



The Marcus Lewis Tennis Center Parent/Junior Guidebook

Your resource for navigating the world of junior tennis

Preface

This booklet was designed for parents who do not know much about the world of junior tennis. If you believe you fit into this category, you are far from being alone. Probably 1 out of every 100 parents (or only 1%) feels confident about knowing their child's level, being able to choose the correct racquet or could answer when would be the best time to start their child in competitive matches. The one parent that does know these answers is likely to be someone who went through it themselves.

The irony in all of this is that there does not seem to be a single tennis program, club or simple resource that can help parents find those answers; at least not until now.

At the Marcus Lewis Tennis Center (MLTC), we were similar to other clubs in that we registered players into our classes, taught them as best we could and then sent them on their way. Sometimes we would see the parents and sometimes we would not. Sometimes parents had an idea of what they hoped their child would gain from tennis while others only wanted their child to have some exposure to the sport. Many parents would consistently ask the same questions and we would answer them each time, but unfortunately there was always some sort of gap between the parent's understanding of their child's options and our program's ability to provide the answers.

During an MLTC staff training session with a world leader in junior tennis, a comment was made by the presenter who said, "The parents just want you to talk to them...talk to them!" Although his comment was an aside, it may have been the most important piece of the entire presentation. Those of us who have been teaching tennis for years know how much parents appreciate any information they can get about their children. We sometimes take a few minutes after a class to speak with a parent about their child's progress, but there has not been a systematic and formal approach so that all parents receive consistent, personal feedback and there has never been a simple guide to help answer some of the most common questions about their child's next steps.

At the MLTC, we have changed that by issuing progress reports at the end of every session so that parents can have a clear picture of their child's development. We have also put together this guidebook that will help to answer the most common questions we receive. It also gives parents a blueprint that helps to decipher the world of competitive junior tennis.

The guidebook is in a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) format to make it as easy as possible to understand. It also allows us to easily revise the material and add more questions as they come up.

1. What is the best age to start playing tennis?

You and your child are the best ones to answer that question. We have had a mother bring her three-year-old to us when other programs turned her away because they felt her daughter was too young. What was unique was that this little girl was drawing pictures of tennis racquets and telling her mother that she wanted to be a “tennis star” when she was older. As evidenced by her passion, the girl was quite ready to play and she was more focused than many of the kids who were older. On the other side of the coin, we have had teens show up for class who would prefer to be anywhere else except a tennis court.

For a child who is under six years of age, you are going to have to gauge his/her level of focus. If a child cannot pay attention well enough to take direction or if the child finds more joy in picking up the balls than hitting them, then you are better off waiting.

For children who are over six years of age, just ask them, “Johnny, would you like to try taking tennis lessons?” Maybe Johnny has seen tennis on television or he has watched mom and dad play and would like to try it. If he says, “yes,” then there’s your answer. If he vacillates and seems averse to it, you would be better off to wait rather than force it.

2. Does it really help a lot to start kids so young?

There is no question that kids who start younger improve quicker. It is apparent to almost any tennis pro when a player, no matter what age, has had proper formal training. This is true of almost any sport, however it always has to be done at the child’s pace and when the child is ready.

3. How do I choose a racquet for my child who is a beginner or low intermediate?

If your child is younger, then the best way to do this is via your child’s height:

Height of Child	Length of Racket
Less than 3’6” – 42 in	19 inches
3’7” to 3’10” – 46 in	21 inches
3’11” to 4’6” – 54 in	23 inches
4’6” to 5’ – 60 in	25 inches
5’1” and up – 60+ in	27 inches (adult)

For these types of racquets, you can find them at virtually all department stores and they are very inexpensive.

If your child is old enough to use an adult size racquet and he/she is just starting out with tennis and there is a question as to whether or not the racquet will collect dust in a closet, then stop by a department store and pick up something for \$50 or less. There is no need to make a large investment in the equipment, especially if you are unsure about the level of motivation your child has.

Also, unless your child has a large hand, you will want something that has a 4 ¼ size grip. This can usually be found in tiny print either on the bottom of the handle or there may be a sticker on the throat of the racquet.

4. How do I choose a racquet for my child who is a committed player?

If your child wants to play competitively and the racquet will not collect dust in the closet, then you will need to take a different approach. If you have the time, it is worth understanding how the racquet industry works. You can visit <http://www.marcuslewiscenter.com/racquetinfo.html> where there is a detailed explanation of racquet technology, industry incentives, strings, etc.

If you would like the short answer, then once your child is strong enough to wield an adult-sized racquet, he/she should play-test some to see what works the best for him/her. There are certain parameters that you should stay within in order to have the best match:

- **Head Size:** Choose a racquet between 95-110 square inches
- **Weight:** Something that weighs less than 10 ounces if your child is younger
- **Length:** Nothing longer than 27 inches
- **Grip size:** Unless your child has a large hand, the grip should be a 4 ¼

Many clubs will have a pro shop with demo racquets. At the MLTC, we have such a pro shop that is stocked with Babolat racquets and players are welcome to try them.

5. What if my child is younger and can't tell much of a difference between racquets or what if I would like to buy one as a gift?

If your child is passionate about the game but doesn't have a great feel for racquets yet or if you would like to purchase a racquet as a gift, then contact our Junior Director, Pete, for a recommendation: pete@marcuslewisenterprises.com.

6. Can you tell me about the different colored balls and smaller nets that I see in junior classes now? Is this really a good thing for kids to learn this way? Should all kids be doing this?

For a very long time there has been the belief that younger children should use different equipment than what adults use. In the late 80's, Wilson Sports came out with a "Pee-Wee" tennis kit that was very similar to the iteration you see today. There was a small net, small racquets and they used oversized Nerf balls. It never really caught on, but it was an important first step. It showed that kids can have more success using scaled-down versions of tennis equipment.

Now fast-forward to the 21st century. The United States Tennis Association (USTA) decides that due to lack of participation in tennis and also competition from other school sports, it is time to make a very big change. Their solution is QuickStart. The premise behind QuickStart is that the same approach needs to be taken with tennis as it is done with activities such as baseball. In baseball, kids start out on “T” ball and they play on a smaller field. It is the same idea in QuickStart and it is similar to the Pee-Wee program, except there are different color/size balls with different amounts of compression. These balls have a different amount of bounce to them and they are much easier to control.

Maybe the more important piece to making the program succeed was that there was a serious campaign behind it along with a well thought-out curriculum. This campaign was directed at clubs and pros to adopt these new standards and methods. So far it has only been growing.

Is this a good thing for junior tennis? Definitely. Should all kids be doing it? It is our opinion that, no, it is not for every child. Certainly for kids who are probably 8 years old or younger, using the low compression balls and smaller nets makes a lot of sense. Kids can effectively rally, aim their shots and play actual points; something that generally would not happen with a standard tennis ball on a full court. Kids who have been playing for a number of years, who show exceptional skills or who may be big for their age may be better suited to use the adult ball. Some experts would cringe at hearing this statement because they prefer if things are black & white, but things are seldom black and white with this sport. We have a nine year-old who can rally 20 shots back and forth with a standard ball. Would we move him down? Absolutely not. On the other hand, if we have a nine-year-old who is struggling to make two shots over the net, then the best thing we can do is move them to a more appropriate ball.

7. What should I look for in a tennis program?

About the only things you can quickly determine about a tennis program when you first investigate it are if the instructors are certified and what the level of customer service is.

Although instructor certification is better than nothing, there are many poor instructors who are certified and many great instructors who are not. When you were in school, all of your teachers were certified, but it is a safe bet that many were not as well-rounded as others.

If the program you are looking at does not return your calls or emails promptly or they do not seem organized, then this is probably your best barometer that the program may not be worth your money.

Once you decide on a program, then you will need to evaluate a short list of general attributes that the program should have. These are items that our staff at the MLTC would look at if we were enrolling our children into another program:

- a. **What are the teacher/student ratios?** Anything greater than a 5:1 ratio will generally have a negative impact on the quality of the class unless the instructor has a great deal of experience and training or unless the kids can be spaced out onto multiple courts.

- b. **How engaging is the instructor?** Your child (and you for that matter) should like the instructor, personally. If the instructor is not able to connect with your child, then there is a very good chance that your child will not have a lasting interest in this sport.
- c. **How often is my child hitting the ball?** If you can stay and watch a class or two, take note of how much your child is getting to hit the ball. If most of the lesson is spent standing around, this will not help your child to progress.
- d. **Are the ages and levels consistent?** If your child is mixed in with children who are 3+ years older or younger, this can be a problem. The age is not as important as the level, however the two are often related. If you feel your child is either too strong or cannot keep up, this will impact your child's development the same way it would in a classroom.
- e. **Is there an emphasis on technique?** With the youngest players, the goal may be to have basic contact. As players become older it becomes more and more important that players are taught proper stroke mechanics, grip changes, footwork, etc. If at every class the players are only running around hitting balls without much guidance or correction, then bad habits can become reinforced that have to be fixed later.

8. How often should my child be playing each week?

This is where parents can often make a critical mistake that impacts their child's relationship to the game permanently. The short answer to the question is to listen to your child, as it depends primarily on your child's passion. If your child enjoys tennis as a hobby and thinks it's fun to hit the ball here and there, then a clinic once-a-week is perfect. If your child is anxious to get to class every week and cannot seem to get enough of it, then we would recommend that you feed the fire and allow them to play as often as time will allow.

Although instructed time is ideal, it can be costly. What is most important is that your child is able to spend time on the tennis court with someone who is willing to feed or hit balls to him or her. Whether this is tossing balls to your 6 year-old in the driveway or going to the local court with your 10 year-old and hitting it back and forth, this can immensely increase your child's proficiency.

9. Is there a general "formula" for how much my child should be taking instruction and playing if he/she wants to be a competitive player?

Yes, there is. For players who would like to play in tournaments or to compete at higher levels in high school or beyond, the general formula is a weekly clinic, a weekly private lesson and at least one other session of hitting in some form (another clinic, round robin, hitting with a friend, etc.). This should be done at a minimum IF your child has those kinds of aspirations.

Players who are the most serious about their tennis play closer to five times per week. The clinic, lesson and third session form the core of their training. The other two times would come in the form of either clinics or outside hitting with a friend.

Please realize that when we provide this information, it is always with the understanding that this is what your child wants to do. If your child is hesitant about the commitment or prefers to do something else, then you run the risk of wasting money and souring their love of the game!

10. Should I enroll my child into private lessons?

There are really two main advantages of one-on-one advice:

- The player receives 100% of the instructor's attention.
- The instructor can isolate the particular problem(s).

What are the disadvantages? Cost. For some, \$90 per week is not an extravagance that can be afforded on a consistent basis.

Without question, a player will improve more quickly with a regular private lesson each week, however a player will still see significant improvement through group lessons and outside playing alone. The question comes down to how much your child loves the game and also your budget. If tennis is your child's fifth favorite sport and he/she does not have aspirations of playing tennis beyond a recreational level, then private lessons are unnecessary. You should consider private lessons if your child:

- Is serious about tennis
- Wants to try out for the school team
- Loves the game but is struggling in class
- They are affordable for you.

11. My child is motivated to play, but the cost is adding up. Any advice?

The first consideration is what you are paying for in both membership fees as well as the cost per hour in a group lesson.

If you are playing outdoors, then you should not be paying any type of membership charge for your child unless you want them to belong to an outdoor swim & tennis / country club program.

Regarding the per hour cost in a group lesson, the MLTC is at \$25/hour and anything beyond \$26/hour is exorbitant. For a group rate, the student/teacher ratio should not exceed more than 5:1 unless the players are on more than one court and they are able to rally.

There are some additional adjustments you can make to keep your costs down and the quality of tennis high.

First, if your child is a candidate for private instruction, then you can mitigate the costs by sharing the expense in a semi-private format. Although this is not as effective as one-on-one training, it is more effective than being in a larger group.

A second option is to go with 30-minute private lessons instead of a full hour. An hour allows time to cover all of the strokes, but 30-minutes is enough to deal with a specific sticking point (e.g. serve, backhand, etc.).

Another option is to only seek private advice as needed. This is helpful when a stroke is suddenly failing or if the strokes simply need a little adjusting.

Lastly, bringing your child to the courts and hitting with them yourself can add important playing time and it will not cost a penny. During the coldest months this is not possible, but from March through October/November, you can play outdoors.

12. My son has been taking lessons for a few years, but I would like him to get an opportunity to play more. At what point should kids be able to play matches?

This is a great question and it is one that we hear often.

There are two things that any student needs to be able to do in order to begin playing tennis matches. The first is to serve. No matter how good you are at the other strokes, if you can't serve, it will be a very boring and unpleasurable experience. The second is that you have to be able to hit the ball back and forth at least a few times. Until those two skills are acquired, the player will not benefit from match play.

If your child has been taking lessons for a few years and you feel that he/she is not where you had hoped, then one of two things is happening. Either the program is not providing adequate instruction or your child may not be as athletic or coordinated with the sport. The first step to figuring which is the problem is to open up a dialogue with your child's instructor. Relay your concerns to the instructor and see what the feedback is. If you feel the instruction is lacking, then you need to find another class or possibly another program that is a better match for your child.

If the issue is that your child does not have an aptitude for the sport even though he/she enjoys it, then your child will need to invest more time on the court. This could come in the form of a secondary class, private lessons or rallying at the local court with you each week. Anything that allows for additional practice will help your child's coordination and ball contact.

13. How do we register our child for a tournament? How does it work?

The national organization that orchestrates tennis throughout the country is called the United States Tennis Association (USTA) and it divides the country into sections. Our section is known as USTA New England.

For juniors, the events are divided by gender (boy/girl), age (18, 16, 14, 12, 10 and 8 and under), type (singles/doubles) and level (1-8). The designations are fairly self-explanatory with the exception of levels.

Levels 1-3 are only for the strongest players who are looking to compete nationally. Levels 4-5 are a notch below 1-3 and players should have a lot of match experience before entering them. Levels 6-7 are for more intermediate players. Level 8 events are for players who are just starting out.

Here is a step-by-step guide to having your child enter into a tournament:

1. Register your child with the USTA by going here: <http://membership.usta.com/section/Individual-Family-Memberships/101.uts>. There is an annual fee of \$20 to join. After doing so, you will be given a USTA number.
2. From that point, you'll need to do a search for the available tournaments in the area by going here: http://tennislink.usta.com/TOURNAMENTS/schedule_new/search.aspx?section=45&division=G8
3. Check off the radio button that says "All tournaments" and then click the "Division" drop-down menu. Choose the gender and age of the division you would like. Hit the "Search" button at the bottom.
4. Go to the month you want to look at using the drop-down menu there.
5. Once you find a tournament that fits into your schedule, you may then register for it online. The cost to play a singles tournament is generally around \$50.

A few things you will need to know:

- Your child may play in the 10, 12, 14, 16 and 18 age divisions until the month they turn 11, 13, 15, 17, or 19, respectively. Players can always play in a higher age category, but they cannot play in a lower one.
- Most tournaments are within a 45 minute drive of the Metro-West area.
- Tournaments are held on the weekends except during vacation times. If the event is scheduled for the weekend, then child may play on Friday, Saturday and/or Sunday.
- For players who are starting out, the format will be a "round robin" format (players play one set against all of the other competitors). At the higher levels, the event will be in a single-elimination format (your child will play matches until he/she loses or he/she wins the tournament).
- It would be a good idea to read over the regulations that give detailed answers to many questions: <http://www.newengland.usta.com/Juniors/juniorregulations/>

The reality is that there are very few level 8 events despite the fact that there is a large population of novice players who would like to have the experience of playing in a tournament. You will find that most tournaments are level 4-7. If your child is playing for the first time in a sanctioned USTA event, then 99% of the time, you will want to register him/her for a level 7 tournament.

14. What should my child bring to a tournament?

If your child is just starting out, then you can keep it very simple. Their racquet and a water bottle will suffice.

When players start becoming more serious, they will often have a large racquet bag. These bags can be quite large and they can fit a lot of items. Here's what they should have (in approximate order of importance):

- a) Multiple racquets. There is always a chance that a string will break. Players should have two of the same racquet, at a minimum.
- b) A hat for when it is sunny
- c) A towel to dry off when it's hot.
- d) Sunscreen
- e) Some form of light snack that can be eaten between matches or even during if necessary.
- f) A change of clothes when it is hot.
- g) A jump rope to help warm up when necessary.
- h) A notebook for keeping notes during lessons as well as against opponents.
- i) A book. This will help to relax players if they have long a long break between matches.

13. I have been told that my child is not ready for a USTA sanctioned tournament. Are there other options?

Although the USTA is a fantastic organization that has done a great deal to promote the sport, one of the areas where they are lacking is in promoting competitive events that are appropriate for kids who are at the cusp of playing competitively. There is an incredibly wide gap between players who are just getting into match-play and the lower level of a USTA event.

As a result, the MLTC has designed our Junior Challenger Series program that will help kids transition from drills into play and from structured play into tournaments.

Similar to the format we have used for our adult version, it is strictly a play-program in which players participate in a round robin each week. The program is always held on Sundays and it offers both singles and doubles play. For information on this, please contact beth@marcuslewisenterprises.com.

14. My child wants to play high school tennis. How do we prepare? What should we expect? What should we look out for?

The best way to prepare for try-outs is to be practicing during the winter season. There is no question that winter practice gives players an edge on the competition. When kids can step on the court having already been acclimated to playing points versus having not played for months, the difference can be night and day.

During that training period, players should work on their weaknesses and try to improve the worst parts of their game. At least a month prior, it is then helpful to focus more on strengths and point play. A team candidate will need to perform well in matches since that is the single most important indicator of a player's abilities.

At the high school level, there are three singles players and two doubles teams which equate to a total of seven starting players. Most coaches like to carry a roster of 12-15 players. Smaller schools with less of a demand for tennis may have fewer players trying out, hence no one is "cut" from the team. Larger schools will often have a junior varsity or "JV" team where they can send any excess players who are not as strong as their varsity candidates. Some schools have what is called a "no-cut" policy, in which case they take everyone who comes to try-outs. "No-cut teams" are sometimes found in programs that do not have a JV option. It is worth a phone call to the athletic director of a school in order to find out what the format is for your school's team.

Per the regulations, team tryouts cannot begin any earlier than late March, however living in the Northeast, there is a good chance that weather may prevent players from using the courts. In such an event, some teams will postpone try-outs until the weather improves or the snow melts enough. Other teams may try to hold meetings in gyms or other spaces where players can do tennis-related activities. Once players have their general meeting and the weather is conducive to being out on the courts, much of what happens next depends on the coach and the number of players that he/she has to work with.

Coaches may start by having the kids do various drills in order to familiarize themselves with all of the players or they may go right into playing matches in an effort to see exactly who to retain and who to release. Ultimately the coach will have some or possibly all players engage in "challenge matches." In this format, the coach will have players play each other and those results are used to determine whether or not a player will make the team as well as the ultimate line-up when the team competes against other schools. Challenge matches are the most objective means for coaches to assess the true playing abilities of any candidates and they are your child's best ticket onto the team.

Are there times when a coach might have incentive to make a different decision and take someone who is not as strong over someone else who is a better player? The honest and unfortunate answer is absolutely. Periodically we receive questions/concerns from parents about the potential conflict of interest that exists between high school teams and private tennis facilities that have instructors coaching those teams. In fact, in many towns in the area, there are a number of examples of private club instructors in high school coaching positions. The MLTC is even one such facility.

Navigating Your Off-Season Options

There are certainly positive benefits to having a professional instructor be the coach of your child's team, the most obvious reason being expertise. If players can receive guidance from someone who works in the sport for a living, then they are more likely to receive accurate and professional advice. What is the downside? At its worst, players in these circumstances can be viewed as dollar signs instead of as members of a spring tennis team. When this happens, players and parents will often feel compelled to subscribe to the coach's off-season instructional program for fear that not doing so would be looked at unfavorably by that coach.

Is there a way to know beforehand whether or not your child would be leveraged in such a manner? Actually there is. Just ask; "Coach Smith...my son is interested in trying out for the team next year and I hear you have an off-season tennis program. Would my child have a better chance of making the team if he does your program over some other programs that we are looking at?" If the answer is "yes," then you are being played. **No** coach should ever make that assertion and at that point it has crossed into some unethical territory. The right answer would be, "I would love to have Johnny in our program, however no, I cannot say that he will necessarily have a better chance here. It will all depend on how Johnny does at try-outs, so it will really be up to him."

When Try-Outs End

So what happens if Johnny gets cut, yet Johnny was not the weakest member on the team and it also happened that Johnny did not take the coach's program? Remember those challenge matches? If Johnny won his challenge match(es) and did not make the team while players he beat did make it, then you may have a legitimate issue.

Always try to start by having your child ask the coach for an explanation. Some children may be shy about this, but it is important for them to learn to communicate their questions and concerns. Both they and you should also always give the coach the benefit of the doubt until you hear what he/she has to say. Did your child beat one player but lose to two others who were weaker? Sometimes it is not always as black and white as it appears. Also remember to be respectful when inquiring. Coaches deal with a number of players as well as parents who can sometimes have an inflated view of their child's abilities. The last thing they want is to be aggressively grilled, especially if there is no foul on their part.

If both you and your child feel that the explanation is lacking and that there is something more unethical at work, then have a conversation with the athletic director (AD). ADs are the "bosses" of all of the coaches for the interscholastic sport teams. If the AD is unsympathetic and you still genuinely believe that your child has been slighted, then a meeting with the school committee will be enough to solve the problem. Again, you want to be respectful and realize that the committee has a number of issues on their agendas, but they can give a neutral perspective on the situation when given the facts. They would also be the ones to institute measures that will help prevent such issues from happening again in the future.

Without question, the mere suggestion of escalating the problem is plenty of incentive for coaches to play it straight, otherwise it will not look good for them when they are forced to defend their choices.

Off-Season Training

Are there any rules governing off-season training? The answer is yes, and it is critically important that parents and players know the rules, otherwise offending players can put themselves and their teammates at risk.

The organization that oversees all high school sports is called the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletic Association (MIAA) and they are extremely powerful relative to high school athletics. They have the ability to suspend players, coaches and even schools when necessary. They also have spelled out some very strict guidelines regarding how tennis players are handled both in and out of season:

40.5.3 A coach's high school candidates must constitute the minority of those taking part in any out-of-season sport's program, and never more than 50% competing on any team at any moment (e.g. no more than two basketball candidates could be on the court, or 3 ice hockey players on the ice, on the same team, at any point during a game). In sports that are individual in nature, or where competition involves a series of scoring events, candidates of that high school coach must be fewer than 50% of those participating in the overall competition or program.

In simple terms, this means that if your child is considering trying out for the team in the coming season, then he/she absolutely cannot constitute 50% or more of a group that is being taught by their respective team coach. For example, if your child would like to take a group lesson with a total of four players, then ONLY your child could play in it as a team candidate. One more player would put the group at 50% and it would be in violation of the rules. Obviously private lessons with the team coach are completely off limits.

Could the group or could private lessons be taught by another coach? Yes. As long as that instructor is not listed a coach of that particular team during the spring season.

What happens if the offending coach and/or player are caught?

PENALTY: Because these standards are designed to protect young people from unfair and inequitable scenarios, any coach who violates, or does not prevent violations, of these standards will be rendered ineligible to participate or be present at any MIAA approved or sponsored interscholastic competition in that sport for one year from the date of determination of a rule violation. If a violation is inadvertent or relatively minor, this penalty may be reduced by the Board of Directors, or its designee.

83.1 The Board of Directors is authorized to warn, censure, fine, place on probation or suspend any player, team, coach, game official, school official, or school, which violates any MIAA rule regarding interscholastic athletics. The Board of Directors shall have authority to delegate to the executive staff,

duly constituted committees, subcommittees, or ad hoc committees its power to impose and enforce penalties.

Although the coach would likely be suspended for one year, the offending player and the entire team risk punitive action to any degree that the MIAA chooses to mete out depending on how severe they felt the violation was. The longer the violations continue, the worse the punishment is likely to be. For a coach only interested in financial gain, breaking these rules may not seem very important, however he/she is jeopardizing the welfare of all of the players that he/she has been entrusted to help.

The hope is that this overview will assist parents in understanding what the rules are and provide them with the tools they need to act in the best interests of their children. The guidelines have always been available to everyone, but only coaches readily access them. You can read about all of the MIAA regulations here:

http://www.miaa.net/gen/miaa_generated_bin/documents/basic_module/MIAAHandbook1315.pdf

Final thoughts...

We hope you found this guide helpful and we encourage you to forward us any questions that this guide does not answer so that we can add them later.

As you can see, much of what we suggest centers around gauging your child's level of interest and motivation. The first step is to listen to what your child is telling you and go from there. Tennis is not the same for everyone. It can be an occasional hobby or it can be a large part of one's life. We are always here to help and we look forward to answering any questions that you might have!

-MLTC Staff