Being a team captain.

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ABSTRACT

Davis cup and Fed cup are no doubt the most renowned team competitions in tennis and go back a long way in tennis history. Other team events at international level include Junior Davis and Fed cup, national club matches. This article is a personal account of what was required as a team captain within the ITF team competition setting. I summaries key roles and how the role has changed throughout the years.

INTRODUCTION

Historically the teams consisted of players and often only an official delegate. One of the players took the role as “playing captain”.

With the introduction of coaches in tennis the “non playing captain” was added.

In my beginning years as captain of the Belgian Fed cup team I remember it was just me and the official delegate to guide the team. Gradually the teams around the world saw other people added. In the first place this was an assistant coach (tactical advice, training sessions…) and a physiotherapist (rehab, interventions on court…). Some teams even got a physical coach (warm ups, maintenance training within the long season…).

By the time I was Davis captain in the 2000’s a lot of the teams also used a doctor and/or exercise physiologist. Recovery (especially in long 5 set matches) became a key element in the difference between winning and losing. Many teams brought their own stringer (the men are a lot more fuzzy about the right string-tension… the week leading in to the tie is often a continuum of slightly adapting tensions towards the surface, the balls…)

I also had the experience to work with a sports psychologist (who observes team interactions, body language of “the bench” and the captain during the matches…)

Modern technology also allowed for match analysis being done (either during the tie or afterwards). I recall Carl Maes as Fed cup captain analysing Clijsters - Dementieva till late at night in order to prepare for Henin to play Dementieva the day after…with success!

The number of players also changed throughout the years. Often juniors were brought into the team as sparring partner, but also to get them acquainted with the typical atmosphere around this type of competition (which is rare in our individual sports).

Often Davis captains these days make the choice to align a specialist doubles team. Patrick McEnroe had major success with the US team selecting the Bryan brothers. The risk of a potential injury of one of the singles players is outweighed by the virtual guarantee to win the so important doubles match in the tie.

Given all the changes above over the last 20 years, it is clear that the skill set needed to be an effective captain has changed.

The coaching on court does still rely on the same principles. It is still about the right type of communication with the player during the match (what to say, when to say it, how to say it, how much information is effective for which type of player, body language throughout etc)
However, how to use all the extra staff members both in the preparation and during the matches, has given the job of the captain another dimension.

Leadership skills are nowadays essential to make sure that everybody in the team knows his/her task to maximise the performance of the players (internal communications, delegation of responsibilities, working principles...)

In the case one has real top players in the team, another aspect surfaces. The psychology of dealing with top players is often very different as they are used to attract a lot of attention. Very often the work ahead of the tie is in this case much more time consuming (scheduling – discussion with managers – potential help in the negotiations on commercial aspects...). In this case security people are during the tie often present to avoid unwanted situations...another person around the team...

Media demands have changed over the last 2 decades too. Matches are televised or streamed via the internet, journalists need to provide more up to date information (newspapers and online articles...). The way the captain is communicating with the press plays an important role in the image of the team. In the mean time captains are conscious that what they say is also a form of indirect messaging towards their players. A press officer often assists the captain and the players in this particular role.

Personally I have always found the preparation of tennis players for a weekend tie very different to what one does in normal individual competitions. Living towards a tie in the weekend ahead automatically builds up expectations within the team. One has a lot more chances for practice and specific preparation. There is time to maximise readiness, to make choices for the week (selection, match ups...). On top of the responsibility to play for your team/nation, this all adds to the pressure for the players. Hence the many upsets in Davis cup or Fed cup.

Of course there is lot more team coaching to do than just Davis cup or Fed cup. There are some key differences between the role of an educational captain (juniors) versus a result oriented captain (DC, Fed cup).

While the result is always important, captains of junior teams can use team competitions as an optimal vehicle to assist in player development. Coaching on court allows you more than in any other circumstance to shape decision making and game styles together with the player in a real match situation.

As said, this multidisciplinary approach to a national team as described above has changed the role of the captain in the last 2 decades. Some of the very top players have adopted this approach and we now often see them surrounded by a larger team of specialists as well...

I have always viewed being a team captain as an honour as well as an exciting chance for a coach to bring an extra dimension to the job. The different ways of interaction allow you to make more of a difference with the players. It increases the exposure for coaches and what they can bring to the game. From a coaches perspective it is a pity that many of the coaching aspects that one can bring to a team, are only partially possible on the individual tour.