

THE PARENT-COACH-PLAYER TEAM

A strong parent-coach-player relationship is essential in the development of a junior player. The stronger the team, the better the chance is for success. For best results, it is important for this team to work together, be supportive of one another, and always have the child's best interest at heart. Not all young children's personalities and egos are cut out for individual sports and coaches must help parents recognize this fact. Tennis is a high ego sport and players need to be able to handle having all the pressure on them and have the mentality of wanting to "be on center stage." Some players do not want all the pressure to be on them and are better suited to playing a team sport. That way if the team loses, they do not have to take it so personally because the team lost, not them individually. That is why it is important for parents to expose each of their children by the age of twelve years old or earlier to both individual and team sports. All sports will help develop the necessary physical skills like hand-eye coordination, body agility, quickness, stamina, and footwork. They will also learn mental skills such as handling pressure, confidence, concentration, patterns of play, tactics, strategies, and how to compete. Then, let the child decide with input from their coaches which sport he/she likes best and wants to pursue. If the decision is to pursue tennis, then realistic goals need to be set like playing on a junior high or high school team or even perhaps a college team. These goals will keep the player motivated to improve in order to reach his/her goal.

Many children aspire to play professionally one day, but the reality is very few will attain that skill level. Learning the sport of tennis is a long term proposition. So much has to happen over many years in order for that to occur. Players must learn discipline and patience; be dedicated in their practice sessions; be a student of their own game; absorb and apply the coach's information during lessons; learn from watching the point play of top players; and play tournaments to gain experience. The player needs to be his own best friend. He needs a strong ego to fight for himself on the court and learn three lessons from each loss. There are ways to discover the players that have the most potential. One of the aspects we look for as a coach was how quickly a student picked up the new concepts we gave him/her during their lessons. Talented players would pick up the concept immediately and not have to be told twice. They perceived the value of the information, locked it in, which allowed for more rapid improvement. These were the players to put on a fast track and had the best chance of reaching a high level of play. However, there was still no guarantee they would make it because so much had to fall in place over their junior career.

Our philosophy is players need to be successful at each level of development before moving up to the next level. Then they have to continually learn how to compete at each new level. That's why learning the sport of tennis is such a long term proposition. Keep in mind, development does not happen in a straight line. It occurs in a series of plateaus. Players learn a new stroke or improve a weakness that takes them to another level of play. They stay there for awhile until additional growth, such as added a new stroke or improved a weakness, allows them to move to the next level and so on. There is both physical growth, i.e. stroke technique, grips, and footwork as well as mental growth to add. There are no quick fixes or shortcuts to utilize in getting there.

A coach can look at three variables to get insight into how good a player can be: talent, work ethic, and passion. It is not unusual for a player with a strong work ethic and less natural talent to achieve a higher level of play than a player with more talent that lacks a good work ethic. But it is the player's passion, not the parents that will ultimately dictate how high a level of play will be achieved. Passionate players thrive on strenuous workouts; the harder the better. Both coaches and players know these tough workouts will help them achieve better results.

Passion can be defined by the player's actions. Do players do things on their own without being told? Are they practicing on a regular basis and playing practice matches? Do they practice in all types of weather? Are they practicing when others are not to get ahead? Can they push themselves when they are tired? Are they doing off-court training to supplement their on-court practice? These are all signs of passion and of a player committed towards being the best. If players are not willing to do these things, they are not really as passionate about their tennis as they claim, and their improvement will be slower to evolve. Sometimes the coach's passion is greater than his student's. We will give each of our students an assignment of something to do for their game and then ask them if they followed through on the task. The passionate player will always complete the assignment in a timely manner. If they did not do it, we understand as a coach our passion may be greater than theirs. And that was ok because we now knew where they were coming from and hopefully, the coaches passion for bettering their game would make them reach a higher level than they believed was possible.

A good tennis parent supports their child financially and emotionally. They will pay for their lessons and equipment as long as the child enjoys the sport. They need to be the steadying influence in their child's life. They need to be involved, but not overly involved. To excel in an individual sport, it is important for the player to be an independent thinker and take full responsibility for all of his/her actions on and off the court. This includes having them register for tournaments, carrying their own bags, and having all their equipment ready for drill sessions, lessons, and tournament matches. It also includes proper match preparation, diet/nutrition and rest before matches. There needs to be time-off planned into their schedule to stay refreshed and avoid burnout. Even the most passionate players need one-two days off a week. Good coaches know when their players are showing signs of burnout and need to take a break from tennis. This break could only be a week or two, but may even last several months.

Parents need to keep the player's ability and successful play in perspective. Other parents and fellow competitors will constantly be offering compliments on how well the child is playing. Parents need to neutralize these comments in order to keep their child emotionally balanced. Parental reaction after matches needs to be the same whether the match is won or lost-not too high or not too overly concerned. The most important aspect is that the child gave the best effort they could to win the match that day. Effort is one of the few things players have total control over. If they did not, then the parent has every right to question the lack of effort in a heart to heart conversation. Too often after losses, some parents will emotionally and/or physically abuse their child. They will remind their child how much money and time they have spent on their tennis so the message is you need to win every match. They put so much pressure on their child that the child gets to the point where he/she will do anything to win including cheating. It is amazing to coaches how pervasive "the win at all cost" mentality exists today. Parents will sit idle as they watch their child cheat the opponent, say nothing, and then congratulate their child upon winning. What a shallow victory not to mention the loss of an opportunity to teach a life skill to that child. Tennis offers a great opportunity for parents and coaches alike to teach life skills. Sometimes it takes discipline and tough love for these skills to be learned. Parents need to reprimand their child for poor sportsmanship or unacceptable behavior like profanity, cheating or continually banging their racquet on the ground. If the condition persists, they should consider a tougher stance including defaulting their child, taking lessons or drill sessions away, or prohibiting entry into future tournaments. If there are no consequences, then the bad behavior is being re-enforced and will continue.

Every day we realize how much is learned about life through tennis experiences and how it may shape personality and career. It is a shame so many parents miss this great opportunity. The good life skills that can be taught through tennis are: responsibility, good sportsmanship, developing a good work ethic, setting and achieving goals, handling pressure, handling success and adversity, problem solving, building confidence, never "giving up" attitude, discipline, patience, making adjustments, anger management, teamwork, in doubles play, and developing alternate plans; a Plan B.

Parents need to be good parents and let the coach be a good coach. Parents who want to be the coach will only interfere with the player-coach relationship. Too many coaches create a credibility problem. It creates confusion because conflicting information is being given to the player. Players get frustrated because they do not know who to believe. Coaches get frustrated because they feel they cannot do the job they are being paid to do. That is not a good situation for either the parent, coach, or the player to be in. The best environment is having only one coach unless several coaches on a staff work as a team. Even in that situation, one coach needs to be designated as the primary coach and is solely responsible for the player's growth. Admittedly, there are times when the coach is not getting through to his student and needs help from the parent and vice-versa to get an important message across. Sometimes, the player needs to hear the same information from two different sources to be more effective. This is working together for the good of the child. Parents, coaches, and players all have to take on the above responsibilities to make the team a successful one.