



The Role of the Coach in Helping Players' Parents Play a Positive Role in Tennis Talent Development¹

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When he first got into high performance coaching, Jose thought it would be very rewarding to work with talented teens helping them maximise their tennis potential. For the last 10 years, high performance coaching has been everything he thought it would be. Jose really enjoys working with juniors and watching them develop into top players. But one thing he did not expect when he began coaching was how much time and energy it would take to deal with the parents of his players; especially a few high-maintenance ones who sap his energy and frustrate him to such that degree that sometimes he wonders why he is coaching.

Jose's experience is not unique. More and more junior tennis coaches are reporting how difficult it is to work with the parents of some of their players. These parents often live through their child's tennis, base their worth as a parent on their child's success, try to coach when they are not trained to do so, interfere with their child's lessons by distracting their child, and push their child to such a degree that the player becomes uptight and less motivated. At the same time, coaches like Jose also have learned that behind every great player is a devoted parent who sacrificed much to help their child achieve his or her tennis dreams. In particular, these parents provide considerable logistical, financial, and organisational support. They also provide unconditional love and support and instil critical values in their child such as hard work, respect for others, and the discipline needed for competitive success. Finally, parents communicate with the coach and greatly enhance the understanding of his or her players, but also discipline their child if he or she behaves inappropriately.

Given this paradoxical role parents can play in the junior tennis experience, what is a coach to do? Some coaches constantly complain about parents and avoid interactions with them while others let things slide in an effort not to "rock the boat" and upset their paying customer. However, the most effective coaches have been successful in facilitating a positive parent-coach partnership. They do this, for example, by establishing good lines of two-way communication and working hard to help inform and educate their players' parents about the best ways to handle tournament tennis.

This presentation is designed to help you better work with your players' parents. This will be accomplished in two ways. First, we will inform you of the latest USTA Sport Science research on what we have learned about how parental actions influence junior player development. Second, we will discuss some methods you can use as a high performance junior coach to maximise the parent-coach tennis partnership.

THE ROLE PARENTS PLAY IN JUNIOR TENNIS DEVELOPMENT AND SUCCESS

The first step in helping you more effectively work with your junior tennis parents is to provide you with good information about parenting practices and their effects on player development. Thanks to a grant from the USA Tennis Sport Science Committee, we have been conducting a three-phase study over the last several years to do just this. In Phase 1, focus group interviews were conducted with 24 experienced junior tennis coaches attending a high performance workshop for the purposes of identifying their perceptions of the role parents play in tennis success, problems that arise, and the ways to facilitate the player-parent-coach partnership. Phase 2 involved a national survey of 132 coaches attending the USA Tennis High Performance Competition Training Centre Coaches Workshop in January of 2003. Finally, to gain an in depth understanding of the tennis talent development experience and the role parents play in the process, Phase 3 involved in-depth interviews with professional players, their coaches and the parent most involved in the athlete's tennis career.

We learned too much from our study to report all but some of the major findings here. Some of our most noteworthy findings showed that coaches perceived that the majority of junior tennis parents are positive and do a good job with their children. However, a significant minority (upwards to 35%) adopt an inappropriate perspective that overemphasises winning and rankings at the expense of long-term tennis and child development. This perspective often leads to unrealistic expectations, a lack of emotional control, and harsh criticism of the young athlete. On the other hand, the parents viewed as positively influencing their child's development were very supportive (financially, logistically and emotionally), made sacrifices so that their child could develop, provided love and support that was not based on winning or rankings and emphasised values such as hard work, taking responsibility for one's actions, and good sportsmanship.

We also learned that because parents must often make extensive financial, time and emotional commitments for their child to play, it is very easy for them to fall into the trap of expecting a return on their tennis investment. And all too often this return is defined as winning and rankings versus long-term physical, psychological, social, technical and tactical development.

Another major finding from our study came from looking back on how professional players developed from their initial involvement to elite professional status. Prior to doing the study we were told by many in the tennis community that behind all great players was a pushy, forceful parent. In our interviews with professional players, their parents and coaches we did find some over involved, "pushy" parents. While these parents' behaviour certainly helped their child make it to a very high level, it was often associated with a cost in terms of a poor player-parent relationship, psychological issues (e.g., considerable stress and burnout) or early discontinuation from the game. More importantly, we identified players who made it to the same elite level and higher with parents who were highly involved but exhibited few negative or pushy and more positive and encouraging behaviours. Thus, elite players can be developed in a more



positive manner. Additionally, these players of supportive parents exhibited far fewer psychological problems and issues.

Some of the most interesting findings from the present study focused on what the respondents said about optimal parent push. Optimal parent push is the phenomena where at times a parent needs to motivate a player because he or she is being lazy or is not doing what is needed to be successful, while not pressuring or inappropriately making the child do things that interfere with his or her well-being. The majority of participants in the project felt that optimal parent push exists, with 76% in Phase 3 indicating that it definitely existed. However, some respondents preferred a different term be used such as motivation versus push.

Players, parents and coaches also provided valuable perspectives on what optimal push entails. More specifically, it involves prodding young athletes to follow through on commitments and to realise that to develop one's talent, discipline and commitment must be demonstrated. However, pushing the player to win was not seen as a component of optimal parent push. It was also found that there is no one optimal time to push players, but rather that optimal parent push is dependent on a number of individual difference factors such as age, potential and level of self motivation. For instance, a player that is intrinsically motivated does not need the push that other players need. Appropriate push may also require the involvement of other adult resources helping the parent who feels it is necessary to push. Optimal parent push was perceived to go wrong when parents pushed too hard or focused too much on winning, when they did not recognise the need to push or pushed in an inappropriate way, when they used guilt to optimally push, and failed to recognise negative reactions to being pushed. Ultimately, coaches felt optimal parent push could be achieved by finding the middle ground between pushing and supporting the young athlete.

Finally, in our national survey of junior coaches, the following strategies were rated as most useful for working with junior tennis parents.

- be honest and open
- work to build trust
- work hard at listening to them
- define parent roles and responsibilities
- educate parents on positive tennis parenting behaviours

The knowledge from our study is all well and good, but what we learned about the role of parents does little if it sits on a bookshelf or simply appears in a newsletter. You, the high performance junior coach, need to use this knowledge to better inform junior tennis parents. These results also have implications for helping you work more effectively with your players' parents.

THE COACH'S ROLE IN MAXIMISING THE PARENT-COACH JUNIOR TENNIS PARTNERSHIP

There are a number of things that can be done to maximise the parent-coach junior tennis partnership. Some of these are described below.



Help Educate and Inform Your Players' Parents

You might not like the fact that coaching involves working with players' parents, or just consider it a hassle, but in today's world it is necessary. Parents pay the bills and have a right to be involved. They also have a legal and ethical responsibility to protect the safety of their child, which includes selecting a good coach and monitoring his or her actions. Finally, parents know their child much better than you and can provide a wealth of information that will increase your success as a coach.

Even the best parents are going to make some mistakes, however. Knowing how to handle daily decisions in parenting a child is not simple. So, try to be empathetic and see things from a parent's perspective. Don't become sour on all tennis parents because of the actions of a few. Remember, our research shows most parents are a positive influence on their child's tennis development. Finally, take a proactive approach to working with parents. Starting parents of beginning players off on the right foot and shepherding them through the junior tennis experience is more effective than leaving them on their own and then trying to fix their problem behaviour years later.

Educate Parents from Day 1

Our research shows that most parents of junior players did not encourage their child to begin tennis with the intent of having them be an elite player. In contrast, the focus was on being active, having fun and learning a lifetime sport. However, as a player shows promise and becomes more involved, parents are often uninformed of what is needed to help develop their child's tennis talent and no one instructs them as to how to do so. Thus, it is no wonder that 3 out of 10 parents often exhibit inappropriate behaviours. A better approach is for you, as a coach, to educate parents of the ways to positively help their child develop in and through tennis.

To help you in this regard the USA Tennis High Performance Division has developed two PowerPoint presentations, corresponding notes, and self-assessments/worksheets that you can use to help educate your players' parents. The first of these, *Getting Started*, is for parents of your youngest and most novice players. The second, *Talent Development*, is aimed at players moving out of the initial (fun and fundamental) stage of tennis talent development into the second, skill refinement and training, stage.

Set Expectations and Hold Parents Accountable

As a coach, working with junior tennis parents can be tricky business. On one hand, they are your employer; they are paying the bills. As with any industry, to be successful one needs to listen to and meet your customers' needs. On the other hand, as a coaching profession you have the responsibility not only to help develop great players but to do so in a way that has the best interest of the child in mind. So, as a professional, it is imperative that you set and convey standards and expectations. Be clear about what will and will not be tolerated in one's programme relative to player and parental actions and behaviours.



Communicate Consistently and Often

As a professional tennis coach you are an expert on the junior tennis development process. Parents, however, also bring an extensive knowledge base of their child and many other things (e.g., business) to the parent-coach-player partnership. Hence, parents can provide a wealth of information to you, the coach, to help you be more successful. It is imperative, then, that you develop excellent lines of communication with parents and work to keep those lines of communication open. The importance of listening to parents, even when their emotions might get the best of them, is essential. Finally, while you want to keep open lines of communication, talk to your parent about the best times to communicate with you (certainly not while on the court).

Catch Parents Doing Things Right

The old saying 'the squeaky wheel' gets all the attention holds true when working with junior tennis parents. The high maintenance parent often requires much of your time and energy. However, it is essential not to forget about parents doing things right. Recognise their efforts and essentially "catch them doing things right", as reinforcing desirable parent behaviours works much better than trying to correct problem ones later. For example, consider giving a parent of the year award in your programme. Recognising parents who exhibit good behaviours also has the added advantage of providing a modelling effect for other parents.

Have a Problem Parent Strategy

Despite all your efforts, from time to time you may have a high maintenance or problem parent. You want to be prepared to effectively deal with them before any problem occurs. So, take some time to determine what parental actions you will and will not tolerate and how you might deal with potential problems. If you have thought these things out ahead of time you will be more effective when problems arise.

Remember These Facts

In summary, parent support is critical for player success. Moreover, tennis can produce a special parent-player relationship, and you, as a coach, can help make this relationship even more special. So, educate and inform your players' parents. Serve as a valuable resource. Doing so will make your coaching life easier, and your players more successful.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

1. Much of this paper comes from Gould and Lauer (2005).



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