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National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP)

Guidebook



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INTRODUCTION TO THE NTRP

In 1978, the United States Tennis Association (USTA), in cooperation with the United States Professional Tennis Association (USPTA) and the International Health, Racquet and Sportsclub Association (IHRSA), undertook a study of the many tennis rating systems in existence at that time. Researchers involved in evaluating the existing systems agreed that a rating program had to be universally accepted, easy to administer, and non-exclusive in order to be successful.

With this in mind, the USTA, USPTA, and IHRSA chose to adopt and promote the National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP), a classification system that identifies and describes thirteen levels of tennis-playing ability. The sponsoring organizations reasoned that by standardizing the method of classifying players throughout the country, players could achieve better competition, on-court compatibility, personal challenge, and enjoyment. The NTRP is also an excellent tool for player placement in group lessons, leagues, tournaments, and other programs.

To assist in self-rating, a set of guidelines (provided in this booklet) for each level of play was developed and adopted by the sponsoring organizations as an official part of the NTRP.

In research sponsored by the USTA, Graham Neil, Ph.D., McGill University, Montreal, found that when properly used the NTRP is a valid method for determining a player's level. He looked at 75 tennis players ranging in age from 13 to 55. After they rated themselves, he measured their actual level of competition and found a high correlation between their self-rating and their actual level of play.

BENEFITS OF THE NTRP FOR TEACHING PROFESSIONALS

The NTRP is one of the most versatile programming tools currently available to teaching professionals for strengthening their tennis programs, thereby increasing their revenues while promoting the growth of tennis. Through a variety of applications, the NTRP can increase the number of players and the enjoyment of those players at private and public facilities of every kind. Following are some of the ways in which teaching professionals can apply the NTRP to the mutual benefit of these two important causes.

1. The NTRP can be used to ensure equitable competition in virtually every type of league activity including USTA League Tennis, corporate leagues, interclub leagues, and intraclub leagues.
2. The NTRP is the perfect equalizer for any recreational tournaments at private or public facilities that might benefit from level competition. These include round robins, ladders, men's, women's, and mixed doubles tournaments, adult-child events, and team tournaments.

3. The NTRP can be used to put together players of compatible playing levels for group lessons. Maintaining player compatibility in group lessons is a major determinant of a group's longevity. It also encourages pupils to practice between lessons
4. The NTRP offers an ideal progression around which to plan a tennis teaching program. The distinction between one NTRP level and the next in regard to basic strokes and strategies makes it an ideal guide for planning lesson programs.
5. The distinct progression that the NTRP provides for lesson programming is an effective marketing/sales tool for teaching professionals in promoting their respective lesson programs.
6. NTRP ratings are a key element in establishing a reliable player bank, either a manual or computerized listing of available players by level.
7. NTRP provides the teaching professional with a tool to encourage non-tennis players at any facility to make tennis their "second"—if not their first—sport. Being able to arrange immediate and compatible games or lessons for non-players is a step toward converting those individuals to tennis.
8. NTRP provides the imaginative tennis professional with a number of ways to equalize individuals or teams during a match. The difference between two NTRP ratings can be used as a means of adding to, subtracting from, or working off points in order to win a game in any fun set or handicap/equalization tournament.
9. NTRP is tennis's answer to generating motivational improvement of players.
10. Since it is a universal rating system, the NTRP allows teaching professionals to recommend lesson programs and games to visitors from distant sites.

HOW TO PROMOTE THE NTRP

Posters, newsletters, newspapers, public announcements, and flyers all can be used to inform players, parks and recreation departments, and managers of sports facilities of the benefits of using the NTRP in their tennis programs. Whenever possible the NTRP should be used for organized recreational and competitive activities such as instructional programs, round robins, social matches, leagues, challenge ladders, inter-club competitions, and tournaments.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT THE NTRP

The following suggestions are offered to help a facility, CTA (Community Tennis Association) or sponsoring organization initiate and maintain a successful NTRP rating program:

1. Players should be given sufficient information and resources to be able to rate themselves, including contact information for assistance. The self-rating guideline poster should be displayed in a prominent spot as a reference for participants or mailed to players or distributed at the facility where the NTRP is to be used. Facilities can direct players to USTA.com for NTRP characteristics.
2. A qualified person should handle such details as scheduling matches and keeping accurate records of results.
3. After the NTRP is established, a computer program may generate ratings, which are based on match results. The facility or sponsoring organization should maintain a file of all rated players and keep it up to date as ratings change. This facilitates matching players for social or competitive programs. Once the program is established, maintenance tasks such as updating the file become routine, but they do require time and effort.

NTRP SELF-RATING GUIDELINES

The NTRP describes the general characteristics that tennis players exhibit in each of thirteen skill levels. Depending on your competitive ability and other factors, you may find that you actually play above or below the category that best describes your skill level. The category you choose is not meant to be permanent, but can be adjusted as your skills change or as your match play demonstrates the need for reclassification. Ultimately, your rating is based upon match results. With these caveats in mind, the following provides general guidelines for self-rating and then for checking the probable accuracy of your self-rating.

To place yourself in an NTRP skill level:

1. Begin with 1.0. Read the descriptions of all the general characteristics carefully and then decide which one best describes your present tennis-playing ability.
2. Assume you are competing against players of the same gender and ability level.
3. If in doubt, place yourself in the next highest level.

To check your self-rating:

After choosing a playing level, ask yourself:

“Can I play competitively against any age player of my gender who is rated at the same level that I have rated myself?”

If your answer is “yes,” your self-rating is probably accurate.

NTRP CLINIC: PREPARATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Purpose of an NTRP Clinic

There are a number of reasons to hold an NTRP Clinic, including the following:

1. To promote the use of the NTRP as an effective means of classifying tennis players according to their skill levels.
2. To demonstrate the use of the NTRP as a self-rating procedure.
3. To generate increased interest in tennis programs and services available at local facilities and clubs.

Preparation for an NTRP Clinic

To conduct an NTRP clinic, you will need the following materials:

- National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP) Guidebook, revised 2005
- National Tennis Rating Program Poster

Study the NTRP Guidebook. Be certain you are thoroughly familiar with all thirteen skill levels. Once you are, take the following steps:

1. Decide how long the NTRP clinic will be—one afternoon, an entire day, a weekend, or one week. Then decide on the specific day or days and the hours during which the clinic will be held. Allow sufficient preparation and on-court time so that the NTRP event will be successful.
2. Announce the NTRP Clinic, including dates, time, and location, well in advance to ensure maximum community participation.
3. In order to be able to estimate the number of participants and thereby prepare most efficiently for your clinic, provide an opportunity for pre-registration.

Then organize the NTRP clinic to suit the expected number of participants. Remember: Effective self-ratings are best accomplished when players can be matched with other players of similar ability.

CONDUCTING THE NTRP CLINIC

Design your NTRP clinic so that it is both effective and enjoyable. As people arrive, greet them in a friendly manner and introduce yourself. Ask them to introduce themselves to each other. Have the NTRP poster prominently displayed so that it's a focal point of discussion for early arrivers.

The following suggestions have been shown to be effective in running a successful NTRP clinic:

1. Briefly describe the thirteen skill levels and self-rating procedures of the NTRP. Explain the purpose of the NTRP.
2. Before assigning players to a court, have them review the NTRP poster. Then have them rate themselves. Answer questions and guide participants through the self-rating process.
3. Group players of similar ability for singles and doubles play.
4. Have each group play a minimum of four no-ad games and a tie-break while a professional observes their on-court performance. (Allow a half hour minimum for each group.) If necessary, revise their self-ratings based on what the professional observes during clinic play.
5. Keep a complete record of all players who participate in the NTRP clinics along with their ratings. Let players know that the initial self-rating is a suggested entry level for league, tournament, or facility participation.

SUMMARY

The National Tennis Rating Program was developed because of the conviction that players will get more enjoyment from the game of tennis if they are more evenly matched by skill level and that the best way to achieve this is through a universally accepted standardized rating program that is easy to administer. The NTRP achieves these goals. The NTRP is evaluated annually and modifications are made as necessary to ensure its ongoing quality.

The following pages present first the general characteristics of the thirteen NTRP playing levels and then more details for each of the playing levels, which can be used for verification purposes. These guidelines are followed by a list of commonly asked questions and their answers regarding the NTRP.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF NTRP PLAYING LEVELS

Players in wheelchairs should use these same General Characteristics to determine their NTRP skill level. The only difference observed is mobility and power on the serve. (For more details concerning characteristics, see pages 8-9.)

- 1.0 This player is just starting to play tennis.
- 1.5 This player has limited experience and is still working primarily on getting the ball into play.
- 2.0 This player needs on-court experience. This player has obvious stroke weaknesses but is familiar with basic positions for singles and doubles play.
- 2.5 This player is learning to judge where the ball is going, although court coverage is weak. Can sustain a *short rally of slow pace* with other players of the same ability.
- 3.0 This player is fairly consistent when hitting medium-paced shots, but is not comfortable with all strokes and lacks execution when trying for directional control, depth, or power. Most common doubles formation is one up, one back.
- 3.5 This player has achieved improved stroke dependability with directional control on moderate shots, but still lacks depth and variety. This player exhibits more aggressive net play, has improved court coverage, and is developing teamwork in doubles.
- 4.0 This player has dependable strokes, including directional control and depth on both forehand and backhand sides on moderate shots, plus the ability to use lobs, overheads, approach shots, and volleys with some success. This player occasionally forces errors when serving. Rallies may be lost due to impatience. Teamwork in doubles is evident.
- 4.5 This player has begun to master the use of power and spins and is beginning to handle pace, has sound footwork, can control depth of shots, and is beginning to vary game plan according to opponents. This player can hit first serves with power and accuracy and place the second serve. This player tends to overhit on difficult shots. Aggressive net play is common in doubles.
- 5.0 This player has good shot anticipation and frequently has an outstanding shot or attribute around which a game may be structured. This player can regularly hit winners or force errors off of short balls and can put away volleys, can successfully execute lobs, drop shots, half volleys, overhead smashes, and has good depth and spin on most second serves.
- 5.5 This player has developed power and/or consistency as a major weapon. This player can vary strategies and styles of play in a competitive situation and hits dependable shots in a stress situation.
- 6.0 to 7.0 The 6.0 player typically has had intensive training for national tournament competition at the junior and collegiate levels and has obtained a sectional and/or national ranking. The 6.5 and 7.0 are world-class players.

VERIFICATION GUIDELINES

	FOREHAND	BACKHAND	SERVE/RETURN OF SERVE
1.0	This player is just starting to play tennis.		
1.5	This player has limited experience and is still working primarily on getting the ball into play.		
2.0	Incomplete swing; lacks directional intent	Avoids backhands; erratic contact; grip problems; incomplete swing	Incomplete service motion; double faults common; toss is inconsistent; return of serve erratic
2.5	Form developing; prepared for moderately paced shots	Grip and preparation problems; often chooses to hit forehand instead of backhand	Attempting a full swing; can get the ball in play at slow pace; inconsistent toss; can return slow-paced serve
3.0	Fairly consistent with some directional intent; lacks depth control	Frequently prepared; starting to hit with fair consistency on moderate shots	Developing rhythm; little consistency when trying for power; second serve is often considerably slower than first serve; can return serve with fair consistency
3.5	Improved consistency and variety on moderate shots with directional control; developing spin	Hits with directional control on moderate shots; has difficulty on high or hard shots; returns difficult shots defensively	Starting to serve with control and some power; developing spin; can return serve consistently with directional control on moderate shots
4.0	Good consistency; hits with depth and control on moderate shots; may try to hit too good a placement on a difficult shot	Directs the ball with consistency and depth on moderate shots; developing spin	Places both first and second serves, often with power on first serve; uses spin; dependable return of serve; can return with depth in singles and mix returns in doubles
4.5	Very good consistency; uses speed and spin effectively; controls depth well; tends to overhit on difficult shots; offensive on moderate shots	Can control direction and depth but may break down under pressure; offensive on moderate shots	Aggressive serving with limited double faults; uses power and spin; developing offense; on second serve frequently hits with good depth and placement; frequently hits aggressive service returns; can take pace off with moderate success in doubles
5.0	Strong shots with control, depth, and spin; uses forehand to set up offensive situations; has developed good touch; consistent on passing shots	Can use backhand as an aggressive shot with good consistency; has good direction and depth on most shots; varies spin	Serve is placed effectively with intent of hitting to a weakness or developing an offensive situation; has a variety of serves to rely on; good depth, spin, and placement on most second serves to force weak return or set up next shot; can mix aggressive and off-paced service returns with control, depth, and spin
5.5	This player is capable of hitting dependable shots in stress situations; has developed good anticipation; can pick up cues from such things as opponent's toss, body position, backswing, preparation; first and second serves can be depended on in stress situations and can be hit offensively at any time; can analyze and exploit opponent's weaknesses; can vary strategies and style of play in a competitive situation.		
6.0 to 7.0	These players will generally not need NTRP ratings. Rankings or past rankings will speak for themselves. The 6.0 player typically has had intensive training for national tournament competition at the junior level and collegiate levels and has obtained a sectional and/or national ranking. The 6.5 player has a reasonable chance of succeeding at the 7.0 level and has extensive satellite tournament experience. The 7.0 is a world-class player who is committed to tournament competition on the international level and whose major source of income is tournament prize winnings.		

Specific Characteristics of Various Playing Levels

VOLLEY	SPECIAL SHOTS	PLAYING STYLE
Reluctant to play net; avoids backhand; lacks footwork		Familiar with basic positions for singles and doubles play; frequently out of position
Uncomfortable at net especially on the backhand side; frequently uses forehand racquet face on backhand volleys	Can lob intentionally but with little control; can make contact on overheads	Can sustain a short rally of slow pace; modest consistency; weak court coverage; usually remains in the initial doubles position
Consistent forehand volley; inconsistent backhand volley; has trouble with low and wide shots	Can lob fairly consistently on moderate shots	Fairly consistent on medium-paced shots; most common doubles formation is still one up, one back; approaches net when play dictates but weak in execution
More aggressive net play; some ability to cover side shots; uses proper footwork; can direct forehand volleys; controls backhand volley but with little offense; difficulty in putting volleys away	Consistent overhead on shots within reach; developing approach shots, drop shots, and half volleys	Improved consistency on moderate shots with directional control; improved court coverage; starting to look for the opportunity to come to the net; developing teamwork in doubles
Depth and control on forehand volley; can direct backhand volleys but usually lacks depth; developing wide and low volleys on both sides of the body	Can put away easy overheads; can poach in doubles; follows aggressive shots to the net; beginning to finish point off; can hit to opponent's weaknesses; able to lob defensively on difficult shots and offensively on set ups	Good consistency on ground strokes with directional control and depth demonstrated on moderate shots; not yet playing good percentage tennis; teamwork in doubles is evident; rallies may still be lost due to impatience
Can handle a mixed sequence of volleys; good footwork; has depth and directional control on backhand; developing touch; most common error is still overhitting	Hits approach shots with good depth and control; can consistently hit volleys and overheads to end the point	Very good consistency; more intentional variety in game; is hitting with more pace; covers up weaknesses well; beginning to vary game plan according to opponent; aggressive net play is common in doubles; good anticipation; beginning to handle pace
Can hit most volleys with depth, pace and direction; plays difficult volleys with depth; given opportunity volley is often hit for a winner	Approach shots and passing shots are hit with pace and high degree of effectiveness; can lob offensively; overhead can be hit from any position; hits mid-court volleys with consistency	Frequently has an outstanding shot, consistency, or attribute around which game is built; can vary game plan according to opponent; this player is "match wise," plays percentage tennis, and "beats himself or herself" less than the 4.5 player; solid teamwork in doubles is evident; game breaks down mentally and physically more often than the 5.5 player

Players in Wheelchairs:

Players in wheelchairs should use these general characteristics to determine their NTRP skill level. The only differences are as follows: **Mobility:** While players in wheelchairs may have skills that would normally provide them a certain rating, the mobility factor suggests that when competing against able-bodied players, they should participate at an NTRP skill level that provides for competitive rather than compatible play. **Serving ability:** Due to the nature of the player's injury or disability, a powerful serve may not be possible. In this case, it may be more realistic to self-rate below 4.0, as service strength becomes key beyond this level.

Many tournament players in wheelchairs have already received an NTRP rating. Wheelchair players should check with players whose skills match their own before determining their rating. The very best world-class players in wheelchairs have an NTRP rating in the low 4.5s.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Following are some of the most common questions asked about the NTRP and answers to these questions. If you would like additional information on the NTRP program and how it can be used in local programs, please visit usta.com, select USA League Tennis, and then select NTRP on the drop-down menu.

General Topics

- Q. *How do the NTRP classifications compare to the traditional terms “beginner,” “advanced beginner,” “intermediate,” etc. or the frequently used letters a, b, c, aa, bb, aaa, etc.?*
- A. The NTRP was designed to eliminate the use of traditional terms in classifying player ability. There is so much ambiguity associated with these systems that translation is difficult. In various parts of the country, for example, “A” or “Advanced” is the top level of play, while in other places “AAA” is the best. In general terms, a “D” player would be a 2.5 and below; a “C” player would be a 2.6-3.5; a “B” player would be a 3.6-4.5; an “A” player would be a 4.6-5.0; an open player would be a 5.1 and above.
- Q. *How do players enter the USTA League Tennis program?*
- A. New players self-rate using the General and Specific Characteristics of NTRP Playing Levels.
- Q. *Should players rate themselves as singles players, doubles players, or both?*
- A. Players should rate themselves based on their overall tennis ability. However, players who are stronger at either singles or doubles should base their rating on the stronger game.
- Q. *Can the NTRP be successful as a self-rating-only program?*
- A. A self-rating can be accurate. But it is important to remember that ***there is no substitute for match results as a measure of playing ability.*** Even when the NTRP is used as a self-rating-only program, a tennis professional can assist players through the process. In any competitive program, it will become obvious from match results when players have rated themselves inaccurately.
- Q. *Can existing leagues, challenge ladders, and other competitive programs be used in implementing the NTRP at a facility?*
- A. Yes. These programs are beneficial in implementing the NTRP, because the match results can be used to assist in self-rating.

- Q. *Can the NTRP self-rating system be used for placement in instructional programs?*
- A. Yes. The self-rating program can easily be used in instructional programs. If players incorrectly rate their ability levels, it will show up in class performance. It is the responsibility of the instructor to help players adjust their ratings and place them at proper class levels.
- Q. *Is there a prescribed "test" that players can use to rate themselves?*
- A. No. There is no specific test that players should use to determine their self-rating. The best criteria is match results, but it is helpful to refer to the NTRP self-rating guidelines as well as consider their tennis history, the NTRP ratings of friends they play, athletic background, and how much they might improve in one year.
- Q. *Must players qualify on all points of all preceding NTRP descriptions before placing themselves in a particular category?*
- A. No. The rating categories are generalizations about skill levels. They should place themselves in the category that most closely matches their playing skill level. The ultimate test is in match play results.
- Q. *Can a player with an obvious stroke deficiency be rated at the same level, or higher, as a player who has no such deficiency?*
- A. Yes. Some players, for example, cannot hit topspin backhands but have certain abilities that enable them to play competitively with players who can do so. A player's competitive record is the best test of his or her rating.
- Q. *Does the NTRP rate men and women on the same scale?*
- A. The NTRP is used to rate both men and women, but men's and women's ratings are not intended to be equivalent. When rating themselves, players should use players of the same gender as reference points. However, for those individuals wishing to compete against players of the opposite gender, the following can be used as a guide. At approximately the 3.5 rate for a man, a woman with a 4.0 rating will be competitive. When a man reaches the 5.0 level or above, a woman needs to be approximately 1.0 higher in order to be competitive.
- Q. *Is it possible to use gradations smaller than .5 in rating players?*
- A. Yes. In fact, the USTA NTRP computer program ratings are calculated to 100th of a point. It is recommended, however, that for self-rating, players use the .5 increments, which closely follow the available tennis levels.

Q. *What does it mean to be “competitive” with another player?*

A. A “competitive” match is one in which the outcome is unpredictable (scores such as 6-4, 6-4 or closer). When one player consistently wins with only the occasional loss of a few games, the match is not “competitive.” Properly rated, players within .2 of each other should be competitive in playing ability.

Q. *What does it mean to be “compatible” with another player?*

A. Players with up to a .5 difference in ratings are generally considered “compatible.” At a .5 difference in ratings, the outcome is predictable, with the higher-rated player winning routinely. “Compatible” players however, can offer each other recreational, social, and practical benefits.

Q. *Can a player’s rating change?*

A. In a dynamic environment, a player’s rating changes with every match. However, rating adjustments will be made during the season only if the computer evaluates the player to be clearly above the level at which he or she is currently playing.

Age/Rating/Ranking

Q. *What is the relationship between ranking and rating?*

A. Ranking is based upon achievement in sanctioned tournaments, many of which are based on age divisions. Rating is based on match results, tennis background, and the NTRP self-rating guidelines.

Q. *How should individuals rate themselves if they are formerly ranked players who have not played much in recent years or who have had a permanent injury?*

A. A person’s rating should be closely related to his or her potential upon resuming play on a regular basis. Ratings will not be downgraded because of layoffs or temporary injuries, but only for permanent injuries or aging debilities.

Q. *How does age enter into the NTRP ratings?*

A. The NTRP is not based on age divisions. All players of the same gender, regardless of age, should be used as reference points in determining player ratings. After choosing a rating, players should ask themselves: “Can I play competitively against any age player of my gender who is rated at the same level that I have rated myself?”

Q. *Can junior players use the NTRP to self-rate?*

A. Yes. If junior players participate in an adult activity using the NTRP, their ratings are in comparison to all other players of the same gender of any age—not just other junior players. Junior players should not rate themselves until they are experienced in match play.

Q. *How does mobility, age, competitive experience and fitness affect your rating?*

A. **Mobility:** Ability to cover the courts is a prime factor in competitive success. Mobility is a more important factor in singles than in doubles.

Age and Competitive Experience: As speed decreases with age, a player's competitive ability may be affected. At the same time, strategy and skills may improve as a player ages. Therefore, one must rely on competitive results.

Fitness: Temporary changes in fitness such as a non-permanent injury should not affect a player's rating. Players whose game and physical fitness have suffered due to lack of practice and exercise will not be match tough and should be placed in the category where they normally compete.

CASE A

A former world-class player, now a 60-and-over senior player, is interested in a rating. Although once a 7.0, this player is no longer a 7.0. Now his rating will be adjusted according to current match results and the NTRP self-rating guidelines.

CASE B

A talented athlete takes up tennis. This player has the potential to increase his NTRP rating dramatically. In this case, skill development is more important than aging.

Remember:

- The rating categories are generalizations about skill level.
- You may find that you actually play above or below the category that best describes your skill level, depending on your competitive ability.
- Your self-rating is not meant to be static; rather it may be adjusted as your match play demonstrates the need for reclassification.
- *There is no substitute for match results as a measure of playing ability.*