

Let's begin with a look at the lesson culture at the club. Ever since I can remember, private and group lessons have been done by the teaching pro standing near the net, feeding balls to the student. But anyone would agree that a ball that is fed from the net is nowhere near the type of ball that a player receives in a match.

When I ask pros, why then, do they still feed from the net, the top three answers I get are: 1) It is easier; 2) Habit; 3) It is how they were taught.

When I ask tennis club and facility members why they think pros feed from the net, they answer: 1) Pros don't take the lessons seriously; 2) They want the members to leave happy; 3) It is easier.

Now, before you teaching pros out there get defensive, especially with that No. 1 answer, here are a couple of things to keep in mind. Out of the hundreds of pros that I questioned, less than 10 percent say they come to the court with a lesson plan. Members notice this lack of a plan. When members were questioned, they said that the pros rarely, if ever, work on deficiencies from their last league match in a team practice—hence, no plan.

Further, for the last three years, I've traveled the country doing my FBT60 (Fit By Tennis In 60 Days) clinics and have worked with hundreds of recreational players. (FBT60 is a free, innovative tennis/fitness program combining a series of ball machine drills with nutrition and stretching, for both members training on their own as well as group clinics. Visit www.fbt60.com.) Something we noticed immediately was that players did not know any of the shots required to perform the program—for instance moonballs, high approach, low approach, etc. Most staggering, of 547 players in our clinics to date, 547 did not know what their strike zone was for particular shots. Think how hard the game must have been for those players before we taught them about strike zones. They had no idea where they had to get the ball for their technique to be successful.

As an industry, in 2011 and 2012, we lost a combined total of 9.7 million players, while bringing in only 8 million, accord-

For all the latest ball machines and all their specifications and features, see our exclusive Guide to Ball Machines starting on page 30.

ing to the Tennis Industry Association based on the annual PAC study of tennis participation. While some may attribute this net loss of 1.7 million players to excuses such as the economy, a spike in other sports, industry cycles, etc., I believe it boils down to the teaching pro needing to be better and able to provide a more superior customer learning experience.

Now, the ball machine may not solve all of the tennis industry's problems, but it certainly can provide a great start.

Using a Ball Machine

Less than 5 percent of U.S. teaching pros use a ball machine with private lessons. But if the pro did use a ball machine, it would allow him or her to be beside the student to provide the necessary coaching, demonstration, and encouragement for a particular shot. It also would allow the teaching pro to work on shots and shot sequences they may otherwise not be able to or want to feed.

Once the teaching pro is freed up from feeding, it also provides a great opportunity for videotaping. (There are many video apps available, as well as standard video programs that now come on smart devices.) Most importantly, when a teaching pro uses a ball machine in a private lesson, the student gets better at an alarming rate, making the student excited and wanting more!

Next, there is the group lesson. Most pros feel they have no problem feeding a two-line high approach and overhead drill. The problem is that for the feed to be correct, it needs to come from the baseline and be fed at a frequency of when each player's ball passes the pro, they feed another ball. In most cases, it needs to be about a ball every two seconds or less to be correct. If you think you can do this, start checking to see if your feeds are timely. For players to improve, it matters! Of course, if the pro is *that* focused on the feeding, is there really any serious instruction happening?

Today, we have ball machines that can do this drill without fail, allowing the pro to step in and demonstrate proper technique as well as work with each player privately as they exit the lines. The quality of instruction and encouragement with the ball machine can be staggering, compared with that of feeding from afar. Again, the students get much better and want to learn more—and play more!

Now let's look at the post-lesson curriculum. After a student takes a golf lesson, they are told to practice the information given in the lesson on the range several times before taking to the course. In tennis, the teaching pro seems more concerned with getting the student back for another lesson, instead of what the player is doing in between lesson visits to get better.

I always had a rule that the student had to hit on a ball machine twice in between lessons or the student should really not expect to improve very much at all. You have to wonder when you see a golf course has 20 range slots and the tennis department only has one ball machine that is rarely used.

Ball Machine Care

Now, let's go back to where we started, with that lonely ball machine sitting out on that far court. Ball machines get far more use and less abuse on a court close to the pro shop, where people can be seen using it. In a sudden storm, it is much easier to put away as well. When out on court and not in use, make sure the machine is covered. It should be stored in a dry place overnight or when not in use for long periods.

Always try to keep a consistency of balls in the machine for reliable throws. A ball with extra duty felt (regardless of the surface) is best because the felt is usually the first to wear out in a well-used machine. Also, to create an effortless customer experience with the machine, always have the extension cord on a reel for easy set-up and take-down.

With regards to maintenance, you should use a standard leaf blower to blow clay, ball felt, and debris from the machine both top and bottom once a week. If the ball machine is utilized more than 20 hours a week, it should have a preventative maintenance service performed by a technician twice a year; if used less than 20 hours a week, it should be serviced once a year.

To stay in the game, players have to get better and feel that they matter. If the teaching pro uses technology available to them, and becomes more invested in the student's ability to get better, the game we so love will strengthen and prosper. ■

Stan Oley, a member of the USPTA, PTR and Cardio Tennis Global Speakers Team, has been working with and teaching with ball machines for 24 years. He is a product marketing specialist for Playmate Ball Machines and founder of FBT60 (Fit By Tennis in 60 Days), a tennis/fitness program combining nutrition and a series of ball machine drills. He is sponsored by Adidas and Babolat.

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