



# Mentoring programmes: A case study with Tennis Coach Ireland.

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## ABSTRACT

Mentoring is a powerful educational tool that is used across many disciplines ranging from business and medicine through to sports coaching. The process provides accelerated learning and helps inexperienced practitioners on the path to becoming an expert in the field. The present article discusses Mentoring in the context of the initiatives taken by Tennis Coach Ireland, whereby the primary purpose of the Mentoring Programme was to be part of a support system for those coaches who are dedicated to developing professionally and maximising their coaching potential.

**Key words:** Mentoring, Continuous professional development, Licensing.

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## WHAT IS MENTORING?

Mentoring is a powerful educational tool that is used across many disciplines ranging from business and medicine through to sports coaching. The process provides accelerated learning and also prevents inexperienced practitioners from falling into the many 'pitfalls' that exist on the path to becoming a real expert in the field. Mentoring covers many different types of experiences and relationships which have been described in the literature on a continuum from informal relationships or friendships at one end, to more structured Mentoring programmes which form part of a qualification programme or continuous professional development initiative (Stafford, 2011). Mentoring should not simply be a one way process whereby the Mentor provides information. The process of Mentoring should be a two way dialogue focusing on co-learning where both parties develop skills.

Mentoring in the context of tennis coaching refers to a situation where an experienced and knowledgeable coach acts as a guide to a less experienced coach, in order to assist that person to develop professionally. For the purposes of this article, a Mentor is someone who uses his or her knowledge and experience to guide another coach. Conversely, a mentee refers to the 'less experienced' coach wishing to maximise their potential. The present article discusses Mentoring in the context of the initiatives taken by Tennis Coach Ireland.

## Mentoring vs coaching

Although there are many similarities, Crawford (2009) outlines some key distinctions. In particular, coaching typically involves

instruction, support and timely feedback whilst Mentoring is more based on learning, experience and inspiration. In addition to this, coaching aims to improve performance in a specific area at a specific time, whereas Mentoring aims more to prepare the mentee for a future role or performance requirements.

## Tennis Coach Ireland's Mentoring programme

Mentor profile: John Smith	
<p><b>Contact Details:</b>                      Tel: 087 912 5112                      Email: JSmith@outlook.com                      Based In: Dublin City North                      I am interested in mentoring coaches from any part of Ireland on any, with a particular focus on Tennisos and Play and Stay</p>	
<p><b>Biography:</b>                      A level 3 Performance Coach with over 25 years experience teaching the game. I have held the position of Head Coach and Director of Coaching at clubs in both Ireland and the UK. Over 23 years of full time coaching I have accumulated a vast amount of experience in every aspect of coaching from starter players to high performance. I am also vastly experienced in club programming and club development.</p>	<p><b>Below are my specific areas of experience:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mini Tennis Schools Programmes</li> <li>2. Mini/Midi Club Programmes</li> <li>3. Recreational Club Programmes</li> <li>4. Wheelchair Tennis programmes</li> </ol>

Figure 1. Sample Mentor profile.

In 2007 Tennis Coach Ireland began implementing a formal Mentoring programme in response to a survey of the 250 coaches present at the Tennis Coach Ireland National Coaches Conference. With over 41% of coaches expressing a keen interest, work began immediately to research and then establish the programme to support coaches. Mentor profiles were pulled together from the most experienced coaches in the nation into one document, which would eventually be sent to all coaches upon the launch of the Programme.

#### Who can Mentor who?

In the context of the Tennis Coach Ireland Mentoring programme, it was agreed that a Mentor should only work with a coach who holds a lower level of qualification than the Mentor. In the Tennis Ireland coach qualification scheme, this translates as follows:

Who I can I mentor?				
	Tennis Assistant One	Tennis Assistant Two	Level 1 Coach	Level 2 Coach
A LEVEL 2 COACH	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
A LEVEL 3 COACH	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Figure 2. Mentoring levels available to coaches holding different levels of qualification.**

#### Initiating the Mentoring process

Tennis Coach Ireland recommended that the potential Mentee make initial contact to establish the relationship. If the objectives of the Mentee are aligned with the Mentor, and a set of goals subsequently established, the next important stage is to outline details of the relationship. This can include a number of areas, which are outlined below:

- (i) How often both parties need to meet
- (ii) Other methods of communication that will be utilised – phone calls, Skype, emails, visits to each other's clubs/classes
- (iii) Frequency and parameters for the above (e.g. no phone calls after 9pm)
- (iv) Start and finish date for this Mentoring relationship
- (v) Method of ending the relationship at any point if either party desires
- (vi) Fees and arrangements. Each relationship is unique in terms of the level of engagement required of the Mentor e.g. one coach might simply want to discuss a particular issue with a Mentor for an hour; another might seek to 'shadow' a Mentor

over an extended period of time with detailed follow up meetings. Therefore in the present case study, fees would be entirely up to Mentor and coach. Neither Tennis Coach Ireland nor Tennis Ireland would be involved in this negotiation process.

#### Mentoring arrangements, activities and contexts:

Precisely what activities might the two parties engage in, in order to fulfill the objectives of the Mentoring Programme?

- (i) Face to face meetings
- (ii) Telephone or Skype discussions
- (iii) Correspondence through email
- (iv) Mentor observations at coach's club
- (v) Coach observes Mentor in their coaching environment.
- (vi) Review of the coach's lesson plans (for lessons at which the Mentor is not present)
- (vii) Meet at an open tournament to observe, discuss, chart and profile players
- (viii) The Mentor recommends appropriate books, DVDs, websites etc
- (ix) The Mentor sets agreed tasks for the coach to accomplish, with deadlines for completion
- (x) The Mentor assists the coach to improve in terms of playing/ demonstrating ability
- (xi) All documents generated by either party during the Mentoring process should be collated and developed into a 'reflective logbook'. This is designed to provide a written record of what occurred, and also to allow both parties opportunities to continue their own development and learning opportunities in their respective roles.

Benefits of Mentoring

Mentee	Mentor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn and experience first-hand inspiring coaching styles and approaches</li> <li>• Build confidence through encouragement</li> <li>• Develop sport specific knowledge that may have taken the Mentor years to acquire</li> <li>• Begin positive working relationships in the field</li> <li>• Accelerate the learning process</li> <li>• A more flexible process compared to formal courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentors will add another skill to their range of competencies, leading to an enhanced reputation</li> <li>• Growth, self-reflection and personal development as an educator</li> <li>• Mentors will gain insights from the perspectives of other coaches</li> <li>• Satisfaction of fostering the professional development of other coaches</li> <li>• It is an opportunity to work with the "next generation" of coaches</li> <li>• Mentors will be paid a fee, as agreed with the coach they are assisting</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Benefits of Mentoring.

A good Mentor

- Not just providers of information, a good Mentor is someone who engages with a candidate in a caring relationship based on guidance
- A Mentor should be able to critically reflect on themselves and their candidates – excellent communication skills therefore underpin a Mentor’s success.

INTEGRATING MENTORING INTO A COACHES EDUCATION PROGRAMME

Offer Continuous Professional Development points

Offering professional development points is an excellent way to encourage the uptake of a Mentoring programme. In the case of Tennis Coach Ireland, a coach signed up to be Mentored would be credited with points under the Continuous Professional Development Scheme.

Assistance in passing formal coaching exams

Traditionally, candidates who were unsuccessful in their Level 1 or Level 2 coaching assessments were required to complete the training course again. Candidates now have the option to study and gain work experience with a Mentor based on areas that need improving in their coaching. At the end of the Mentoring period there would be an opportunity for the candidate to re-sit the assessment process. Indeed, this type of integration has become one of the more objective measures of the programme’s success: a very high proportion of candidates who entered into the Mentoring Programme, having been unsuccessful in the formal qualification assessment process, have subsequently qualified following a period of Mentoring.

CONCLUSIONS

Formal Mentoring is a key tool that should be integrated as part of any coaches education programme that offers professional development. Nowadays it is considered an increasingly important element of any coach development programmes (Bloom et al., 1998). Mentoring can support people at any level and stage of experience so offers not only a meaningful development tool, but also a high level of flexibility. The Mentoring Programme introduced by Tennis Coach Ireland has proven to be a very useful addition to the overall training and development of tennis coaches in Ireland. Federations without one should therefore consider developing a Mentoring Programme for their coach education programmes. It is hoped the experiences of Tennis Coach Ireland outlined above can assist and benefit other Federations worldwide.

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