

The Story of J.P.

On a cold evening in January 2010, QuickStart Tennis of Central Virginia and USTA/Mid-Atlantic conducted an in-service training session for after-school program instructors in the Charlottesville city schools. One of the instructors brought along a six-year-old boy named J.P. (John Phillip). J.P. was very well-behaved and was sitting quietly at a little desk in the gym corner reading a book about dinosaurs when I approached him and asked if he'd like to learn how to play tennis. We talked a little about how scary dinosaurs are, how big they were and what a nice book it was. After our dinosaur pleasantries, J.P. jumped up and was ready to go.

We started with some QuickStart warm-ups – ball rolls, ball tosses/catches, and ball tracking. His hand-eye coordination and movement seemed good. J.P. was eager to get his hand on a racquet!

I grabbed a 19-inch racquet and foam ball and thought I'd start with a forehand instant-rally progression. The first step was "freeze ball," invented by USTA/Virginia trainer Rob Issem. Palm up, racquet face up, bounce and catch ("freeze") the ball on the racquet. J.P. was marginally successful with freeze ball and clearly not ready for ups and downs. I didn't want him to get frustrated, so I decided to back pedal a bit.

I took the foam ball, placed it on the floor, and showed J.P. how to use a racquet to push the ball forward down a line. J.P. eagerly grabbed the racquet and ball and went to work. At first he was cautious and very deliberate. Once he started to master the activity (and it didn't take long), he started improvising. He'd push the ball slowly, accelerate and then drop to his knees and slide across the smooth gym floor. He was smiling, laughing, just having a blast. He was also developing a low-to-high swing. Each time he'd return to the starting point where I stood.

Then I said how about going the other way. I thought he would run to the other end of the line and push the ball my way, but that's not what happened. He stepped over the other side of the line, turned his hand on the racquet ever so slightly and started pushing the ball down the line using a backhand motion! I was so excited, I literally had to put my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming. I never mentioned backhand. I never mentioned backhand grip. I never mentioned much – most of our communication was nonverbal. I "showed" J.P. what to do and apparently nature took over.



When J.P. saw the after-school instructors rallying, he asked if he could play too. He and I hadn't even gotten to the instant-rally progression, but he seemed confident and ready to go. Less than an hour after he first picked up a racquet, J.P. was successfully rallying with adults. He was out there rallying for over 45 minutes. Couldn't get him to take a break, but did manage to get him to drink a little water.

At the end of the training session, USTA instructor Steve Iman asked the after-school instructors if they had

any questions. J.P.'s hand immediately flew up. Steve pointed to J.P. who then asked, "Why do people play tennis?" We all burst out laughing at the same time and said **BECAUSE IT'S FUN!**

Needless to say, J.P. went home that night with a QuickStart racquet and foam ball.



I bet we created a lifetime tennis player on that cold evening in Charlottesville. What do you think?