



## COACHING

## Developing Players

Teaching pros and team coaches can take away valuable lessons from their pro-tour counterparts.

BY BRUCE KNITTLE

**T**he role that coaches play in tennis has been in the spotlight since the controversy during the women's final at the 2018 US Open.

Regardless of your take on that particular incident, teaching pros and team coaches can learn a lot from the men and women who coach professional players—and learning from the best is always a good idea. Here are a few key ideas that top coaches employ.

### How to Work with Different Personalities

Elite pro players come in all types of personalities. Coaches need to find the best method to reach that particular player, while also forming a productive partnership. For a successful relationship, this often means the coach must adjust to the player's personality.

All teaching pros and coaches—whether for a college team, elite junior or rec league team—have many different personalities to deal with, so they need to be flexible and open-minded. To find the optimum way to communicate, teaching pros would do well to emulate how top-level tour coaches adjust to their particular athletes.

“Personalities are different,” said Paul Annacone, the former coach of Pete Sampras, “but there are clear commonalities that allow a player's talents to shine in the biggest moments.”

### Convey the Appropriate Message

Coaches obviously want to get the most out of their players. As a former college coach, I always tried to pay attention to what I told my players before, during and after matches. I quickly

realized that whatever I said needed to be personalized and easy to grasp—and sometimes, I didn't need to say anything at all; I just needed to be there for them. Often, just a few succinct words to a player at the right time is all that's needed. Effective tour coaches know that talking too much is more of a hindrance than a help.

Former champ and U.S. Davis Cup Captain Jim Courier once told an interviewer that he doesn't try to take players out of their comfort zones. “I don't want to confuse anyone when in high pressure,” he said. “They are looking for more clarity, not more cloudiness.”

### Use Technology

Just about every tour coach uses technology to help their players. They can easily analyze and chart performance, and even live-stream practice sessions if he or she can't be on-site.

Teaching pros and college and high school coaches also should be using technology to give their players an edge.

### Keep It Fun, Too

When elite players train with coaches, they have a singular focus to their sessions. There is always a purpose to the workouts, along with an intense desire to improve. But the coach should realize that it's important to add in some fun.

Former champion Andy Roddick said that when he was coached by Brad Gilbert, they would first kid and make fun of each other, but then they would get down to business. Training regimens can get serious. But effective coaches know when and how to inject “fun.”

Likewise, teaching pros and team coaches should add some fun into their practice sessions to keep players motivated and engaged. It can help their players raise their game, and compete just as hard as champions in the pros.

Bruce Knittle is a former president of a consulting company specializing in work with sports camp owners and directors, as well as collegiate athletic departments. Previous to that, he was a tennis camp owner, teaching pro and tennis coach. In 2014, he was inducted into the College of Staten Island's Athletics Hall of Fame for his years as a collegiate tennis coach.