The State of Play: Coaching Persons with Disabilities.
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ABSTRACT
In its broadest sense, the term 'special population' refers to any group that is considered 'different' or 'non-traditional' because of circumstances (e.g., the homeless, substance abusers, persons within the juvenile justice system) or disability (i.e., reduction of functional ability resulting from physical and/or intellectual impairment) [Coaching Association of Canada, 2005; United States Tennis Federation, 2006]. For the purpose of this article, the scope of this review will be limited to coaching persons with a disability and, specifically, to key themes that are currently considered relevant and appropriate for coaches to embrace in order to provide an inclusive environment for persons with a disability to play and enjoy the game. These key themes will now be briefly examined with respect to coaching persons with a disability (physical and/or intellectual).

INTRODUCTION
‘We’ve come a long way’ is a slogan that might well apply to the awareness of the importance of, and availability of published material about, coaching special populations. While much still needs to be done, a review of the literature suggests an increasing range of material about coaching special populations is now available for coaches to access (e.g., Bullock, 2007; Young, 2007; Young & Browne, 2009).

INCLUSIVE COACHING SO EVERYONE CAN PARTICIPATE EQUITABLY
A. Focus on a Player's Ability

B. Adapt when Appropriate
A coach should be prepared and able to adapt activities, skill practice and/or games to ensure all players can participate. Possible adaptations include changes to one’s teaching style, rules, equipment or environment. For example,

Teaching style:
• Use more demonstrations and less verbal instruction

Rules:
• Allow players to hit the ball after 2 or 3 bounces; score first to 10 points and/or play to a time limit

Equipment:
A. **Use shorter racquets and lighter/softer balls (e.g., foam balls or balloons), lower or remove the net**

**Environment:**

- Change the size of the court playing area; move to an area with less noise and distractions

**C. Engage in Effective Communication**

Coaches need to be mindful that we all learn and respond in different ways, and accordingly, coaches require skills to show, listen, explain and demonstrate in a variety of ways to and with a variety of people. Notwithstanding cultural differences, smiling is a recognised universal way for coaches to warmly welcome and give positive feedback and encouragement.

**D. Ensure Fun and Safe Environment**

The challenge here is for coaches to plan and deliver engaging sessions that are fun and safe. This is an on-going and demanding task if a coach is to fulfill his/her duty of care to his/her players. To this end, detailed attention to risk management strategies are imperative and should never be compromised. As is appropriate for all players, coaches should enquire about any relevant safety or medical condition before a player starts taking lessons.

**E. Be Prepared to Have a Go**

It is natural for coaches to feel nervous or apprehensive about working with persons with a disability and, as such, the first step may be the most difficult. In many instances a pro-active approach may be required to target persons with a disability and introduce one’s coaching services. Thereafter, the best advice is to ‘have a go’ and not worry about making the occasional mistake given persons with a disability often just want to know they are respected and valued.

**F. Integrate into Existing Programs or Create New Program**

The decision to integrate persons with a disability into an existing tennis program/session, or to start a new program/session, depends on a number of factors (e.g., are players of a comparable standard; does the coach have the time and resources to start a new program?). Given persons with a disability generally appreciate the choice to participate in a program or activity that suits them best, a good starting point is to ask persons with a disability what might attract them to the game and work for them.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The themes noted above are currently considered pertinent for inclusive coaching and are consistent with recognised general coaching principles (e.g., Martens, 2004) and coaching athletes with a disability principles (Coaching Association of Canada, 2005). As such, this review re-enforces the notion that ‘coaching is coaching’ irrespective of the targeted group.

No longer is there a complete void of material about coaching persons with a disability. Since it’s inception in 1993, the ITF Coaching and Sport Science Review has actively sought articles that address coaching ‘non-traditional’ groups. Notwithstanding, the opportunity exists for further research and the sharing of information from those coaches who have had inspirational and insightful experiences in coaching persons with a disability. In the past, certain groups have been oft-overlooked, or even avoided, but if we are to truly grow the game and embrace the notion of equity and ‘fair play’, then coaches have a responsibility to reach out to all including those persons with a disability.

**REFERENCES**
