

# "Can we play the game?"

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I guess anybody who has taught physical education has been confronted with the question from the pupils "Can we play the game?" Depending on the ability of the children, the teacher's plan and the time available, the response can vary, but the teacher tends to say no if the request comes at the beginning of the lesson. Why is that?

Traditionally, and it would seem logically, we teach the skills and rules of a game before we play a game. The typical teacher format of a warm-up, skill introduction and review, skill development in a drill, then a game with the skill incorporated, being the accepted pattern. With a relatively homogeneously skilled group this process usually, depending on the competency of the teacher, works effectively. However, for the more common, heterogeneous ability group, the results are far less encouraging (Bean, 1992). Why is that?

In my experience many children understand the game based on the professional adult version as in baseball, tennis and football, fed to them on television. Children see the game as relatively easy to do and have expectations of doing the same. The child's request to play "the game" virtually means the full adult version. If the ability of the children in a group is not competent enough, or the span of ability in the group makes playing the game impossible for some of the children, then playing the game just tells some children that they cannot play.

Traditionally, the teacher's response to a child's inability to play the game is to concentrate more on the technical skills that enable students to play the adult game. After all you don't want students to lose interest in a game just because they cannot play the professional version. The pupils' response to repetition of physical skills is often, "This is boring, can we play a game yet?" Children, indeed perhaps all of us, want to play.

An approach referred to as "Teaching Games for Understanding" (TGUFU) advocates a way to address this problem. Popularized in the UK in the eighties (Thorpe, Bunker, & Almond, 1986) and gaining wider interest in the United States (Rink, French, & Werner, 1991; Werner, 1989), TGUFU is an attempt to enable the learner to realize what he or she needs to know to play the game. In this approach instead of showing the pupil how to do a skill that the teacher knows is needed to play the game, the pupil is introduced to a modified or simplified game related to the adult game. Through a series of guided discovery questions the teacher tries to help the child realize strategies (ways of playing), tactical (how to beat an opponent) and technical

(biomechanics of skill performance) aspects of playing a game. The potential to modify games are infinite. As an example of a tennis related game, a bowling pin is placed between two players. The players are asked to hit a ball alternatively using their hands. Simple rules to start a game could be "The ball must bounce once, the ball must be hit upwards and you score by knocking the bowling pin over." A strategic question addressing the need for the consistency in playing could be, "How can you play so that the ball keeps going?" A possible answer could be,

"Hit the ball higher."

"Why?"

"Well a higher ball gives your partner more time to play a shot."

From this understanding a conditioned task could be set by the teacher as follows,

"How long can you and your partner keep the ball going before it bounces twice."

This task can help the players to appreciate the benefit in rallying (being consistent).

A related tactical question when the players return to the game could be,

"Where should you stand after you have hit the ball?"

The question concentrates on the idea of positioning with consideration to your opponent's possible shots. A possible answer here could be,

"The other side of the bowling pin because my opponent should be aiming at the bowling pin."

Then the technical skill of accuracy can be focused upon with the question,

"How can you be more accurate with your shots?"

From experience, trial and error, teacher guidance, players soon grasp some of the basic principles of ball control in racquet sports, such as, hitting with a flat surface area, getting beneath the ball, hitting a falling ball and position one's body sideways to the target. Once the need for these skills is appreciated by the players, as with the traditional approach, the teacher can then use drills to refine the technique needed, feeding the improved performance back into a game. The game is developed by adding short handled racquets, then a small court area, and so on.

Essentially, this approach to teaching games emphasizes the **WHY** of playing before **WHAT** you need to know and **HOW** you should play. So, an answer to the pupil's question posed in the title, "Can we play the game?" could be, "Sure, let's play a game!!"

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