



Teacher education on court.

Bernard Pestre.

French Tennis Federation, France.

ABSTRACT

Each of you may find yourself in a situation of educating teachers. Whether your structure is called club, academy, team or any other name, you will probably be expected, one day or another, to educate a collaborator or, better still, run a training programme with a group of participants who want to get into the wonderful profession of tennis teaching.

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Corresponding author: Bernard Pestre, French Tennis Federation, France.

Email: bpestre@fft.fr

WHICH METHODS OF TRAINING?

You will need to use a wide range of training methods, from the traditional lecture format (the least possible) through to video, online learning and, of course, actual teaching sessions during which your students will be responsible for players under your supervision.

Your goal will be to help future coaches acquire real skills rather than knowledge. These days, the aim of training is usually defined as follows: "At the end of the training course, the trainee will have learned how to...". What skill could be more important than the ability to run practice sessions with one or more players on the court? The act of teaching is the main reason why young adults decide to go into training; it is therefore essential that we allow them, right from the start of the training, to learn through simulation. Throughout their training, we must also give them the opportunity to coach players in their own clubs so that they gain experience. You learn by doing. This principle has been used by craftsmen for centuries. The professional who is in charge of supervising trainees has the most important role to play. Indeed, he is the one who sees trainees on a daily basis and can influence their behaviour.

In this article, I would like to share with you some of the ideas that I have developed over 15 years of experience in this field.

When you supervise a trainee who is conducting a teaching session, keep in mind that he is in a state of vulnerability. When giving feedback, do as you would with your own players: start with telling the trainee what he did right during the session! Give him the opportunity to learn by trial and error. "A child learns to speak by speaking" (Freinet, 1956). By minimizing the significance of errors, trainees will be able to build their

confidence and be ready to get involved with players. Tennis players need to build their self-esteem to make progress. The same can be said of trainees.



Unless it is for a certification exam, avoid commenting on the trainee's performance as a whole; instead, focus on a couple of specific points. If you do not follow this rule, chances are that your most important points will be diluted and your feedback inefficient. At the early stages of training, students are usually unable to determine priorities.

Feedback can be given on various aspects such as:

- Communication with students;
- Relevance of the observations made and the goals selected;
- Choice of drills and their set-up;
- Quality of feeding;
- Relevance of technical instructions.

Make sure to inform the candidate in advance of the aspects that you will be reviewing so that he does not feel “trapped”. This way, he will have the opportunity to prepare his session and be ready for the area in which he will be assessed.

- If other trainees are to be present, ask them to play a specific role as observers in relation to the teaching area being assessed.
- Some will observe the players in order to compare their observations with those made by the person who is in charge of the assessment.
- Others may suggest exercises or advice different from those that were set up or provided.
- Some will also verify that all the guidelines provided by the coach regarding communication have been followed: attitude, voice projection, language used, appropriate instructions and feedback provided to players, etc.

Beyond these practical tips, the main point that I would like to make is that teachers (or, in the case of the present article, future teachers) should focus first and foremost on helping players improve. This seems obvious, but unfortunately this is not always the case. At the end of every single session, players should be in a position where they can safely say: “I have learned something” or “I have improved something in my game”.

It is important to have a systematic and consistent approach to teaching such as the one below:

1. I observe;
2. I make conclusions;
3. I set a goal;
4. I select a drill or exercise;
5. I make use of that drill or exercise to make technical improvements;
6. I adapt the difficulty level of the task based on players' success;
7. I integrate the newly learned skills in real game situations.



Although some students or coaches are good at helping players improve technically, it has to be said that our teachers' primary weakness often lies in their inability to make technical corrections (point 5 above). More often than not, the fun and global aspects of the tennis game take priority over technical improvements. Having set up a practice situation, coaches will simply act as facilitators without looking to achieve a better technical execution. However, what students look for is the feeling that they are better players when they leave the court.

Trainee coaches often have good intentions, but they are also afraid to do the wrong thing and fear that they will give bad advice to their players. In these situations, the trainer needs to be reassuring by emphasizing the fact that everybody makes errors in the beginning, himself included, and that experience is what enables coaches to have better judgement and provide more knowledgeable advice. That being said, if teachers never take any risk, chances are that they will keep acting as “facilitators” rather than as real tennis coaches.

The fact that the technical aspect of the game is a requirement does not mean however that we should go back to a time when technique was taught as a goal without any relation to the game. Let's not go back to that extreme situation: the starting point of each session is indeed the game. Duality is the very essence of tennis and therefore must serve as a guide.

When the child is first introduced to tennis, he will be put in a situation where he has to “play with” his friend. At ages of 5 or 6, this usually means rolling a ball on the ground. Remind your teachers that even at this level, it is essential to provide technical elements to children:

- The ready position: it enables players to start each stroke correctly;
- The holding of the racket at the end of the handle (no need to discuss grips yet);
- The impact point in front of the body: one of the fundamentals of tennis that players must keep in mind all the time.

Regardless of the level of play, there are requirements that the tennis coach must not overlook if he does not want to limit his players' potential.

At the other end of the line, there is the professional player; he too is looking for that “little extra” that will make a difference. It is the role of his coach to find that little something that is missing.

CONCLUSION

We should never separate matchplay and technique: technique serves the purpose of tactics; it is crucial for teachers to understand the importance of this and make players aware of it. The coach needs to take the time to explain to the player which part of his game will be improved and how the proposed correction, however disquieting it may appear, can benefit his game: “your serve will be stronger”, “you will be able to play short cross-court shots”, etc. Explaining is the key to getting players to fully support technical changes. It is also important

to frequently remind players of the benefits that can be expected from the work being done. Players then know what they do and why they do it.

I know many of you already apply these recommendations. Beyond theory – which is also important to learn –, my intention here was to recap the most important aspects, in my mind, of teacher education on the tennis court.

Note

The word “player” in this article refers to both girls and boys, and includes all words related to trainees such as students, pupils, etc.

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