Coaches are role models: Tales of influence.

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the notion that coaches are role models and exert considerable influence in the development of a player's tennis, character and life skills. Suggestions for coaches to be positive role models are presented.

INTRODUCTION
All coaches are representatives of the sport and in a position of power and influence especially when dealing with young impressionable players. Accordingly, it may be timely to review what role models are, why they are important and what coaches might do to be the best role model they can be.

What is a role model?
Although numerous definitions of role models can be found in the literature, all definitions embrace the notion that they are persons who motivate, inspire or assist/support others to engage in similar behaviour (Payne, Reynolds, Brown & Fleming, 2002). Role models set standards and are points of reference for others.

Who are role models?
Parents are generally considered the dominant role models especially for children. The extent of their influence is thought to change over time as significant others, such as teachers, coaches, peers, celebrities, emerge as ‘persons of influence’. There is evidence that both boys and girls are more likely to embrace a role model of the same gender. This is understandable in terms of closer similarity and identification with a same-gender role model.

HOW CAN ROLE MODELS INFLUENCE OTHERS?
The potential influence of role models is wide and pervasive. They can impact on another person’s thoughts, feelings, values, attitudes and/or actions. How might they do this? Very simply, any or many of their behaviours are imitated, adopted or embraced by others. It could be for example what they say, do, wear, how they conduct their coaching sessions/business or how they live their life. In this context it is reasonable to see that not all influences are necessarily positive. Some may well be negative being unlawful, unethical, amoral, disrespectful and/or destructive (e.g. well-known personalities who are reported in the media for drink-driving, match fixing, doping offenses or disorderly conduct).

What does this mean for coaches?
A coach’s influence can extend well beyond the tennis court and into life itself. This is clearly illustrated by Rafael Nadal in his tribute to his coach Toni,

“... everything I have achieved in the game of tennis, all the opportunities I have had, are thanks to him. I’m especially grateful to him for having placed so much emphasis from the beginning on making sure I kept my feet on the ground and never become complacent... he pushes me always to improve and do better” (Nadal, 2012, p.263).

The importance for coaches to be positive role models has been vigorously promoted by the legendary US basketball coach John Wooden, who is widely credited as the greatest coach of the 20th century. Some of his key messages to coaches/teachers are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Advice to coaches/teachers from John Wooden (1997) about the importance of being a positive role model/example.
The messages in Table 1 highlight not only the considerable responsibilities coaches have to those they teach but also the opportunities afforded in being a positive role model. It is a chance to guide, enthuse, motivate, inspire and support players to develop their strengths and potentials, character and creative efforts to be the best they can be, or want to be, both on and off the court. It is a chance to have a lasting legacy in the lives of those who you coach.

WHAT CAN COACHES DO TO BE POSITIVE ROLE MODELS?

It is critical that coaches are aware of, understand and embrace their responsibility to be positive role models. To this end a number of suggestions are presented for consideration in Table 2.

Table 2. Recommendations to coaches: How to be positive role models.

CONCLUSION

All coaches are role models (Lyle, 2013). While this carries responsibilities it also affords coaches opportunities to positively influence players in developing their games, character and life skills. Nothing can be more rewarding to a coach than to receive acknowledgement and appreciation for the critical role he/she played in a player’s tennis and life. Such acknowledgement and appreciation were clearly evident in Novak Djokovic’s recent tribute to his first coach, Jelena Gencic at the time of her death.

“Jelena was my first coach, like my second mother. We were very close throughout my whole life and she taught me a lot of things that are part of me, part of my character today. Hopefully I will be able to continue with her legacy, because she left so much knowledge to me, to the people that were close to her. I feel a responsibility to continue doing that in the future because she worked with kids between five and six years to 12 or 13. She dedicated all her life to that generation and to tennis” (The Independent, 2014).

Tennis will never look better than when its coaches fully embrace the opportunity to positively influence others by being the best person they can and capably coaching to the best of their ability.
REFERENCES


