

Short Court Tennis



After school format suggested for elementary schools

What is Short Court Tennis?

We are all accustomed to sports that have been modified for children. Little league baseball fields are smaller. Grade schools often have eight-foot, instead of ten-foot baskets for basketball. Youth soccer is played on a reduced field. Yet we seldom see such a formal adaptation of tennis courts.

Short court tennis puts an emphasis on giving children a chance to really play the game. To play tennis is to serve, return serve, rally, and keep score. By utilizing smaller courts, you can get multiple children actually playing tennis in a limited space, indoor or out. The smaller courts and modified equipment shifts tennis from a game that is very difficult and often frustrating to one that is immediately accessible and rewarding.

How to Get Short Court Tennis Underway

Here's what you need:

1. An indoor or outdoor play area
2. Junior tennis rackets
3. Lightweight nets and portable standards; or makeshift nets or barriers
4. Foam tennis balls

Play Versus Instruction

Short court tennis is designed to be a continuum of tennis in physical education classes. While opportunities for coaching will abound, it is our hope that the focus will be play, and not instruction. Using short courts and easy-to-rally tennis balls brings down the level of difficulty to the extent that almost everyone can get right into the swing!

Age and Skill Level

Short Court Tennis is recommended for 3rd-4th grade students but can be played by beginning players of all ages and is ideal for locations with limited space. As players advance in skill, they can participate in Mid-Court Tennis formats (see page 7) and eventually full-court formats.

Playing Area

Gym floors or paved schoolyards are ideal. Short court tennis can also be set up on packed dirt, or even on grass. The best court size for beginner mini tennis is 18 to 20 feet wide and 36 to 44 feet long. Existing markings on floors can be utilized. The lines of a badminton court (20' x 44') fit this perfectly.

A regulation tennis court can be turned into six mini courts by hanging a net or rope with streamers through its center lengthwise from fence to fence and using the service lines and baselines as sidelines and the sidelines as baselines (see diagram # 1). The length of a volleyball court (60') can be used for intermediate players (refer to Mid-Court Tennis description). Flat rubber lines, chalk or tape can be used for playing surfaces that are not marked.

Balls

Foam balls are the best choice for beginning players on smaller courts.

Nets

Use any lightweight net that can cover an 18- to 20-foot area. A badminton or volleyball net can be used if a tennis court net is not available. You can also improvise by using plastic barrier tape, yellow caution tape, or rope with streamers. The net should be approximately 2 ½ feet high in the center.

Racquets

Small racquets work best and are safest for doubles. Suggest racquet lengths range from 21" – 23". Please see the accompanying chart regarding suggested specifications for short court and mid court formats.

The Game

The goal of Short court tennis is to simulate full-size tennis. As a result, play can be either singles or doubles. Overhand serves can be used, but underhand serves are perfectly acceptable. Once in play, the ball can be hit after one bounce or out of the air. All other rules parallel tennis.

Scoring Options:

- Numerical scoring is recommended (1-2-3-4) with games being first to win four points and sets being first to win four games (2 out of 3 point tie-breaker at 3 games all).

Serving

To speed up play, give players only one serve to get the point started (overhand or underhand). Otherwise, two serves are acceptable.

Short Court Formats

There are numerous successful models for organizing short court programs. These range from drop-in formats, organized team play, and round-robin tournaments. Short court formats are a perfect bridge towards organized team programs at the middle school and high school level. We recommend formats that emphasize participation, and that do not require elimination of any students. Parents should be utilized as organizers and program leaders whenever possible.

Team Tennis

Concept: To provide structured team matches with students remaining on the same team for an entire season.

How to: Students are divided into teams representing their class, their grade, or their school. Team size should reflect the facilities, with the goal of creating matches where every player can remain active. Schedule of matches should allow each team to play each other at least once during the season.

Flexible Team Competition

Concept: To allow for team competition in a situation where the student population changes from day to day.

How to: Divide students into teams and play a series of short scoring matches (e.g. 11 point games, 21 point games), or for a designated time (ten-minute matches). Each team may have, for instance, four doubles squads. At the end of the period, points can be totaled to determine the day's winner.

Round Robin Tournament

Concept: Provide students with equal opportunity for competitive singles or doubles play in a non-elimination format.

How to: Players are divided into four to five small groups of four to five students. Students will play all other students within that group. This will usually result in records that have a distribution of something like: 3-0, 2-2, 0-3. For the second half of the intramural program, students are once again divided into groups (or flights) based upon their record. This format works best if you can separate the most skilled players during the first session.

