



The Tennis Coach's Toolkit: Identification, analysis and intervention for psychological skills issues.

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ABSTRACT

Working with the mental side of a player's game is often seen as an area that is challenging, warrants caution, and is perhaps even a daunting task when compared with making technical or tactical changes. This article outlines how a coach can approach such issues with confidence and competence, using the method adopted from the 'Tennis Coach's Toolkit' mental skills development resource. Using the three pillars of effective coaching, Create Environment (CE), Effective Working Relationships (EWR) and Steepening The Learning Curve (SLC), this article outlines the process by which a coach can maximise not only their player's potential, but also their own potential.

Key words: Psychology, Effective coaching, Coaching tools.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an ever growing trend in athletic development to seek out specialist assistance from sport science support teams in order for an athlete to achieve maximum potential. In the context of psychological development of athletes, practising sport psychologists are almost synonymous with modern day athletic development. To call on the expertise of accredited sport psychologists with relation to mental components of the game is now an accepted norm. However, we have to be careful in modern day high performance sport that the coach does not become marginalised and impotent as a result of the input from sport scientists. We would also imagine that 99% of the tennis programmes in the world do not use a sport psychologist due to either availability or cost. It is important, therefore, that we believe that a knowledgeable coach can and should develop the vast majority of psychological skills that a player needs.

Mental fitness of players should be, and is often perfected through effective day to day coaching on the court, which requires the practical application of good mental skills development strategies from the coach. The present article reflects how the methods behind the Tennis Coach's Toolkit, can increase the accessibility of coaching psychology strategies and interventions for all levels of coaches all over the world.

METHODOLOGY

In an effort to illustrate the methodology, the article will work through a very short story....

The story

A coach is teaching a group of players on two courts, in which one of the players is becoming despondent because of not winning enough points in the practice. In particular he has lost his focus and willingness to run for the ball. The player has a tendency to 'get down' and can become negative quickly and then struggles to 'get out of it'. This particular player does not believe he moves very well and is not very agile. These attitudes contrast sharply with his behavior when he is off the court or at the beginning or end of season 'get-togethers' where he is the life and soul of the group. When the coach directs his attention toward the player either through eye contact, verbally or by moving closer to him the player's attitude becomes even more distracted and uncooperative. The player's unhealthy attitude is starting to have a harmful effect on other players in the group.

Your review

The purpose of this part of the process is for you to make the first attempt to analyze, identify and then provide possible solutions to the issues in the story.

Our review

We review the story highlighting the areas we find most relevant and indicate which of our three pillars of effective coaching we think they relate to;

- Create Environment (CE)
- Effective Working Relationships (EWR)
- Steepening The Learning Curve (SLC)

ANALYSIS

The player's despondency and tendency to 'get down' (CE/EWR/SLC) appears to be linked to having an outcome based approach, with his inability to win points in the practice over shadowing his willingness to investigate the causative factors for his low points tally. A person's behavior is influenced by his emotions which is in turn a result of the nature of his thoughts. The player's inability to control his emotions can be linked to his perception of achievement and success. This 'motivational climate' can be significantly influenced by the coach in this story. If the coach can think of exercises that encourage the player to be more proficient at understanding and then executing performance and process goals the outcomes will be more satisfactory.



The player 'does not believe he moves well and is not very agile' (SLC): This harmful belief may be the result of a negative self-fulfilling prophecy by the coach. This self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when coaches' expectations become reality. A coach will sometimes develop an expectation for the player that predicts the level of performance and type of behavior that the player will show. These expectations may influence his treatment of the player. So, the coach's behavior toward our player in the group may differ to that of the others in the group according to the coach's belief concerning the player's competence.

The way in which the coach treats our player will affect the player's performance and rate of learning. Also, different communication to different players tells each player how competent the coach thinks he is. This information affects the

player's self-confidence, motivation and level of aspiration, all of which are influential to the steepness of the learning curve of the player.

The player's behavior and performance then conform to the coach's expectations of him. This behavioral conformity reinforces the original expectation of the player by the coach, and the process continues. Now imagine the impact that the player's own self-fulfilling prophecy will have on his treatment of himself! The player will begin to have what is called a 'negative filter' and notice only those behaviors in himself which reinforce his own beliefs that he moves poorly.

Feedback by the coach can therefore raise or lower the level of self- expectation of the player and influence subsequent behavior. For example, after the player has not made an effort to chase down a ball, the coach might say "Tom. That's unlike you, not to chase that ball down." Or "Tom, with your improving speed and determination, that's unlike you not to chase that ball down", resulting in the player chasing down subsequent balls in similar situations.

Another way of raising the aspirational level of the player is by showing your high level of expectation by apologising to the player for not working him hard enough and so not being appropriately demanding of him e.g. "Ahh! Sorry Tom I let you down then...I'm sorry. That last feed was probably too easy... what do you think?"

Here is another example in this short story when working hard to understand and accept would be very relevant to the coach. When the coach directs his attention toward the player either through eye contact, verbally or by moving closer to him the player's attitude becomes even more distracted and uncooperative, (CE/EWR).



This probably requires the coach to look inside himself and reflect upon his role in the development of a healthy working alliance with the player, in other words how to form a more effective working relationship. The coach's presence seems to have triggered a negative change in performance/behavior of the player. There may be something about the approach of the coach that the player feels is negatively parental, punitive,

demanding, or having expectations. Even though the coach may want him to get better, the 'want' could be an expectation and an expectation is a hidden demand - not just "I want", "you should". Taking a 'want' and making it a 'should' is what creates an expectational pressure.

The player's unhealthy attitude is starting to have a harmful effect on other players in the group, (CE/EWR): An important role of the coach within a group or squad situation is to nurture effective working relationships between players. Players may need help to be aware of their important role in supporting each other, as this security is a key factor in people making changes and sticking to them. For example, in the above part of the story if players had accepted that it is their responsibility to 'look after' the standards of the whole group in the session and they may have offered support for this player 'in trouble' at the very first sign of his mental struggle. If a player acknowledges their role for the group then they may choose to respond differently when not playing well because they understood that the health of the on-court environment is about us not me.

COACHING TOOLS

The coaching tools of the Toolkit are split into three categories.

- A. On court activities, drills and games
- B. Off -court activities and tasks
- C. Super coaching

On court activities, drills and games WAR AND LAR

WAR (Winner Assesses the Rally) and LAR (Loser Assesses the Rally) drills help encourage the player to review their performance and not just the outcome (win or lose) of the point. After a rally, starting with or without serving, either the winner or the loser awards points to the actual player who won the rally on the following scale:

- + 3 points = very good tennis
- + 2 points = good tennis
- + 1 point = ok tennis
- 0 points = average or below average tennis

EFFORT-PERFORMANCE-EFFORT TALK

Before each point the player gives three separate scores out of ten, one for how hard they tried on the last point, another for their performance and finally another score out of ten for the

effort they are just about to give in the point about to be played.

TENNIS TOUGH

The player and coach agree on a specified number of times that the player will be 'tennis tough' during point play. The player has to show good emotional control during the period he has chosen to be 'tennis tough'. This pre-decided period may be for a certain length of time or number of points or games. When this time has elapsed the player may resume as normal.

Off -court activities and tasks

Learning opportunity is not confined to the tennis court and lessons only. These 'off-court' and often 'off-lesson' tasks provide coaches with additional and alternative ways to help players learn outside of the tennis court and help the player to grow and develop self-responsibility as well as enabling the coach to explore player motivation.

- 'I PLAY MY BEST TENNIS WHEN...'

The player is asked to write a short story (no more than one side of A4) about one of the following titles: 'I play my best tennis when...'

'How I would help a young player who sometimes gets down on himself in practice and matches'

Super coaching

The last category we have included in coaching tools is 'Super Coaching'.

Super Coaching is occurring when the players "light bulbs" are flashing on repeatedly or helping to get that 'penny to drop' in record short time.

USING ANALOGIES

Analogies, because they are descriptions and examples of events and experiences similar but not identical to the ones directly being addressed by the pupil and coach, ask the pupil to make a leap of imagination and reasoning, the equivalent of mental gymnastic training. The effort involved in arriving at the conclusions helps retention of the lesson; before we directly tackle the story let's have a look at a relatively simple analogy and which would be an example of 'Super Coaching'.

Coach: "You play football don't you?"

Pupil: "Yes"

Coach: "If I tell you that if you become very good at swerving a free kick up and around the defensive wall you will develop a really great serve. Why could that be true?"

Pupil: "Because they both involve making the ball spin when you want."

Coach: "How?"

Pupil: "You need to strike the ball at one side so it spins and then curls around"

Coach: "I said you will have a huge serve one day!"

Within Super Coaching there is an understanding that the key lies not in providing players with just information, but in turning information into knowledge that cannot be ignored. Analogies can do this by passing information onto the player through an 'ah-ha' moment. For example the following analogies may be useful in our story and we ask you to think about the coach and player having these conversational themes:

- The importance of emotional control: Imagine an astronaut making a mistake on his spaceship and then 'hanging his head' while the others are trying to rescue the situation.
- Imagine what it would be like to be in one of the '8's' of the Oxford and Cambridge boat race and rowing out of synch with the rest of the team and causing chaos as the oars clatter into each other.

TRANSFERENCE OF SKILL – Challenging unused strengths

A creative search through the life experiences of the young player may well reveal an area they are successful in, which is closely related to what the coach wants to work on.

A conscientious school student will be familiar with the discipline required to switch off the television and begin revising, or a keen middle distance runner will understand how to cope with his own negative thinking when the race pace starts to hurt. Super coaches tap into these unused strengths, transferring confidence from another part of the player's life, so by-passing a potential 'road block'. This young player's attitude off court of being the 'life and soul of the group' can be used to help his on-court performance. I wonder how long it would take you to lead the player into becoming the 'life and soul of the tennis group'? And the others to be saying "we can't start Coach, without him being here!"a Super Coach!

CONCLUSION

The present article has offered just one example of a typical on-court issue that many coaches are likely to have faced

throughout their careers. Through the presentation of a short story, the article then works through the problem in two stages. Firstly, it has analysed the issue using the three pillars of effective coaching. Secondly, it then presents on and off-court tools that a coach can use, to ensure they are securely on the pathway to super coaching. The regular adoption of this problem based, hands on approach to the mental side of player development, will ensure success of both player and coach on a regular basis.

REFERENCES

- Dent, P. & Reynolds, K. (2009). The Tennis Coach's Toolkit: A pathway to super coaching. The Tennis C.

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