



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.

Key words: Coach, Role model.

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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.

Key Messages to Coaches
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a role model is the most powerful form of educating. Youngsters need good models more than they need critics. • Your main responsibility as a coach is to set an example • A leader's most powerful ally is his or her own example. Leaders don't just talk about doing something; they do it . • No written word, no spoken plea Can teach our youth what they should be. Not all the books on all the shelves. It's what the teachers are themselves. • We need models that are good, positive models. • Remember that you represent others who are responsible for you as well as yourself and your personal appearance and conduct should not reflect discredit in any way upon yourself or upon those whom you represent. Cleanliness, neatness, politeness, and good manners are qualities that should be characteristic of those who are of great influence on young people and you certainly qualify for that category. Be a good example. • Changing lives (of those we coach) matters most.

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.

Recommendations (adapted from Wooden & Jamison, 1997; Young, 2009)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Genuinely care about your players and prioritise the development of your players as people –embrace developing character and helping players develop to their full potential as your most important endeavours •Emphasise and reward a player's best efforts (versus wins/results on the scoreboard) at training and in competition •Emphasise and exhibit exemplary qualities including determination, hard work, resilience, passion, integrity, honesty, fair play, respect, equality and inclusion •At all times adopt lawful, ethical, moral and healthy practices in your coaching and life outside of coaching - commit to the ITF Code of Ethics for Coaches (or adapted version adopted by your tennis club or National Association). 'Practice what you preach'. Lead by example (versus directing and instructing) •Adopt the 'Golden Rule' – treat others as you would like them to treat you. Give of yourself/help others without necessarily expecting any reward •Learn from the past but live in the present – be optimistic about the future •Love and enjoy your coaching – appreciate that you are in a 'select' group who has the ability and opportunity to coach. Openly show your enthusiasm for the game and coaching •Commit to professional and personal development (eg. attending training courses, reading the latest information in coaching, consulting respected peers and finding a mentor). Challenge yourself to be a life-long learner •Give your best effort in every lesson and task you undertake •Prepare and plan carefully and thoroughly. Attend to the detail as little things matter – get yourself well organised and very good at time management •Be consistent and keep an even keel under pressure - ensure the valleys are not too low and the peaks not too high •Be patient - good things require time to happen •Attend to your appearance (clean, neat etc) •Be punctual, courteous, thoughtful and respectful. Take a genuine interest in others and actively listen to what they say. Invite others to share their views and questions.

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.

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