



# Remember parents and coaches are team members: Team work is required.

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## ABSTRACT

This article features a study that was recently conducted in Australia with parents and coaches of Australia's top 10 professional female tennis players. The study's results highlight that parent and coach consider the other to be complementary and valuable team members who are focused on their player's well-being and pursuit of excellence.

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## INTRODUCTION

All champions have their own unique 'story' of their journey to the top echelons of tennis. Rarely is the story one of an easy road but rather is one of trials, setbacks, challenges and great moments of inspiration and perspiration! While stories differ in the detail, a common element appears to be the critical and influential roles played by a player's parents and coaches (e.g., Gould et al; 2005; Young and Pearce, 2011).

To date, research has generally focused on gaining an understanding of coach and parent contributions to talent development by asking coaches and parents about their own roles or asking players to describe the respective roles of their parents and coaches. This article takes a different perspective and reports on coach- and parent-understandings of the other's role. What do coaches think about parents and visa versa? What are their respective contributions and where can they add value? What can coaches and parents take from understanding the other person's perspective in a common endeavour to support and guide a player to fulfill her tennis dreams?

These were some of the questions I wanted to address when I recently conducted a study on parents and coaches in collaboration with Tennis Australia and The International Tennis Federation. Given my own background in the sport as a player, coach and administrator, I wanted to focus specifically on women's tennis to better understand the dynamics of talent development for aspiring female players.

## OVERVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN-BASED STUDY

The study involved 10 parents (8 female and 2 male) and 10 coaches (2 female and 8 male) nominated by Australia's 10 top-ranked professional female tennis players. All parents had sporting credentials with 5 having a background in tennis from social player to elite and veteran competitors. All coaches were former professional circuit players and, on average, had been a coach for over 17 years and had been working with their top-ranked professional female tennis player for over 3 years.

Data was collected from these coaches and parents by means of two questionnaires. Coaches were asked:

- (a) What role do the player's parents currently play in their daughter's career?
- (b) Has this role changed over the years, and if so how?
- (c) What recommendations do they have for parents who want their daughter to develop her talents in tennis?

Parents were asked a similar set of questions about the role of the player's coach.

## STUDY'S KEY RESULTS

A series of inductive content analyses was conducted to analyse the data and revealed the following results.

A. Coaches' Perspectives

In brief, coaches reported that they believed:

- A parent's role was to be supportive and, in some instances, to provide financial assistance if required.
- There had been changes over the years in the role of parents in their daughter's tennis careers. Most parents were less heavily involved once their daughter competed on the international circuit and became more successful. At this point parents continued to provide unconditional support and put their trust in coaches and their programs to best guide players.
- Parents who want to help their daughters to develop their talent should following the recommendations listed in Table 1.

RECOMMENDATION	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Empower player to take responsibility	<i>"Encourage player to become more responsible for her own actions and organisation of tennis matters"</i>
Provide unconditional support	<i>"Always be positive after a match. Give plenty of encouragement, comfort and love after a loss"</i>
Be a parent	<i>"Know your role as a parent and simply be a parent (not coach or manager) who provides a balanced and loving environment"</i>
Identify a good coach	<i>"Do your homework to find a good coach and then trust the coach chosen"</i>
Establish a sound relationship with the coach	<i>"Be part of a team with the coach but let him/her do the coaching! Support and allow the coach do his/her job. Be loyal, stick by the coach and leave the tennis to the coach. Do not attend practice sessions"</i>
Be respectful spectator	<i>"Do not sit courtside for every match. Watch matches without showing emotions but with encouraging smiles and nod of the head"</i>
Respect parent-coach-player team and communicate	<i>"Clearly define relationships and roles earlier rather than later and communicate regularly and openly to ensure expectations are managed"</i>

Table 1. Key recommendations to parents from coaches.

B. Parents' Perspectives

In brief, parents reported that they believed:

- Coaches were responsible for many roles including mentor, fitness and training advisor, support person, tournament scheduler and teacher of the technical and mental aspects of the game.
- The role of a coach was dynamic (changed over time).
- Changes in a coach's role moved from primarily one of 'instructor' to later being a 'collaborative support person' to the player.

- There are several ways coaches can assist and guide female players to develop their talent. Key recommendations are listed in Table 2.

RECOMMENDATION	REPRESENTATIVE QUOTES
Adopt a positive and player-centered philosophy and approach	<i>"Know what the player wants and put processes into place to focus on developing the player and avoid putting too much emphasis just on results"</i> <i>"Treat player as an individual and get to know how best they learn and interact"</i> <i>"Encourage a sound work ethic but keep it fun and enjoyable"</i>
Be mindful of effective communication skills	<i>"Take care to use appropriate words because words are very powerful and can be very damaging if one says the wrong thing"</i> <i>"Give constructive feedback"</i> <i>"Always listen"</i>
Keep updating skills and knowledge	<i>"Understand how the ranking system works"</i> <i>"Be knowledgeable about the sport"</i> <i>"Continue to expand abilities to recognise and develop talent"</i>

Table 2. Key recommendations to coaches from parents.

WHAT DO THE STUDY'S RESULTS MEAN FOR COACHES AND PARENTS?

One can make some generalisations for parents and coaches including the importance for both to be mindful of the 3 'As' – Awareness, Acceptance and Acknowledgement. That is, both coach and parent need to:

- (a) Be aware that they are members of the same (player) team. Both are focused on the best interests, well-being and dreams of the player.
- (b) Accept each other as significant team members who have different but complementary roles to fulfill.
- (c) Acknowledge the other for the contributions each can make. Open communication between coach and parent is essential.

CONCLUSIONS

Adopting the notion of 3 'As' re-enforces the importance of sound interactions and communications between coach and parent. Both parent and coach are encouraged to view the other as a key member of a support team where each party's role may be different and dynamic yet complementary at all times.

In summary, to best nurture Australian female talent, this study's results suggest that strategies need to be in place to facilitate 'parents to be parents' and coaches to ensure an engaging and collaborative learning environment. Further, this

study provides clues for achieving such (Tables 1 and 2). It is re-assuring to know that these recommendations are consistent with those found in the talent literature (e.g., Bloom, 1985).



Tennis is often thought of as an individual sport where a player competes against another on the singles court. This study highlights a 'team' element of tennis where outstanding results can be achieved when parent and coach combine to form a winning combination to support and guide their aspiring player. Like all effective teams, this requires many ingredients including team work, continual appraisal, a common goal and open communication. Let's not exclude either parent or coach from making valuable contributions to player development.

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