



Measuring the service quality of International Tennis Federation coaches education courses.

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ABSTRACT

The requirement for effective coach education certification programs is becoming increasingly important worldwide for many reasons. First, the number of children who participate in youth and interscholastic sport is increasing dramatically. In addition, female participation, older people playing the sport, and newer sports forms are also on the increase which has created a demand for more qualified coaches and sports instructors, thus, making the education and certification of coaches essential, particularly at the entry level. Most of the developing countries using the International Tennis Federation's coach education syllabus have a policy that all coaches need to be affiliated and be certified in order to coach. Ensuring that all coaches go through the certification system, particularly at the developmental level, to transfer the appropriate knowledge to the coaches in order to retain players is paramount. The purpose of this article is to present a research on measuring the service quality of the International Tennis Federation's coaches' education courses.

Key words: Coach education, Service quality, Developmental coaches, Starter-beginner players.

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INTRODUCTION

In order to have a thriving business, tennis coaches on all levels need to keep players in their program. Coaches who tend to have the most influence on the game of tennis are developmental coaches. Developmental coaches are coaches who work with starter-beginner tennis players. The first impression that an aspiring player has of the game will ultimately predict their future participation. Usually the first introduction to any sport is through a coaching lesson (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Therefore, the quality of coaching that developmental coaches produce in their lessons will have a significant bearing, not only on their own program, but also the game of tennis. It may be assumed that developmental coaches should be proactive in making sure they have the right skills to coach players. This would entail attending a course staged by their respective National Tennis Federation. Unfortunately, this is not the case as the image of tennis coach education courses is somewhat negative; participants of courses are of the feeling that they are not receiving the required knowledge to deliver high quality tennis coaching service (McCullick, Belcher, & Schempp, 2005).

Studies to date have demonstrated a positive influence between coach education courses and a coach's confidence

and efficiency (Vargas-Tonsing, 2007). Considering the globalisation of sports, including tennis, coach education and the demand for qualifying coaches, has been on the rise. In light of this information, tennis has stepped up its efforts to provide a better education to their coaches through adopting coaching courses that have the most updated coaching information and matching educative resources (Crespo, McInerney, & Reid, 2006). Santos, Mesquita, Garca, & Rosado (2001) concluded that the quality of coaching has a direct relationship to the success and satisfaction of its participants and ultimately in their willingness to stay in the sport. There has been a change in focus by researchers in coach education from coaches' behaviours and performance towards thoughts and knowledge that form the basis of coach's actions (Gilbert & Trudel, 2004). Many developed Tennis Federations have established their own unique models of coach education and certification to ensure that those individuals working with a country's top young players are employing both current coaching practices and working with these players with a methodology and philosophy that is player-centred where the health and well-being of the athlete is put first (Crespo et al., 2006).

The International Tennis Federation (ITF) is the world governing body of tennis and is responsible for the overall development of the game worldwide. The ITF's Development Department's

objective is to help developing countries grow the game. One of the ITF's development programs is the provision to developing countries of a coach education syllabus, should they not already have one in place. A large majority of developed countries have their own curriculum and, therefore, do not require the ITF's assistance. Currently, there are 80 nations that use, in some form or other, the ITF's coach education syllabus (Miley, 2011). The ITF, therefore, influences a great number of coaches worldwide by way of developing countries using the ITF's coach education syllabus. It is for this reason that the ITF's coach education syllabus should be the cutting edge in coach education design, ultimately to fulfill its objective of developing the game worldwide.

A major component of participation in the sport of tennis falls on the shoulders of the tennis coach. In most cases, the first port of call of any interested starter-beginner tennis player is the coach. Studies have shown that the quality of coaching has a direct relationship to the success and satisfaction of its participants and ultimately their willingness to stay in the sport (Santos et al., 2001). Although quality of coaching is not the only intervening variable in the continued involvement in tennis, it is recognised as a significant, contributing factor to the development and retention of players.

THE RESEARCH

Purpose

Evaluating the quality of service of tennis coaches' courses as a service, therefore, become fundamental to the sustainable development of tennis as a sport. From an educational point of view the development of sports coaches is a complex process that requires not only an individualised program, but in many cases random learning pathways (Nelson & Cushion, 2006). It is the requirement of coach education syllabi to recognize this and to comply with the demands of the coach as they play a critical role in tennis participation and retention. Misener & Danylchuk (2009) justify the importance of the coach when they say, "Coaches are influential figures in the social, physical, psychological and emotional development of athletes".

Instruments

A quantitative and qualitative research instrument was used. Survey method was used for the quantitative section, and the feedback from the quantitative response was used in the qualitative section. The standardized quality of service SERVQUAL questionnaire to evaluate pre-service expectations and actual post-service experiences of a group of tennis coaches attending the ITF Starter-Beginner Tennis Coaching course constituted the quantitative research instrument. A pre- and post-questionnaire exploring five dimensions of service quality was administered to respondents. These dimensions were: reliability of service, responsiveness of service deliverer, assurance of service users, tangibles and empathy of service

provider. The nineteen sub-dimensions that explored the gap between respondents' expectations and actual service experience are summarised in table 1.

Sub-dimensions of service quality.
1. Credibility of tutors and instructors
2. Tennis training course design
3. Tennis coaching contexts
4. Organisation of tennis coaching practices
5. Pre-course organisation
6. In-course organisation
7. Post-course organisation
8. Marketing of course
9. Learning styles and strategies
10. Education styles and strategies
11. Different methods of course delivery
12. Didactical styles and strategies
13. Tutors created learning environment
14. Feedback opportunities
15. Quality of coaching course material
16. Integration of prior learning
17. Delivery of technical principles
18. Delivery of tactical principles
19. Delivery of scientific tennis principles

Table 1. Sub-dimensions of service quality.

The sub-items under each dimension of SERVQUAL model constituted two questionnaires. The sub-items elaborated on the tennis coach education context and provided appropriate feedback to the research objectives of obtaining a service quality of the ITF's Starter-Beginner Coaching Course. The pre-course questionnaire was divided into two sections. The first section requested demographic information from each participant. In the second section, 19 sub-items representing the five service quality requested respondents to rate the importance they gave to each sub item on a five Likert point scale. The post-course questionnaire was also divided into two sections. The first part was an identical layout to the pre-course questionnaire where the sub-items were presented on a five Likert scale. The second part of this section requested respondents to give consent to be part of the interview part of this research.

The qualitative part of the research used a personal in-depth interview. The aim of the personal interview was to gain further insight into the importance each tennis coach gave to identified aspects of the ITF's Starter-Beginner Coaching course.

Sample

Ninety six coaches (n=96) over four ITF Starter-Beginner tennis coaching courses were approached to take part in the

quantitative part of the research. Of those 96 coaches, 71 (South Africa n=22, Vietnam n=24, Seychelles n=11, St Lucia n=14) consented to take part in the quantitative SERVQUAL survey as part of the research. 56 participants were used in the final analysis section of this research.

The second part of the research used eight qualitative interviews with participants who had consented to provide additional insight into their expectations. Gender equality was imperative in the respondents' research sample resulting in four males and four females taking part in the qualitative section of this research.

RESULTS

The following observations were obtained from the responses made on both the pre-course expectations questionnaire and post-course satisfaction questionnaire.

- Sub-items delivery of technical and tactical knowledge, and tutors created a learning environment were recorded as the most importance to the respondents.
- Sub-items marketing of the course and integration of prior learning were not perceived as important to the respondents and were given the lowest grading.
- Sub-item in-course organisation was rated the highest actual satisfaction received by the respondents.
- Sub-item marketing of the course was rated the lowest actual satisfaction received by the respondents.
- Sub-item that gave the most quality of service by way of gap analysis was integration of prior learning.
- Sub-item that gave the least quality of service from comparing the difference between expectations and importance was marketing of the course.
- Dimension assurance of service user was ranked highest by the respondents when comparing the difference between expectations and satisfaction.
- Dimension tangibles were ranked the lowest by the respondents when comparing the difference between expectations and satisfaction.
- The sub-item delivery of technical knowledge under performed as it was given the highest importance and low satisfaction representing nearly one of the lowest differences in values.

- Sub-items credibility of tutors and instructors, didactical styles and strategies, and feedback opportunities were given an equal rating of importance and satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this research emphatically point towards the ITF's Starter-Beginner Coaching course providing a high level of quality of service. Considering the worldwide perspective of the sample generated to make this research's analysis and interpretations, the ITF is doing its best to impact coaches in a positive way. The implementation of the modified rules program into the ITF's Coach Education Syllabus has been positively received by the participants of this research. This provides the confidence to the coaches in their attempt to attract and retain tennis players in this program. If every coach who takes the ITF's course is receiving the appropriate knowledge and doing their best to retain players, this will have a worldwide impact on the game of tennis. This would be the ultimate goal of the ITF as the status and future of the game falls in their hands. From a coach's educational point of view, the ITF is fulfilling its objective.

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