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# “The Dynamic Role of Elite Coach: Player and Coach Perspectives”

## Abstract

As part of a larger study on talent development, ten top ranked players and ten coaches (nominated by the player) responded to open-ended questionnaires. Players and coaches were asked them to recall their background in tennis, describe the role of the coach and any changes in this role, and offer suggestions to coaches for nurturing talent. A series of inductive content analyses was conducted to analyze the data. These analyses revealed significant, and changing, roles of the coach during a player's development to professional status. Recommendations to coaches highlighted the importance of coach philosophy, communication, and planning. Implications for coach education programs are discussed.

**Key words:** elite tennis coach, coach's role.

## Introduction

It is always interesting to note the credit given to a coach when a player does well in an event. Such recognition acknowledges the contribution of this key member of a player's support group. Therefore, what do coaches contribute and why is their role an important one? A review of the tennis literature suggests coaches play a significant, and changing, role throughout an elite player's career.

### *Studies of the role of a tennis coach*

Bloom<sup>(1)</sup> provides a framework for understanding of the role of a coach in proposing that learning a skill (such as tennis) progresses through three stages: the Early Years, the Middle Years, and the Later Years. Adopting this framework, Monsaas<sup>(2)</sup> examined 10 male and eight female US tennis players who achieved a world top 10 ranking between 1968 and 1979. Monsaas found players' first coach was typically selected because of his/her location (nearby) and group lessons were the norm. It was the coach's role to get children interested and excited about playing and, accordingly, good interpersonal skills were essential. In the Middle Years a new type of coaching, and sometimes a new coach, was required as players committed more time and effort to the game. Lessons were individualized and coaches focused on

developing a player's technique ('thousands of balls' were hit in 'countless' drills during this stage). When players committed full-time to the sport in the Later Years, coaches worked primarily on strategy and any weaknesses in a player's game.

In a study consistent with Bloom's<sup>(1)</sup> developmental perspective, Carlson<sup>(3)</sup> interviewed five professional male and five professional female Swedish tennis players. The study found the player-coach relationship was a critical factor influencing which players would succeed in reaching the pinnacle of their sport. These findings were recently endorsed by Wolfenden and Holt<sup>(4)</sup> who examined the role of coach in their study with three elite British juniors (aged 13-15 years). These researchers found coaches provided tennis-specific advice and, together with players' parents, formed an important support team for players.

Given it is now over 20 years since Monsaas's<sup>(2)</sup> pioneering study, it was considered timely to examine the role of the coach in today's tennis that has evolved so dramatically into a truly international and professional sport. The purpose of this study was to examine elite Australian female tennis players and their coaches

in light of Australia's recent resurgence in women's tennis. Specifically, this study sought to gain a fuller understanding of the role of today's elite coach, how this role may have changed, and what recommendations elite female players and coaches have for aspiring coaches. The study was supported by the International Tennis Federation and Tennis Australia.

## Method

### *Participants*

Data were collected from 10 Australian professional female players (mean age of  $24.3 \pm 2$  years) who held a Women's Tennis Association (WTA) singles ranking (range 159 to 837) and were competing on the WTA and International Tennis Federation (ITF) women's circuits. Data was also collected from 10 coaches nominated by players as their current coach.

At the time of the study, players had started to play tennis at a mean ( $\pm 3.1$ ) age of 6.9 years, taken their first lesson at a mean age of 7.5 ( $\pm 2.7$ ) years, entered their first tournament at a mean age of 9.7 ( $\pm 2.2$ ) years, decided to concentrate on tennis at a mean age of 13.9 ( $\pm 2.7$ ) years, had gained their first WTA singles ranking at a mean age of 17.7 ( $\pm 1.7$ ) years and had an average of 5.7 ( $\pm 3.7$ ) coaches during their career to date.

The 10 coaches had worked with this study's players for a mean of 3.4 years ( $\pm 2.5$ ) and had been a tennis coach for a mean of 17.5 ( $\pm 7.9$ ) years. All coaches were former professional circuit players.

### *Materials*

Participants completed a self-report instrument, a Player Questionnaire or a Coach Questionnaire. The questionnaires were adapted from Wolfenden and Holt's 4 interview protocol for the purposes of this study and consisted primarily of qualitative measures. Participants were asked to describe the coach's role and changes in this role over the years, and make recommendations to coaches who wanted to help a player develop her talent.

### *Procedure*

Following ethical approval from the University Human Research Ethics Committee, the first researcher spoke (in person and by telephone) with Australia's 10 top ranked SonyEricsson singles players from a contact list provided by Tennis Australia. The study's purpose, benefits and requirements were detailed, and, if the player agreed, copies of the questionnaires and information sheets were emailed and/or mailed. Players were asked to provide a Coach Questionnaire and Information sheet to their current coach. If a

player (or coach) was unable or unwilling to participate in the study, the next ranked Australian player was contacted. Participants were instructed to respond to the questionnaires in as much detail as possible and requested to email or mail responses with assurance given that these would remain anonymous. Data was collected over a 4-month period.

### *Data Analysis*

A series of inductive content analyses were conducted to analyze the qualitative data<sup>(5)</sup>. This procedure involved the identification of 'raw data themes' in participants' narratives (smallest unit of information that could stand by itself) and those themes that shared explicitly similar meaning were then grouped into higher order themes. All steps in the inductive content analyses were scrutinized by a member of the Australian College of Sport Psychologists, who was knowledgeable in qualitative research methods but independent from the study. This member reviewed the first researcher's analyses and challenged her to justify the identification and organization of raw data themes. Where discrepancies between the member and researcher existed, these were discussed and consensually validated<sup>(5)</sup>.

## Results

### *Influence of first coach*

Seven players reported their first coach influenced them to become a tennis player by making the game fun and challenging. While a basic technique was taught, the first coach primarily encouraged players to enjoy the game.

### *Influencing factors for getting started as a tennis coach*

Four coaches nominated their parents as influencing factors and three attributed the progression into coaching as a natural one after competing professionally on the circuit. Other factors include the influence of their own first coach and exposure to a university-coaching course.

### *Current role of coach*

#### *A. Current role of coach reported by players*

Two players reported they did not have a coach. The roles revealed from the analysis from eight players were: (a) psychological support; (b) on-court coaching; (c) manager; (d) tactician; (e) travelling coach; and (f) oversees fitness.

As described by one player,

*My coach plays a supportive role and somebody who makes a big difference on the consistency of my commitment to tennis*

*B. Current role of coach reported by coaches*

Six key roles were revealed from the analysis: (a) psychological support; (b) on-court coaching; (c) manager; (d) travelling coach; (e) oversees fitness; and (f) oversees nutrition program.

As described by one coach,

*My role covers all areas required as a coach (technical, tactical, mental and physical). The player has a separate physical trainer who writes the program, and I assist in making sure the sessions are completed often by doing the sessions with the player. My role also involves project managing the player's schedule, tournaments, periodisation, sponsorship, friend on the road and mentor in life*

*Changes in coach's role*

*A. Changes in coach's role reported by players*

Players reported changes from a technical role to one of facilitator and allowing the player to take responsibility. As articulated by one player,

*Coach before was more controlling, made decisions,*

*now I make choices. Coach now plays more of a facilitator role*

*B. Changes in coach's role reported by coaches*

Three coaches reported that their roles had not changed as they had only been with the study's player for a limited period. Seven coaches reported key changes were to move from developing technique to focus more on tactical, psychological and mentoring support as well as developing a player's clay court game. As articulated by one coach,

*My role went from being very technical to evolving into more of a tactical and psychological role. I think when the athlete is young the coach is the main driver of the athlete's program, as the athlete matures the roles reverse allowing the athlete to drive the program. Duty of care issues become easier as they get older*

*Recommendations to coaches*

*A. Recommendations to coaches made by players*

Players were asked what suggestions they had for coaches who want to help a player develop her talents. Key recommendations are listed in Table 1 together with a representative quote.

**Table 1**  
**Key Recommendations to Coaches from Players**

Recommendation	Representative Quote
Provide Support	<i>Always be encouraging and stick with the player through the bad times</i>
Take Player-centered Approach	<i>Treat player as an individual</i>
Be Committed	<i>Be willing to work more than 20 weeks a year consistently with player</i>
Be Effective Communicator	<i>Listen to the player and make it 2-way learning</i>
Teach Range of Skills	<i>Realize player needs more than physical teach</i>
Take Care with Coaching Approach	<i>Make it fun and allow player to learn on her own to develop her strengths</i>
Plan Lessons	<i>Construct good sessions that have a goal</i>
Be Visionary	<i>'Think outside the square' with the big picture in mind</i>

*B. Recommendations made to coaches by this study's coaches*

Coaches were asked what suggestions they had for

coaches who want to help a player develop her talents. Key recommendations are listed in Table 2 together with a representative quote.

**Table 2**

**Key Recommendations to Coaches from this Study's Coaches**

Recommendation	Representative Quote
Adopt Coaching Philosophy and Guiding Principles: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solution-focused</li> <li>• Player-centered</li> <li>• Holistic perspective</li>   <li>• Personal perspective</li> </ul>	<i>Empower player to compete</i> <i>Involve player in all parts of process and make it fun</i> <i>Must recognize player's needs in all areas (on-and off-court and personal life)</i> <i>Accept travel is tough, accept and love this - take time out for yourself on the road</i>
Attend to Coach Attributes	<i>Always be honest, responsible, accountable, fair and have a laugh at yourself</i>
Attend to Program Management: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Conduct</li> <li>• Monitoring</li> </ul>	<i>Need for periodised plans</i> <i>Lots of simulated game practice</i> <i>Be aware of body changes, weight increase and growing pains</i>
Be an Effective Communicator	<i>Need clear and concise lines of communication</i>
Make Clear Coaching Arrangements	<i>Be clear on your payment structure and payment frequency</i>
Understand your Role	<i>Realize you are doing the most difficult undertaking with very little chance of major professional success</i>

**Discussion**

This study extends the knowledge base of the role of the coach with a sport- and gender-specific examination of Australian professional female tennis players and their coaches. The study's findings highlight the multi-facet skills and tasks required of today's coach in elite women's tennis. No longer can a coach be just an expert in teaching technique or strategy but rather an all-embracing repertoire of skills is required to address the demands of top competition and travel. Further, the study's findings highlight the importance of a player-centered and solution perspective for coaches to adopt where the player is empowered to make decisions and take responsibility.

In terms of the current roles of the coaches in this study, it is interesting to note the close correspondence between player and coach perspectives. Players and coaches reported virtually identical areas of coach responsibilities thereby suggesting a close understanding and agreement between player and coach as to the basis of their professional relationship. Such correspondence provides confidence that positive outcomes of the player-coach relationship can be achieved.

Reported changes in the coach's role are consistent with

Bloom's<sup>(1)</sup> conceptualization that as the player develops and evolves, so does the role of the coach. As identified in this study, the early coaches focus on making the sport fun and enjoyable<sup>(2)</sup> whereas coaches of a player competing on the international circuit respond to the need to be more strategic and holistic by providing strong psychological support, mentoring and counseling.

Both players and coaches in this study offered an array of recommendations for aspiring coaches of female talent. Taken collectively, the recommendations embrace the notion that today's elite coach is expected to cover a range of on- and off-court responsibilities<sup>(6)</sup> that extend to provide psychological support, fitness and coaching advice, managerial expertise and possible travel commitments with a player. This has implications for coach education programs. Clearly, a sound understanding of human behavior, emotions, cognitions and values is required by today's elite female coach. To this end, coach training course designers need to take an expansive perspective and include such topical units as business management, drug education and player safety, welfare, health and well-being. Indeed, coach training courses need to be designed to equip today's coaches with the ability to deal with the expected,



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Dr Janet A Young is a lecturer in the School of Sport and Exercise Science at Victoria University and also conducts a sports psychology practice based in Melbourne, Australia. Her research interests include Optimal Performance and Experiential States, Talent Development, Mental Toughness and Retirement from Sport. Janet has had a long involvement in tennis both at a National and

International level in roles including Head of Women's Tennis at Tennis Australia, Tour Director for the Women's Tennis Association, Australian Fed Cup Manager, and member of the ITF Women's Pro Circuit Committee. As a former Australian representative, Janet was a member of two winning Fed Cup Teams. Janet is currently a Tennis Australia Board member.

Tennis Australia and the International Hall of Fame recently honored Dr Young for her contributions to Australian Tennis.



**Dr Alan J Pearce, PhD, BSc (Hons), Grad Dip.**

Dr Alan Pearce, former manager of coach education at Tennis Australia, is now a senior faculty member of the School of Sport and Exercise Science at Victoria University.

and unexpected, challenges of a volatile and dynamic environment of tournaments, travel, training and media. To do so effectively, this study suggests coaches need to instill in their players a strong sense of independence to drive their own programs.

While strength of this study was its information-rich groups of participants<sup>(5)</sup>, a limitation was its use of self-

report data.<sup>(7)</sup> Future researchers may wish to look at interviewing elite male players to provide a comparison with this study's findings. In closing, it is hoped this study creates excitement amongst tennis coach to set goals, and take action, to share the rewarding and fun experience of pursuing sporting excellence with their players.

**Competing interests:** none declared.

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