

## **White Paper: The Need for a USTA Player Rating System**

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The purpose of this White Paper is to outline the advantages of implementing a rating system to complement (not replace) the existing USTA sectional and national age-based ranking system. *A well-designed rating system is the final piece and missing link needed in the USTA's player development program, providing a comprehensive pathway for the future development of American players. Further, the level-based competitions that would become possible at all levels would not only increase the competitiveness of a greater percentage of our up-and-coming players, but would also indirectly allow them to be better students, citizens, and ambassadors of tennis.*

### **What is the difference between a rating system and a ranking system?**

A rating system is designed to determine a player's level of play. A ranking system is designed to determine the order of players.

### **History**

Over the last 100 years, players in the United States have been developed primarily through age- and gender-based events, the results of which are used to determine their rankings. Each year, committees meet to assess the effect of these efforts, and each year new regulations are attempted as a means of achieving these primary goals of player development and growing the game. Everyone knows that something is missing, but no one is quite sure what to do about it. Everyone is concerned about how we are going to produce a new generation of champions, but no one is entirely sure what to do to make sure that happens. We need to create an environment that will assure our nation will have a pipeline of world-class players that can succeed at the highest levels.

As Einstein pointed out so well, "We can't solve the problems we now have by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

### **Other Countries**

Other countries have become more progressive in implementing certain innovations, which have resulted in a more unified approach to developing world-class players. While we devote time and money to studying the training methods of other countries, we have not done a thorough examination of the benefits of other countries' system for ranking and rating players. Spain, for instance, uses a ranking system whereby every player in the country is ranked in the same system [www.rfet.es](http://www.rfet.es). The Spanish Federation ranks some 19,500 men/boys on the same list; there are over 8,000 women/girls ranked as well. Men and women are on separate lists. The Swedish ranking system is similar to the Spanish system; all males in the country are on the same list, and the females on a second list. This type of system affords juniors the opportunity to compete with adults. The current ATP rankings shows 9 Americans in the top 100; in the WTA top 100 there are 5 Americans; the U.S. population is 305 million. France has 13 men and 5 women in the top 100, with a population of 65 million; Spain has 11 men and 4 women, with a population of 40 million.

The French in particular have made great strides over the last 10 years by adding what we would call a rating system to their system of age and gender based tournaments. Information on their rating system

can be found at [www.tennis-classim.net](http://www.tennis-classim.net). France's system is highly effective. Players from all over the world visit France in the summer and are able to find the appropriate level of tournament easily. Tournaments typically run for over a two-week period. Players of one level begin the tournament, which then allow the qualifiers to move on to play against players of a higher level, and so on. There is usually a back draw. In this format, players know exactly where to enter a given tournament, and are placed with other players of a similar level. The best players don't enter the draw until several rounds later.

The French system should not be confused with "block" seeding. Each player's first match is going to be against a player who has played through from one rating below. This is the "nervous" match for the higher rated player. He or she must pass the first round to play someone from the same level, playing for the opportunity to play the next higher level player. In the U.S., since players in one age group cannot now be compared to players in another age group (unless the younger players have played "up"), it often appears younger players who play up are "upsetting" the older players. In reality, it may be no upset at all. Recent data suggests that many of the best 16-and-under players are among the best 18-and-under players, although they don't regularly compete in the 18's.\* The French system reinforces the wisdom of the coaching axiom that the best ratio of competition is achieved with an even ratio of playing down, even, and up."

While the U.S. approach to its ranking system remains largely unchanged, with the exception of the occasional "tweak" like PPR (rankings based on points per round), other major international tennis organizations are continuing to innovate. Bob Larsen's Tennis Newsletter recently announced that Tennis Europe plans to offer a Unified Ranking System for Junior Players. The system is devised to give a unified overall list that shows the relative strengths of all players, regardless of where they achieved their results or picked up points. A player's total includes points from Tennis Europe Junior Tour 16 and 14 & Under events, plus points earned by players in these age categories who participate in ITF Junior Circuit and professional tournaments, all of which are weighted according their relative strengths. The 14 & Under ranking will continue to be available separately, as well as being integrated to the overall rankings.

The USTA cannot afford to stand still any longer on this issue.

### **Impediments to Implementation**

Most "shareholders" (parents, educators, sectional advocates in tennis in the U.S. immediately quickly see that a well-designed rating system would be permit a welcome shift away from what has unfortunately become an expensive, elitist and education unfriendly player development paradigm that now exists.

However, the world of tennis in the U.S. consists of an alphabet soup of organizations (USPTA, PTR, ITA, IRSA, AAPHER, ATP, WTT, etc.), each of whom have a stake in this debate. Many individuals and organizations have spent many years promoting their own "signature" classification system.

It would be a great gift to U.S. tennis as a whole if this discussion could remain focused on what's best for the U.S., rather than what's in it for anyone, whose name is on it, who gets recognized, or who makes money from this. Let's figure out what works.

The USTA has been wise enough to benefit from the experiences of other countries by implementing programs like Quick Start, or by hiring talented international coaches to work for the USTA. Similarly, we should take full advantage of the lessons learned by others, whether outside or inside the U.S.

### **Don't We Already Have a National Rating System?**

A great amount of time and resources have been put into the formulation of the USTA's NTRP (National Tennis Rating Program) over many years. When the USTA adopted the NTRP system many years ago, it was primarily designed to address the levels of recreational players. It is now used primarily for rating players in adult leagues, but never caught on as a rating for other segments of the USTA. As currently constituted and implemented, NTRP does not provide a wide range of levels to easily distinguish one level from another across the wide spectrum of competitive play, which has caused a glut of players rated from about 2.5-5.0. A recent article in Tennis magazine relates how players "game the system" in order to qualify for National Championships. The ratings of about 90,000 of the 300,000 in the NTRP database are being changed, upsetting many of those who wanted to stay in the lower level.

Play with USTA Leagues, based on one's NTRP rating, is primarily designed to keep players competing against players within their rating range, rather than to provide opportunities for players to keep playing until they reach their highest level, as they do in the French system. The USTA league system is "gamed" because players who want to play on teams that can make it to the national events artificially depress their playing level to remain within a lower rating level. The existing structure rewards player "non-development" because the players at the high end of any rating level have no encouragement to move up. Equally problematic is that players at the bottom end of the rating level get fewer opportunities, since they are probably substitutes on many of the teams.

A great deal of time and money that has gone into developing the NTRP over many years. After expending so many resources on it, it would at first glance seem to make sense to retrofit the NTRP system to fit the wider spectrum of abilities and needs of a more "universal" rating system. However, upon deeper examination, given the current dissatisfaction and problems with NTRP, it might be as sensible as trying to adapt a Volkswagen "bug" to the demands of a NASCAR race. In addition, it would seem to be courting a public relations disaster to try to re-ignite interest in a system that has been available for a wider application for many years, but never captured people's interest.

It may be wiser to start with a chassis that has been designed with the demands of NASCAR driving in mind, and work with it until the engine "purrs" at high speeds.

**Appendix A** describes a system (the Universal Tennis Rating System) which has already proven its efficacy in increasing participation through local level-based tournaments, and which fully addresses all of the issues raised in this paper.

### **Advantages of a Rating System**

With a properly designed system, the effect would be transformative and would make it possible for USTA player development to shift into overdrive;

- Players who grow up with the opportunity to compete regularly against older players would learn how to "play the game" sooner and better, rather than just learning to hit the ball well.
- Local level-based competitions would reduce missed class-time and the pressure to resort to online schooling due to the considerable travel needed to compete nationally.
- More level-based competitions available locally would allow players to remain "potted" for longer in their home soil, which would likely produce more emotionally healthy, "hardier" human beings.

- It would encourage more elite adult players to stay in the game longer. These players are an essential component in building local level-based events that are competitive enough to challenge rising juniors. As a side note, Ray Benton of the Junior Tennis Champions Center and a recently-designated Regional Training Center, noted that involving post college or tour players in this way would also keep their thoughts in the game, as they each move forward in their careers. By keeping them involved, they are more likely to get involved administratively or as sponsors in the future.
- It would provide more “at risk” juniors (juniors who are not good enough to win a round in regular age-based competitions and are likely to give up) with more friendly entry-level tournament play.
- Local level-based competitions would make tennis more affordable, since it would make it easy for thousands more players – young and old - to find suitable competition locally, without the need for extensive travel.
- It would make clearer the steps involved in moving from one level of play to another. Players would be less apt to “skip a step,” (a primary goal of the player development program outlined by Patrick McEnroe in September, 2009).

**In addition to meeting the needs of so many USTA “shareholders” (parents, coaches, college players, juniors, etc.), it would facilitate an increase in participation overall and boost USTA membership revenue.**

**QUICK START: How to grow the New “800 pound gorilla” that we want to talk about now!**

When we consider the investment the USTA is making in Quick Start, what better way to engage potentially a hundred thousand newcomers to the game than by awarding them a rating? It would be a public relations disaster to think that a 10-year-old would be totally “psyched” to be told that he/she is ranked say, #102, #592 in the United States. Not quite the response we hoped for! Now imagine a young player’s response (and his parents) to his being awarded a rating of 2.43, in a letter that said “Congratulations on achieving your first USTA rating of \_\_\_\_\_. With this rating, you are now qualified to play in the following local level-based events, with nominal entry fees, and entry-level friendly round-robin and/or compass draw play. While the majority of young children may never need more than these opportunities, the precocious will quickly advance through these events (and without being held back by the less relevant criteria of age or sex).

**Using the Right “Lure”**

While individual rankings will always be necessary and motivating for the best players, players ranked well down in the 200’s and 300’s tend to be embarrassed, not motivated, by an undistinguished ranking. Rankings sometimes encourage players to “duck” competitions in which a loss would dramatically hurt their ranking. Since individual losses don’t have as obvious an effect on one’s standing within much larger groups of players, players tend not to worry as much about the effect of a loss on their rating.

National competitions would, of course, still be necessary to determine the standings of elite players. A rating system would not interfere with the present system of national events in any way. It can be done as a parallel system to the rankings. However, the potential of a comprehensive rating system is so great that it is likely that most players will get used to identifying themselves by their ratings, rather than by their rankings, since most competitions will give them an opportunity to improve or maintain their ratings. It may eventually seem more objective to select players for the nationals or for international squads based on their ratings instead of their points per round (“PPR”) age based rankings. Time will tell.

### **Increasing Capacity to Accomplish Greater Tasks**

A group of individual computers, when linked, can accomplish tasks that none of them could accomplish by themselves. Similarly, the power of the USTA would be similarly transformed by joining these separate data pools. The following ranking categories are each separate unto themselves:

- Quick Start
- Junior (10's, 12's, 14's, 16's, 18's)
- High school
- ITF junior events
- College - conference, regional, and national team and individual competitions
- ITA Summer Circuit
- College "club" tennis through "Tennis on Campus" sectional and national competitions
- International intercollegiate events, such as the World University Games or the Master's BNP Paribas recently held in France
- Adult leagues
- Senior age-group events, International Club events
- Professional tournaments, and World Team Tennis and Davis and Fed Cup Competitions

### **Is There a Problem, Officer?**

- Similar kinds of problems arise in the proper identification of a player's level when players move from one category to another, whether the categories are based on age, education, or sectional membership: Juniors who age "up" (e.g. move up from the 14's into the 16's) lose all the points they have earned in one age group and have to begin all over again, at great expense in time and money.
- Potential recruits have no way of knowing whether they are good enough to make a given college varsity team.
- High School players have no way of knowing whether they can make a college club team.
- Inter-sectional results do not help one's sectional ranking. While players from one section (e.g. a New Englander who lives near the Eastern Section, particularly in Southern Connecticut) may find it more convenient and less expensive to play tournaments in another section (because they are closer), they cannot get credit within their home section for any good results.
- Blue Chip first year college players cannot qualify for national collegiate events based on their junior rankings.
- Senior rankings, too, are based on PPR. Players from different age groups have to be evaluated based not on their level, but on the points they have accumulated, which makes selection of players for international competitions unnecessarily subjective.

### **Administrative Nightmares Caused by Transitions from One Category to Another**

In most categories, it is challenging to sort out the best way to handle these transitions. For example, at the recent ITA Operating Committee Meeting, the better part of two hours was spent discussing how to rank incoming blue chip junior players and other first year players. Imagine how much time it must take USTA and ITA (Intercollegiate Tennis Association) volunteers and staff to make similar decisions when they must bridge the information gap that exists between so many different transition points, year after year.

A rating system would more easily connect players of the same level to every other player in the system, regardless of their age, location, sex, or educational level.

The positive effects of a rating system would be clearly seen at a local level. It would give many more players a clear and motivating pathway for improvement at any stage of the game. With more players of a certain skill level available within small geographical areas, it would be possible to create hundreds of level-based competitions across the U.S. each drawing players of similar abilities – regardless of age or possibly sex - from shorter distances within a smaller geographical radius. For example, local competitions could include emerging grammar school juniors, talented high school varsity players, college varsity and club tennis players, local pros, and adults.

### **Other Kinks in the System**

In addition, while the PPR ranking system has proven to be effective in making players play more tournaments, it has failed to solve some other problems:

- Players get no credit in their own age group for good wins when they play “up.” While the points that a player wins can be credited towards their ranking in their natural age group, they will not likely earn as many points in the higher division as they would by playing in their own age group - regardless of the quality of their “up” wins.
- Inaccurate seedings and skewed results are almost inevitable when talented younger players “play up.”
- Rankings based on per-round play have no predictive value for college coaches. College coaches rely primarily on tennisrecruiting.net (which lists rankings, but which also provides a rough approximation of their relative success against players their age in several categories), not the USTA rankings.
- “Winning can be confusing,” as Steve Smith, the well-known developmental coach from Tampa pointed out. A high ranking in any age group, however weak the competition or however small the pool of players, encourages a young player to keep doing what he is doing, which for 12-14-year olds can be a hindrance to their development. More competition against more fully developed players (playing against older players and more experienced players) in a ratings-based system would encourage and reward more aggressive juniors and help more passive, one-dimensional players to hone the attacking skills needed to compete with the collegiate and even players who have played the pro circuit.

### **U.S. Juniors Don’t Play the Game As Well...**

It is an oft-heard criticism of U.S. juniors that they hit the ball well, but don’t understand the game as well as their international counterparts. Once in the junior development system, in which they must devote time and energy to seeking points, they have little time and no formal incentive to play against more experienced opponents. All too often, young players in junior clinics are grouped 4 to a court, and are expected to hit crosscourts or be fed balls for an hour and a half because the economics work better for the professional under that structure. 13- and 14-year-olds do not learn the subtleties of the game as quickly from peers with similar styles as they would, for instance, from playing the club champion who looks like a hack but never misses. Contrast this with a comment from a collegiate player who had grown up in the French rating system: “As a 12-year-old, I was good enough in French tournaments to play with adults and older juniors. They sliced me; drop-shotted me, hooked me, pushed me around, and always tried to intimidate me. By the time I was 15, I had seen it all and knew how to play tennis.” Damien Lacombe, former VCU player.

### **Geographical Challenges Unique to the U.S.**

In France, players can take a train to just about any tournament they need to play. The same goes for Spain. The U.S. covers a huge area many times the size of France and Spain combined. There are far fewer players of similar ability and age within most given geographical areas than there are in, for instance, Europe. To get to other players of the same age requires players to travel considerable distances to find suitable competition, which puts tremendous stress on families, resources, time, and education.

### **Staying Closer to Home**

Over the last 40 years, the nuclear family concept has been under assault for a variety of reasons. Other sports keep their juniors closer to home. Young swimmers, who arguably put in more time in the pool than most tennis players do on the court, all can stay in school. They benefit from a club system, run on most college campuses. Swimmers can compete locally because they can compare their times with anyone, and don't have to forego traditional school to seek competition at great distances. We can do better with a rating system that keeps the vast majority of players close to home and in the game.

### **Show Me the Money**

The present costs of developing a nationally competitive player are well beyond the reach of most families. It was estimated in 2006 that it costs families between \$25,000-\$75,000 per year from the ages of 12-18. If U.S. tennis is to compete with other sports, which produce talent through more locally-based development systems, tennis must become more affordable.

Unfortunately, the current is moving strongly in the wrong direction. For the first time in 75 years, the level of prosperity did not increase in the U.S. Family incomes on average in 2008, if computed for inflation, were equal to what they were in 1999. We can only imagine the impact if the data were computed based on 2009 statistics. Tennis is already comparable to figure skating – available only to those who are well-to-do or happen to be in the right place at the right time to catch the eye of a potential sponsor or earn a scholarship. The most popular sports in the U.S. are inexpensive and easy to play at the local and regional level. Some of the best basketball players in the NBA developed their skills by simply playing competitive pick-up games in their neighborhoods, in playgrounds, and on their high school varsity teams.

If the USTA hopes to get more and better athletes to play and stick with tennis, what better way could it find than one that offers more frequent competitive opportunities locally and on a much more affordable basis? This would surely be enough to encourage more families of modest resources to keep their kids involved in tennis.

### **U. S. Education at Risk... Has the USTA Become Part of the Problem?**

The present PPR ranking system puts even greater stress on young players to either resort to online schooling, or to stay in school formally but miss more school than their counterparts in almost any other elite sport. Either choice puts their futures at even greater risk.

Educational “think tanks” continue to warn that the U.S. educational system in general is already at risk, and is not keeping pace with many other countries. They warn that if the U.S. wants to remain competitive economically, it will have to change its ways. The trend toward more on-line schooling is not the change that is needed.

Young people need guidance. They will naturally want to take a path that seems more glamorous – after all, they are only trying to “live their dream.” Only when it is too late do they find that they have mortgaged their futures unwisely – and most often unnecessarily.

Many top junior players in the last 20 years either dropped out of school or relied on home schooling or online programs to pursue their dreams, only to end up on the “failed to make it” list, with little to fall back on, and unable even to get into a college.

If we know that only a few players out of thousands will actually become the Andy Roddick’s of the future, can we afford to continue with a system that – whether intentional or not - mortgages their futures after tennis? How responsible is that?

### **Producing Hardier Individuals and Better Competitors**

Local competitions based on level would give more young players the chance to remain “potted” in their home soil longer. This would arguably help them to grow into “hardier” people. While Patrick McEnroe and the national coaches are now wisely advising all but the most outstanding prospects to go to college, they are still working against what the PPR ranking system encourages top prospects to do, which is why academies have become so prevalent.

There are unquestionably outstanding coaches and people associated with many of the academies that have become popular. Academies by their nature focus primarily on one facet of a young player’s development, often at the expense of other necessary supports.

Developing too great a reliance on academies with our top players affects more than just the elite players alone. It is only natural for an aspiring player to want to do what he sees the top players doing. Local “training center” academies, like the Regional Training Center in College Park, MD, at least allow players to work within the existing structures of a community, which will insure a necessary balance. Mitchell Frank is one such player who has been able to remain in school and still develop into a player capable of reaching the semis of the Orange Bowl this past December.

When a player can remain in a more traditional school environment, stay at home with his or her family, develop lasting friendships with a wide range of people, play with other adults who have had tennis as a big part of their lives, and have non-tennis mentors, it is safe to say that that individual is less at risk in this critical period of his or her personal development.

College coaches know this from experience. Anecdotally, coaches are often dismayed at the lack of fundamental reading and writing skills they see with residential academy players they recruit. They also find they are often less emotionally ready to understand the nature of team play, and seem to burn out more often. And, of course, they often find that tennis players who have been devoting their time just to tennis and end-running school and avoiding a more balanced life often lack maturity and judgment (both on and off the court).

If it takes a village to raise a child, why then are we surprised that many “away from home” academy-raised players - without the traditional supports of family - are less equipped to deal with life’s vicissitudes, i.e. less hardy? Not only are they less able to function independently on the circuit than their international counterparts – but also they are less able to handle themselves off the court.



Even for those players who do resist the temptation to attend school online, the hunt for ranking points in their age group and the next age group up requires missing excessive amounts of school. One top recruit last year casually mentioned that he missed 38 days of school the previous year to keep his national and ITF ranking up. That is over 7 weeks of classes! We can do better if we can build a rating system in which only the crème de la crème must go the academy path, without forcing the majority of young players to compromise the quality of their lives.

We can and must do better if we are to produce the best players possible and fulfill the USTA's mission to promote and develop the growth of tennis.

### **Harnessing the College Tennis Engine**

Varsity college tennis programs – with their great depth of American and international talent – can be the vital link towards increasing opportunities for junior players to get rigorous local competition at a lower cost. It is a lot less expensive to put together level based events that utilize the best that college tennis has to offer than it is to “re-pot” 14 junior players and send them to Florida or California – or even abroad. Just as we are all being encouraged to buy food that is locally grown to reduce the damage of “transportation air miles,” a rating system would reduce damage to the environment, to pocketbooks, and to the educational opportunities of our youth.

In addition to widening the base by putting more juniors into the system, and giving them a better time, a rating system is essential for realizing the great potential of the NCAA approved Campus Showdown format. Campus showdowns are one-day, short format tournaments open to juniors, college players, professionals and adults, usually held on a Sunday or Saturday. Generally, draws are compass draws for both singles and doubles with matches being one set with a tiebreaker at 5-5, although format and scoring is at the discretion of the tournament director (often a college coach). Events can be men's, women's, or co-ed. Entry fees are extremely affordable (\$5 for singles- \$10 for doubles), and the competition is terrific and fun. With little travel time, there's still enough time for players to do their homework and spend some time with their families and friends, and parents still get to “have a life.” What a concept!

NCAA recruiting rules have for many created an “iron curtain” between juniors and college players. Since this barrier exists for no other country than the U.S., we have practically been trying to develop our juniors with one arm tied behind our backs. Contrast this with how players used to develop before these NCAA rules were strictly observed: Eliot Teltscher said that without the opportunity to compete regularly as a 16-year-old against college players from Pepperdine, USC and UCLA, he would never have been prepared to turn pro (and ironically, to skip college!).

Thankfully, the Campus Showdown format has now paved the way for tearing down this artificial barrier. However, in order to clear NCAA rules, entry to these tournaments cannot be based on age or year in school. Without a rating system, however, there exists no reliable way for juniors to determine the proper level of Showdown they should enter. With a rating system, our best young teens in virtually every area of the country could test their skills regularly against collegians and even professionals in their communities. How much easier for all would it be if the USTA website listed Level-based Showdowns that could be found locally throughout the country so that players could easily find the proper level for them?

Even the least competitive Division III or community college teams could host competitive one-day tournaments for younger junior competitors. College club team could host Campus Showdowns for a lower rating level.

The Campus Showdown format (one-set small compass draws, usually of 8 or 16) has proven that this format could be just as effective for other level-based competitions where time, convenience and cost are major factors.

### **Barriers to Utilizing the Potential of the College System**

The USTA player development program and the Collegiate Committee have worked jointly to help mitigate the losses of programs from the college system, which threatens this “engine.” However, there is still a great deal of work to do. College coaches are at risk as well. With the exception of perhaps major 10 college programs that are supported at revenue sport levels, college tennis coaches are underpaid, overworked, and greatly under-respected (as coaches of non-revenue sports). Without well-thought out incentives, it is unrealistic to think that besieged coaches will automatically make coordinating their team schedules with local junior development tournament schedules, or making their players available as practice partners for upcoming juniors, a priority.

To fully realize the potential of the campus showdown format, either formal or informal, incentives must be designed to encourage college coaches to identify with the goals of player development and be willing to “buy in.” While we have over a hundred campus showdowns, and more in the works, everyone involved in promoting these understands that volume is critical to really prime the junior development pump. The incorporation of a rating system itself would do wonders for the college system, as it would give more players opportunities to keep playing competitively during the summer, whether they could afford to travel extensively, or whether they had to work and could only compete on weekends. In addition, continuing outreach from USTA player development leaders will do wonders for creating a closer working relationship with college coaches. Making more wildcards for appropriate level pro events for highly-rated college players will help create a feeling that we are all on the same team, as will including college coaches in more USTA training sessions. Continuing to encourage active sectional Collegiate Committees will also be necessary to build “common cause” at the local level.

### **Ratings Create New Opportunities ...Which Creates Hope...and Everyone Wins**

Hope for advancement to the next level is a vital and necessary incentive at any level of participation:

- Post-Varsity players are one of the USTA’s greatest untapped resources, and yet one of the hardest to tap into. With the exception of the adult league play, adult tournament participation at the elite level has dropped in the last 30 years. Because they are hard at work professionally or academically, few young adults have the time to give up a whole weekend to play in a tournament. Offering shorter-format compass draw events that take only a half-day would encourage this group to stay in the game. By retaining more of these players through local events, it would automatically raise the level of play available locally – just where it will be needed most to help develop top juniors through competition.
- In addition, of the 15,000 players who play on college varsity teams, only a few hundred will ever make it to the NCAAs. The remaining 14,000+ would love to have their results apply towards their rating, which would automatically carry over into summer play.

- Every college team has players who don't start. Instead of feeling like "scrubs," non-starters could enter every competition – whether a tournament or an "exhibition" match at a dual match, with the chance to improve their rating.
- High school players would know whether they are good enough to be recruited or whether they should set their sights on playing on a college club team. In any given 4-year period, there are approximately 340,000 high school players, and only 15,000 spots on varsity teams. Ratings would give the high school tennis system an enormous boost.
- College club teams would no longer have to schedule other collegiate club teams to find an appropriate level of play, when they could play against local clubs in the area at a fraction of the cost. All results would count toward one's rating, whether a player was on a college club team, or a private club team.
- Even local club players, whose skills are not good enough to qualify them for a ranking - and who probably don't even have an interest in getting one - would find local level-based events attractive, thereby increasing the diversity of styles that upcoming kids need to see and deal with in order to develop.
- Thousands of players who are presently ineligible for rankings would be encouraged to keep trying if offered friendly, entry level-based events that would be counted toward their rating. In a sample taken from the USTA New England's player list, there were approximately 2,000 boys and 1,175 girls (from all junior age levels) who had played in one or more tournaments, but had not won a single match. Why not? Many of these juniors played in one age-based (not level-based) junior tournament where they probably drew one of the top seeds and were beaten soundly. If there are over 3,000 players in New England alone in this category, imagine how many tens of thousands of young players there are across the country who might be encouraged to continue in tournament play if they had had more fun – perhaps even won a match! - in their first events. Although each USTA section has tournaments (the names for these levels may differ from one section to another) that are intended to offer competitive opportunities to these ranking-ineligible players, they draw far fewer participants than the next level up because they do not award points. Even if shortened match formats are used, results could easily be applied toward one's rating.
- If so many juniors are now being lost because of our system or because of a poor experience in their first age-group tournaments, what is going to be different for all the players who have been introduced to the game through QuickStart programs once they "graduate" from QuickStart?
- While some players may not be good enough to merit a ranking (based on a 2 out of 3 tiebreak match length), imagine their delight if they knew they could qualify for a USTA rating." It could keep them in the game for a lifetime. And, who knows how many of their friends might be encouraged to pursue tennis?

### **What Should We Do Next?**

If, based on initial soundings, there is strong consensus to implement a rating system, the USTA is faced with either creating its own system, formally adopting that of another country, using one that already exists that meets the criteria needed (the Universal Tennis Rating System – see Appendix A), or modifying one that already exists (NTRP or other ratings systems that have been used to serve "niche" markets).

As we already know, all of us together are smarter than any one of us on our own.

While this White Paper is intended to give the reader a reasonable grasp of the issues surrounding a rating system, it is far from a complete examination. More brainstorming is desirable and necessary at the sectional and national level. Readers who would like to understand more about an existing system called the Universal Tennis Rating System, which incorporates all of the features described in this paper, are encouraged to read Appendix A.

## **APPENDIX A:**

### **The Universal Tennis Rating System**

A domestic rating system with 16 levels and calibration down to the 1/100th of a point already exists that should be seriously considered.

The Universal Tennis Rating System ([www.universaltennis.com](http://www.universaltennis.com)), was started by David Howell, a teaching professional from Tidewater, VA. Howell took top juniors to France for five summers in a row and marveled at how well their system worked. He modeled his own rating system on the French system, and added the innovation of gender mixing. He also introduced a competitive threshold ratio. With the assistance of local pros, they significantly increased participation by offering level-based tournaments based on his 12 levels of play (<http://www.tftennis.com>). The data from the tournaments demonstrated that competitions based on rating levels instead of age-groups created greater parity - and hence more competitive - matches.

Darryl Cummings, the Director of Tennis at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA, encouraged Howell to expand his program so that it might be adaptable for a national or international scale. The result was the Universal Tennis Rating System ("UTRS").

Unlike the NTRP, whose design creates too much of a bottleneck at the upper levels of its 6 point scale, UTR has a 16 point scale and has quite accurately rated all levels from QuickStart graduates to Roger Federer. When tennis legend Vic Braden was shown the UTRS, he called it a "no-brainer."

### **Competitive Threshold – A Valuable Innovation**

In addition to addressing all of the criteria listed in the White Paper "The Need For a USTA Player Rating System," UTRS has a feature not found in other tennis rating systems. Besides computing wins and losses, it also determines whether the losing player had reached a certain competitive threshold, and, unlike other systems, it rewards the losing player slightly.

This enables UTRS to track the percentage of matches within a given event that were "competitive" (7 or more games won in a two-set match). Typically, age-group events have such a wide range of abilities that it results in a much higher percentage of noncompetitive matches. Level-based play, however, often creates a competitive ratio of 50% and higher.

Large draws in age-based events include too many levels of play, which render lower competitive ratios. The top players have to be there as early as Friday, and often don't get a competitive match until Thursday. For example, last summer, the main singles draw at Kalamazoo in the 18s yielded a 42% competitive ratio. Chase Buchanan, the winner, played one year of college tennis and won the tournament without having one match that reached the competitive threshold! The vast majority of the players at Kalamazoo came from sections that averaged around 37% competitive ratios. It is apparent

that age-based tournaments yield less developmental value for the time and money spent than level-based events.

Contrast this with college and professional tennis. Using the 7-game threshold as a guide, Men's Grand Slam events render a 70% competitive ratio (10-game threshold due to 3 out of 5). The same is true for ITA Men's events. WTA Grand Slams and ITA Women's tournament are at 55%.

### **Pilot Programs are already in the Planning Stages**

Based on our preliminary research, UTRS at this point might be considered the "yardstick" against which to measure other rating systems, as it appears to be able to address all the concerns raised in "The Need for A USTA Player Rating System."

To lend more data to the search for the ideal rating system, UTRS is now beginning several pilot programs at the sectional or academy level. A pilot rating program is being formulated by USTA New England to build a shadow rating data base, in order to try out some of the level-based events suggested in the "Rating" White Paper above. Bonnie Vona of USTA MATA used UTRS ratings for their College Showcase last November, and was able to organize 96 kids on 8 courts and make sure each player was with players of the same level.

The Junior Champions Center in College Park, MD has also done preliminary work with the UTRS, as has the Bollettieri Academy. Representatives from Canada and Argentina have also expressed interest in using this system.

### **Appendix B:**

#### **Make International Players a Part of the Solution, Not the Problem**

Globalization, as it has in most other facets of American life, has brought many international players to the US, eager to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by college tennis.

A greater percentage of Division I players are international rather than domestically grown. Often maligned, this talent pool of accomplished international players could become a "field of diamonds" for the USTA's elite player development program – if the USTA can find a way to use this talent to help upcoming juniors in locally-based Level competitions such as the Campus Showdowns. For this to happen, college players and college coaches must be encouraged to buy into a vigorous partnership with the USTA, which will in turn help the USTA get greater returns on its own elite player development efforts. Wildcards into appropriate professional events for Americans who do well in intercollegiate events (made easier when all players in the system have a rating), and close coordination of schedules at the sectional level with the strong college programs will go a long way toward creating a sustainable and powerful architecture for player development.

Globalization is here to stay. College tennis can no more turn back the clock on the international appeal of the US collegiate system than can any other part of the US economy. Billie Jean King has contended for some years, that Americans have to "stop being wimps," embrace the competition, and get better. Patrick McEnroe echoed these sentiments at the USTA Annual Meeting in September, 2009.

The creation of a rating system would immediately take advantage of the wealth of talent in college tennis, including, and perhaps especially, some of the best international players in the world.

**Footnotes:**

\* compiled by Dave Howell of Universal Tennis Rating. With so many of the top 16-year-old players able to compete successfully in the 18's, it suggests that the age categories used prior to 1962 (18-and-under, 15-and-under, 13-and-under, 11-and-under), without the opportunity for mixing ages that would exist with a rating system, might have actually yielded more competitive competitions than our current age breakdowns.