

9/19/17 USTA-THE PROS AND CONS-Gerry Berkheimer

Below is my opinion and not that of The Jungle Club.

Between my sophomore and junior years in high school, I decided tennis was where I was headed full-time both in teaching and playing. At that point I paid \$200 for a Lifetime Membership in the USTA which covered a monthly magazine and by-passing annual USTA fees for tournaments for the remainder of my playing career. It was one of the best investments ever and it paid off well through extensive tournament play for 40 years and a very productive teaching, playing, and management career. All was going well and I expected the USTA to continue making intelligent decisions. However, the USTA is a very different organization now and I hold that many of their decisions are questionable and you as parents and players should look at the USTA closely.

Parents, if you have kids playing the school USTA programs, look closely, and ask for resumes from those who want to train your kids. My 7-day a week junior program will have your child ahead of the group and ready for high school, college, and beyond, if they have the desire to do so. Read below about our new tournaments for juniors.

THE USTA JUNIOR TOURNAMENT FIASCO

1. In 2016 the USTA Florida division would not allow any of my 9 kids in the 7-10 year old range to go straight into the 12 and under tournaments-a first in 40 years for me. They established what I call 'baby' or 'kindergarten' junior tennis tournaments of red and orange levels (using shorter tennis courts with abnormal size tennis balls) that kids *had*** to play in order to be allowed to advance to the regular yellow tennis ball on regular size courts in the 12s. If my kids wanted to play tournaments, they had to 'downsize' their games to play a specified number of 'baby' court tournaments in order to play on full-size courts or wait to qualify for the 12s on normal courts and lose many years of sanctioned tournament experience. Let me clarify further. Before 2016 any child deemed qualified to play by the pro or parent on regulation size courts was allowed to test their skills early in tournament play if they felt they had what it took to compete at that age level.

Now, after the start of these USTA 'kindergarten' tournaments, all of a sudden these same-type kids 100's of other pros and I have been training on full-size courts and sending to 12 and over age tournaments are now forced to play silly 'baby' tournaments or not play tournaments at all. The USTA corralled the kids and had a monopoly on the tournament market for many years, then simply said, 'Tough luck'. Considering most kids are probably still trained on regular courts, I expected at least a regular court tournament option and a 'baby' court tournament option. I first thought this was a joke and figured the national committees from golf or soccer were in charge of making our tennis rules now.

I called the USTA at their home base to attain some answers as to why they are holding back advanced kids with these 'baby' tournaments. I explained that it was exactly the same scenario as a 6th grader going back to 1st or 2nd grade even though all the work was completed for 6th grade. No real answer from them-'that's just the way it is'. Great reasoning, eh? I'm sure it's all about the money and the USTA wants everyone to start at their beginning-not at anyone else's. If the USTA wanted 'baby' training, I'm fine with that. Just make sure that the kids who have already past that level a long time ago are accommodated and able to play around those 'kindergarten' tournaments. Making those 'kindergarten' tournaments mandatory for advanced kids is simply embarrassing and shows a phenomenal lack of judgment.

MY SOLUTION TO THE USTA JUNIOR 'BABY' TOURNAMENTS

I am now holding monthly non-USTA 'money'/certificate tournaments with a regular draw and consolations to help kids continue their improvement, have the feel of a real tournament, and stay out of these forced 'baby' tournaments until the kids reach the eligibility to play the 12's where, hopefully, the 'babysitting' will end and they can play a normal tennis game on a normal size tennis court again. Both qualified kids inside and outside The Jungle Club tennis program are welcome to sign up and play with us on designated Sundays every month. 1st place is \$75 certificate, 2nd is a \$25 certificate, and a trophy is given for the consolation winner. These certificate tournaments are also for those above the 12 and under level, by the way. I have found that many of our older players like these one-afternoon tournaments as well and these tournaments can provide a way for local juniors to meet and compete in the 14's and 16's. Check with me, Gerry Berkheimer, at 772-321-7800, for tournament times and dates.

2. In the mid 1990s an article was published entitled 'Tennis is Dead' and this article virtually awakened everyone in the tennis industry to the need to develop our industry further and not rest on the laurels of the past 20 years. It was at this time that many of the larger tennis organizations, including the USTA, met and came up with some options. As with most situations like this, a leader had to emerge and the USTA took the helm and began to control the industry—mostly I believe due to their numbers and money available. I sent a letter to all the board members of the USPTA, my tennis teaching organization, to alert them that the USTA would set up programs—and had set up programs—that would completely eliminate or overshadow the good efforts of what the USPTA had initiated and accomplished. Again, I was right and the USTA has done exactly that.
3. Another potential problem for the USTA in junior tennis is school coaching. I recommend my kids should only play if their matches are competitive; otherwise, it is much better to train with me in the daily tennis clinics at The Jungle Club and play on the Challenge Ladder and all the other active tennis events. Volunteer, starter, or filler coaches are nice, but you want a completely-experienced pro for training your child; the window for junior tennis is relatively short. Check the resume of the person running tennis at your child's school, then decide what's best for your child.
4. As for adult tennis, if you like competitive leagues, the USTA has done fairly well in this department, although supplanting in many instances regular club leagues set up by individual pros. In Vero both are played. One significant challenge the USTA has always encountered is accurately assessing the players' levels to match the levels of the other teams especially at regional, state, and national play that can lead to serious mismatches. As for the adults, you can choose local league play which I still believe is positive note for the USTA or you can relax and enjoy some mixers and leagues with us here at the Jungle Club tennis courts.
5. For a tennis organization as the USTA to promote playing tennis as much as they do and simultaneously reduce the amount of play is completely hypocritical to me. The amount of required tennis match play has dropped

considerably over the years-5 sets regular scoring, 3 regular sets, 2 sets and a tie-breaker, an 8-game pro set no ad, a 6-game pro set no ad, and, now the new one they are testing, is the 4-game pro set no ad. Their logic, through one of their own spokespersons, is that society is moving much faster and tennis should pass by as fast as well. I think corporate tennis thinking, tournament directors, and players have become a bit lazy and just want more money for much less time and effort. I, of course, would go the complete opposite direction-and have with my personal adult tournaments, The Shootouts, in the past-and head toward the 3 and 5 regular sets again. These are still done at the highest level of play, but should be in colleges, leagues, high school, and middle school. More play is needed, not less. As I have said for many years, pretty soon the USTA-or whichever corresponding organization is in charge-will just have the players spin their rackets through the finals and finish the entire tournament in 20 minutes.

6. One of my favorite USTA stories is how the head guy of high-level junior training for the USTA came out about a year ago stating that the original pros should stay with their protégés and work through the system rather than being ripped/stolen from the original pro and placed with pros who know nothing of the player, his makeup, or his goals. I'm impressed with his epiphany of keeping the original pro and student together; it concerns me, though, that anyone who has trained players at such a high level for any length of time should know that as a starting point, not a 30-year afterthought.....I hope my kids' parents are reading this as several of my past kids in the tennis program have lost a great deal of progress and time thinking they are better off switching pros and are currently behind 1-3 age divisions. My simple, logical statement to my parents is, 'Switch the words 'tennis pro' with 'parents'. Would you give your child to other parents based on what you have done raising them so far? Of course not. Then why think other tennis pros will do anything better after early exceptional results with your child?' All the kids have to do is follow the system; it's all set up for them at The Jungle Club.

Certainly, my initial outlay of money for the Lifetime Membership with the USTA proved to be quite the investment and I am grateful to those who set up the Lifetime Membership. My guess is those who have laid the correct

groundwork for the USTA back in 'the day' would be quite shocked as to the direction of the current USTA. The USTA then and now are two entirely different organizations. Based just on the current direction of the USTA with the juniors, their tournaments, and overall amount of play, I would not make the investment again if it was offered until I saw the direction and interest of the junior players are put first again.

These are my opinions and how I have viewed the USTA over the years.

I encourage all parents, at least those locally who are reading this, to contact me regarding the junior certificate tournaments every month for their junior tennis players. Remember, constant competition creates better players.

All the best and stay healthy.....Gerry Berkheimer