

NTRP

and the Health of the Game

The National Tennis Rating Program, formally launched by the United States Tennis Association in 1980, and now an integral component of both inter-club team play and individual tournament competition, is not without its flaws. Although well-intentioned, in certain instances it has, unfortunately, been allowed to evolve onto a slippery slope.

Motivated by golf's long standing handicap system, tennis attempted to follow suit in order to better level its competitive playing field, particularly with regard to league doubles play, which represents the heart and soul of USTA membership with nearly 350,000 participants nationwide. It replaced the long standing A, B, C rating system for team play — any given club's best players were designated as A's, their second tier were B's and third tier were C's — along with specific age group differentiations for individual play. Unfortunately, tennis skills and levels of play — with 13 different NTRP rating levels — are far more difficult to compartmentalize and do not lend themselves well to handicapping.

For those unfamiliar with the current system, a beginner is designated a 1.0 player, while the big boys and girls on the professional tours are at the very top of the spectrum at 7.0. In clubland, the most populated divisions are 3.0, 3.5 and 4.0, with a 3.0 rating being a first modicum of skill and earned success and a 4.0 being a very well-rounded player.

Official match results are regularly entered into the USTA computer to maintain a player's status quo, advancement or even rating demotion. This is a never-ending topic of player conversations, and it often becomes, rightly and wrongly, a source of frustration and dissatisfaction among many.

You would think that players would be continually striving to improve their games and results in order to play at "the next level," a phrase commonly clichéd by athletes in all sports. Not always so in the NTRP scheme of things. Why not?

Some express dissatisfaction, once their rating has been elevated because of their success, over then not being able to win matches as easily and regularly. Winning, albeit at a level they no longer belong in, trumps the sense of personal achievement that one would think would be embraced in being "bumped-up" to play against better competition.

Others decry their upward ascent because they won't be able to play with their friends anymore — players whose match records happen to not warrant promotion — prompting some to formally file protests with, would you believe, made up excuses about physical limitations they don't really have or have embellished, and even ghost

operations that never took place in order to maintain their status quo.

I also know of a league match in which one of the doubles partners, a good player who worried about being recognized as belonging at a higher level, queried their partner about easing up in a match where a lopsided victory was probable in order to avoid triggering a rating red flag.

Early on, one had to attend an NTRP rating session in order to be evaluated and rated by one of the attending pros before they could participate in league play. I recall volunteering for one of these sessions and remember it as, shall I say, a very interesting experience. Lower players, typically 2.5's, perceiving themselves as better and better players requesting in earnest that I not rate them "too high," again apprehensive about taking on better opponents.

Currently, first time players are allowed to rate themselves — pros eventually shunned the process en masse — with their submitted results regularly computer crunched to make any necessary adjustments if they were too modest in evaluating their games, or, as is more often the case, willingly "sandbagging," not unusually at the urging of a team captain looking to gain an unfair advantage.

"Everyone else is doing it," is the party line rationale among players and their captains seeking an edge to win, whether it's men's, women's or mixed-doubles. And therein lies a problem. And yes, they are all doing it.

An instance of this occurred not long ago in which a 50-year-old relative rookie and newcomer to USTA league tennis participated on a team that won their local 6.5 Combo league (a 3.0 and 3.5 player



partnering-up) and qualified for the state finals at the USTA tennis center in Daytona. Early in his first match against two allegedly equally skilled twenty-something players, both of whom exhibited big topspin forehand weapons and kick serve skills that normally don't exist in a 6.5 combo league, he sarcastically asked them, "So which one of you is the 3.0?" They laughed nervously, yet unapologetically regarding their obvious scam.

A post-match protest was filed against their participation at that level — officials were not on site to monitor any clear violations that slipped through the cracks at the local level — but the powers that be gave these guys a pass with a full plate of blue blazered mumbo jumbo despite the indisputable match-up discrepancies. Not a good message to the perpetrators. And then the word gets out.

Of equal concern, if not more so, is that it's not uncommon for club pros, some of whom are not that far removed from playing college tennis or stints in tennis' minor leagues, or even veteran pros who have decades of playing savvy, to participate in USTA league play. I thought that these leagues were aimed specifically at promoting participation among club and public park players, i.e. the "growing the game" slogan, not at individuals earning their living in tennis?

I know of a very good woman player, a solid 4.0 player with 4.5+ talent, who told me about playing against a young "ex-Gator player" in a 9.0 combo mixed league whose serve was so overwhelming she "couldn't even return it into play."

Additionally, it has actually become acceptable, represented as "strategic," to alter a team's actual line-up strength as if all the players

involved are perfectly interchangeable parts, which they are not. Example: placing a team's top doubles team in the #2 or #3 position to get a sure win and sacrifice the #1 position since it's being projected as a sure loss. That's not strategy; that's poor sportsmanship. "But we're all 3.5's, and that's what we've been rated, so why shouldn't we be able to do that?" is a common rationale. "Besides," they say, "everyone else is doing it." And, truth be told, they are.

This state of affairs reminds me of something I read recently about the way in which today's society has evolved in general: "We used to devote ourselves to doing things right. Now we're more interested in how we can sell it."

Over the years, the sporting challenge of pure club-to-club, head-to-head, strength-to-strength, let the chips fall where they may competition has fallen victim to an increasingly accepted culture of circumventing tennis' long standing tradition of fair play. This development should be alarming to all who love the game and its integrity.

It's up to the USTA's national leadership, and those in the trenches of its 13 sections, to step-up and reset the current culture with an updated mandate, a League Tennis Code of Conduct if you will, hopefully one backed-up by a no-nonsense monitoring and enforcement system to penalize those individuals and teams guilty of egregious manipulation of NTRP's original intent. 