



# Coaching advice from legendary wheelchair tennis players

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## ABSTRACT

This article features insights from a selected group of the most prominent and successful Wheelchair Tennis Players of all time. Therefore, this is an overview, or opinion piece, more than a traditional research article. The players that are highlighted shared their views on what it took to get to the very top of the game. All were happy to share their “secrets” in hopes of supporting tennis coaches as well as players of all levels as they strive to reach their goals. Each of these players is either a current, or future, member of the International Tennis Hall of Fame. We hope that their insights will show the individual traits of each player, but just as important their commonalities, which highlight their road to the very top of the game.

**Key words:** wheelchair tennis players, legends of the game, secrets to success.

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## INTRODUCTION

As coaches, we have many opportunities to have a significant, positive impact on players as they learn the game and progress along the pathway of success. Certainly, when writing articles for the ITF Coaches and Sport Science Review, we review the early (Roetert, 1983) as well as current literature to look for sports science/medicine trends and new findings that might be relevant to this specific topic. We do so in this particular case as well (Abuwarda et al, 2013; Rietveld et al, 2023; Rietveld et al, 2024; Roetert et al, 2024; Sánchez-Pay & Sanz-Rivas, 2021; Sánchez-Pay et al 2023; Sindall et al, 2013). In addition, we reviewed the rules and regulations of tennis as well (ITF, 2024; USTA, 2019). However, in this particular article, we are turning the tables to see directly what knowledge we can glean from some of the top wheelchair tennis players in the world. Specifically, we asked five legends of the game what their secrets of success were as they worked their way to the top. We have had the privilege to obtain input from Rick Draney, David Hall, Shingo Kunieda, Brad Parks and Esther Vergeer. Four of these players are currently members of the International Tennis Hall of Fame and the fifth player (Shingo) will no doubt join them as he becomes eligible. We took the liberty of adding coaching tips using the players’ own comments. We hope you will appreciate these players’ insights of the game as much as we enjoyed obtaining their candor and knowledge.

## STARTING OUT

*Coaching Tip: Celebrate achievements, milestones, and success stories to inspire and motivate participants to pursue their athletic aspirations with passion and resilience – Esther Vergeer.*



What a simple yet powerful statement Esther shares as she explains how important it is to seek guidance, resources, and mentorship as you, being a coach in particular, navigate the challenges and opportunities of disability sport. Advocate for the inclusion of disability sport programs in schools, sports clubs, and recreational facilities to expand access and opportunities for kids with disabilities. As Rick explains further, a player’s particular type or level of injury/disability may be similar to other players, yet the “manifestation” of the type or level of injury/disability may differ greatly. However, keep in mind that this variety is one reason wheelchair tennis is so intriguing. Players learning the sport of wheelchair tennis, as well as their coaches, should absorb all they can to read/watch, observe others, ask questions, practice, experiment, adjust, adapt and then apply it to fit your particular skills and abilities. In addition, Esther stresses that coaches also seize every opportunity to continually advocate for the inclusion of disability sport programs in schools, sports clubs, and recreational facilities to expand access and opportunities for kids with disabilities.

Another key component David points out is the element of fun. Especially in the early stages, the focus cannot exclusively be based on learning technique. New players will rarely come back if they aren't enjoying their first tennis lessons. He mentions fond memories of mixing up drills and sometimes just hanging out with his first coach at the side of the court sharing funny stories. Brad mentioned that when he first started playing all he hoped for was to see if he would be able to rally and hit with friends and family. That experience allowed him to discover the love for hitting tennis balls. He played his best when he was having the most fun. Because he was very fit, he felt he could outlast and out-hit most other players.

*Coaching Tip: I loved to practice, I believe it's in practice sessions that we learn to truly love the game and I had the desire to hit all day – Brad Parks.*

Brad always strived to focus on hitting one ball at a time while staying in the moment. In addition to appreciating being coached and taking part in many drills, he loved to hit with good able bodied players who put him through the test.

## MINDSET

*Coaching Tip: Be prepared to suffer. It could be in the gym, on court, or pushing hills. You have to go beyond what you think you're capable of – David Hall.*

David gets right to the point with the statement above by saying that if you want dreams to come true and truly strive to become the best player in the world, then, there are some things in life you'll have to do without. Whether it's diet, social life, money management or anything else, the question should be 'Am I prepared to do more?'. A champion will say 'yes'. Then the real suffering begins. If you've got the game to win a one major championship, then you've got the game to win more majors. Don't ever be satisfied. Crave winning with an insatiable hunger that's never fulfilled. Don't get caught up in your own success. Rick agreed with that statement and after matches always reviewed in his mind what went well, what didn't go well, and focused on what he could work on to improve.

Rick also felt that the simpler he kept things in competition, the better the outcome. He tried to do in practice what he wanted to accomplish in competition and not to "overthink" or "get caught up in the moment" during competition. By knowing his strengths and weaknesses, he tried to maximize opportunities to utilize his strengths and minimize exposing his weaknesses. In addition, he tried to know as much as possible about his opponent's strengths and weaknesses so he could formulate a plan for each match and execute that game plan. If something in the plan needed to be modified or changed during a match, he focused on being proactive instead of reactive.

*Coaching Tip: Maximize opportunities to utilize your strengths and minimize exposing your weaknesses – Rick Draney.*

Shingo chose to see every challenge as a "problem". When he was ranked number 5 in the world, he felt he had four problems ranked ahead of him and even when he reached the number one ranking in the world, he wanted to stay there and continued to look for "problems" to solve in order to help improve his game. He often used self-talk as well for encouragement. He repeated his affirmation statement of "I

am Invincible" both on- and off the court, which helped him to get rid of negative feelings. He made key words like "I know what to do" and "Be confident" part of his regular routine.

Esther's mindset during her winning streak in wheelchair tennis was a combination of determination, focus, resilience, and a relentless pursuit of excellence. She was deeply committed to mastering her craft and achieving excellence in wheelchair tennis and approached each match with a steadfast dedication to continuous improvement, setting high standards for herself and tirelessly honing her skills on and off the court. Despite the pressures and expectations associated with her remarkable winning streak, she maintained a positive and optimistic outlook. She understood (and enjoyed) the importance of focusing on the process rather than solely on outcomes. This allowed her to remain present and fully engaged in each point, match, and tournament, channeling her energy and attention towards executing her game plan with precision (and adjusted it when needed).

*Coaching Tip: Embrace challenges as opportunities for growth, viewing setbacks as valuable learning experiences that fuel motivation to strive for greater heights in the sport (on and off court) – Esther Vergeer.*

## CHAIR/EQUIPMENT

*Coaching Tip: It may take hours, days, weeks, or even months and hitting lots of tennis balls before you really know if something feels and works better or worse – Rick Draney.*

All of the players that contributed to this article referred to the importance of the chair and how much effort they had put in to its proper design and fit. As Rick aptly points out, your limits will change as your skill, strength, and playing style change. Dialing-in your chair set-up should be a never-ending process. This should include knowledge and awareness of frame, size and type of rear wheels as well as front forks and casters, side guards, foot positioning and strapping just to name a few considerations. The idea is to securely and comfortably "unify" your lower body and your tennis chair. Brad agreed as he reflected on the evolution of the chair and the significant improvements over several decades. He was one of the first athletes using a "sports chair" in the 1970's and believed that players should know as much as possible about the chair and its features. This should include knowing how to repair the chair as well as what seating and strapping is best for you and your body. The wheelchair and how you fit in it takes years to learn and tweak. This should be constantly updated and experienced.

As Esther reflected on the different versions of the wheelchair she believes that, in her opinion, the evolution of the many modifications has been instrumental in shaping the landscape of wheelchair tennis, propelling the sport to new heights of athleticism and inclusivity. Personally, in 2008, she started to believe that she had issues of maneuverability, stability, and balance, which hindered her ability to fully engage in the game. Recognizing the need for innovation, she began experimenting with modifications to enhance functionality on the tennis court. Together with manufacturers she started designing a specialized wheelchair tailored to her unique demands. These adaptations included modifications to the frame, wheels (including the back wheels), and seating (bucket) to optimize performance and agility. Lightweight materials became integral for greater success including the use of new

components that ensured durability without compromising mobility. In 2009, Esther started to build a bucket seat which allowed her to become one with her chair. It took her a year and a half to design, develop, and build it. And it took another year to get used to the new seating and maneuverability.

Shingo tested various materials throughout his career. However, more important than the material for him was to decide on the proper center of gravity. He felt that even sliding the seat position one millimeter forward or backward could change the chair's maneuverability. The proper seat position also affects the foot position on the foot board as well as the proper hip joint angle. Additionally, using belts or knee pads can often provide greater power and stability, but this could be at the detriment of having greater flexibility. Shingo decided on the proper balance of these components which clearly improved his performance.

*Coaching Tip: Always have your equipment prepared for play... Whether it is your racquets, your tennis chair, or your body and mind... Control the controllable - Shingo Kunieda.*

## TRAINING CONSIDERATIONS

*Coaching Tip: Play with a variety of practice partners. In addition, find players that play with different styles. That should include players that mix up various spins and speeds as well - David Hall.*

David believes in changing training methods sooner rather than later. Even if training techniques worked earlier, they may not continue to work. If you are a coach and your player stops improving, find out why and make the necessary change(s). David often played practice sets with able bodied players. This included young juniors who could run like the wind as well as older players who never missed a shot. Not only was it great practice but it kept training interesting. Rick always focused on "keeping it simple". He believed that physical conditioning is essential and can be a significant advantage to help you win a match if you out-last or out-hustle your opponent. However, be aware of injury from over-training or improper technique. Eat healthy, keep well hydrated, avoid harmful substances, and get adequate rest. Keep in mind, agility, quickness, and endurance are more beneficial than sheer physical strength for tennis (wheelchair or not).

Rick shared that mental conditioning is an often neglected or under-utilized component. Sometimes, matches are won (or lost) at a mental (not physical) level. It's that ever-elusive mental toughness that can be the difference between winning and losing. Like other aspects, be patient, think long-term and try to develop your mental toughness slowly and steadily. Similar to Rick, Brad learned the importance of the mental side of the game as a competitor. He became a student of mental training in sports and studied many of the top sport psychologists who wrote about the game. Both Brad and his biggest competitor, Randy Snow, became students of the game. As it relates to the physical aspect of training, Brad loved hitting even if it was only against a ball machine. As he improved, he wondered how he matched up against other players. He realized that pushing his chair and training in wheelchair racing helped complement his movement and fitness on the tennis court. At that time, he felt he was fit enough to outlast anyone. Striving to hit one ball at a time and stay in the moment became the goal. Throughout her career, Esther also encountered obstacles, setbacks, and some great

opponents. However, her resilience and mental strength enabled her to overcome adversity with determination. She viewed setbacks as temporary rather than insurmountable barriers. She learned to be resilient under adverse conditions.

## INTANGIBLES AND CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

*Coaching Tip: Discover the love of hitting tennis balls. This will often lead to encouraging others to experience the fun of playing - Brad Parks.*

### Have a passion for the sport

Brad shared that when he first started playing all he hoped for was to see if he could play and hoping to be able to rally and hit with friends and family. By doing that, he discovered the love for hitting tennis balls, which lead to encouraging many others to experience the fun of hitting.

David agreed by stating that "fun isn't overrated". Coaches should help their players to find early success. Whether that's correcting a shot or winning a few rounds at a tournament. If a new player feels they aren't getting somewhere they will likely leave the sport. As a coach, do everything you can to correct their worst shot. "Do that and the player will make a big leap and feel like they're really going somewhere". If the player feels like they're part of a team and the coach is 100% invested and cares as much as the player about their success, then that goes a long way.

Esther's passion for wheelchair tennis was big. She approached each match with a genuine love for the sport, embracing the joy of training, competition and the camaraderie of the tennis community. Her enthusiasm and dedication inspired her fellow athletes alike, leaving a mark on the sport's legacy.

### Resilience

As mentioned in the previous section, Esther's resilience was likely one of her greatest assets. Similarly, Rick shared how the coach of a wheelchair player should also be resilient throughout the process of coaching a player. He believes that it is very important for a coach to understand the player's particular type or level of injury/disability. The player may appear similar to other players, yet the "manifestation" of their type or level of injury/disability may differ greatly. This variety is one reason wheelchair tennis is so intriguing.

Shingo always tried to stay one-step ahead of the competition during his career. He was able to do this because of the respect that he had shown for the increasingly well-prepared and improving generation of players entering the sport. Shingo understood that he had to try to "stay out in front" of the competition. Addressing the physical, tactical and mental needs for constant improvement, along with turning every loss into a learning opportunity, allowed him to remain at the very top of the men's game for almost two decades.

### Learn to overcome adversity

Shingo was playing in the finals of the 2022 Wimbledon Championships. Wimbledon was the one Grand Slam tournament that had eluded him and was indeed a tournament he very much wanted to win. He found himself in a real battle with his opponent. In fact, he had lost the first set and won a very close second set. He felt the third set slipping away and he found himself down 2-5. He just didn't feel he was

getting much traction with his wheels on the court. With that knowledge, he decided to let some air out of the tires on the change-over to gain some additional traction, while continuing to show his confidence which would be clearly evident to his opponent. The result was greater traction, better movement, improved confidence and likely a drop in confidence for his opponent. Shingo ended up making a great comeback to win the match and the only Wimbledon title of his career.

Esther mentioned being resilient during adversity. Throughout her career, she encountered obstacles, setbacks, and some great opponents. As she shared with us: My resilience and mental strength enabled me to overcome adversity with determination. I viewed setbacks as temporary setbacks rather than insurmountable barriers.

*Coaching Tip: Use resilience, mental strength and determination to overcome adversity. View setbacks as temporary rather than insurmountable barriers - Esther Vergeer.*

### Concluding statements

*Coaching Tip: Analyzing yourself is the key to a successful practice session. Even after reaching the highest level of the game, stay focused on improving yourself - Shingo Kunieda.*

Each of the five players mentioned in this article mentioned the importance of having a set of routines. Shingo may have been the most organized in his routines. Even after he reached being the top player in the world status, he kept his focus on continual improvement. He practiced proper technique and swing paths over and over until they became patterns he could rely on. Strength and conditioning training on- as well as off-court became a staple to improve strength, flexibility, agility and endurance. Once Shingo realized that although an average match would typically last about an hour, the actual playing time was approximately 25 minutes. This knowledge allowed him to be able focus on the time between points more efficiently so that he would have a positive mindset starting each point.

Esther provides this great summary in focusing on the journey - From humble beginnings to global recognition, the journey of wheelchair tennis reflects the unwavering determination of athletes to defy expectations and redefine the boundaries of possibility. As we celebrate the achievements of wheelchair tennis, let us also reaffirm our commitment to fostering an environment where every individual, regardless of ability,

can thrive and shine on and off the court. As the sport of wheelchair tennis continues to evolve, the quest for innovation remains perpetual. Advancements in materials science, biomechanics, and engineering hold the promise of even greater breakthroughs in wheelchair design and performance.

*Coaching Tip: The ongoing collaboration between athletes, manufacturers, and sports organizations ensures that wheelchair tennis will remain at the forefront of adaptive sports, inspiring generations to come - Esther Vergeer.*

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct this research.

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