Starting and Developing an Academy—Marketing Considerations.

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Hong Kong International Tennis Academy.

ABSTRACT
This article describes the obstacles and typical decisions that a coach may have to make when starting an academy. It is based on the development of Hong Kong International Tennis Academy (HKITA), and the breakdown of the stages in which this academy and those like it typically go through as the number of players and programs increase and expand.

Key words: Academy, Business, Program Development, Marketing.

INTRODUCTION
Hong Kong International Tennis Academy (HKITA) was established in 2007 after many years of successful practice by former ATP Touring Professionals and Head Coaches of National Associations and National Teams. Currently the HKITA consists of 3 training centers, 8 different programs, 160 kids and a coaching team of 6 full time coaches and 4 part time coaches.

CASE STUDY
The academy started at a facility which did not have well established junior programs and at a public facility. In Hong Kong it would be lucky to get 3 courts at one time for a program. It is difficult to get courts in Hong Kong due to the shortage of land supply; this exact problem could be a problem in any urban area of the world.

At the start, staff could consist of only one or two coaches working at multiple clubs. For the HKITA one coach was working at the club with elite players, while one coach was working at a public facility with younger players. It may not be easy adjusting from having a full time coach position or going from a full time job to being a coach at a public facility where everything can be slow to start and very demanding both physically and mentally. It can be a tough time but adapting fast will aid you to execute the plan and program that is desired.

In the beginning the academy started with 4 children under one coach and 5 children under an associate coach. In 6 months we built up the academy from 9 children to over 40 children. From 40 children expanding meant that you may need to direct multiple training centers with up to 8 various programs targeting different needs, levels and ages.

METHODS
Below are the stages in which the academy went through and the tasks which were required to aid increasing participation and program development during that stage. For each stage a target time and approximate number of coaches needed is shown for reaching the following level of participation

1. Getting Started (From 4 to 40 players)

Target- 4 months. Manageable with 1-2 Full time Coaches

Choose an attractive name for your academy.

Some coaches like to use their own name to open their academy. Unless you were in the top 100 in the world and everyone knows you, it could be preferable to use a name that represents a city, state or country. I could name my academy Benny Lin International Tennis Academy, but I feel naming it Hong Kong International Tennis Academy will make our academy sounds more prestigious and more marketable.
Perform a SWOT analysis of your academy.

What are your strengths, weaknesses, opportunity and threats?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Strong and experienced coaching team</td>
<td>• Lack of tennis courts</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Strong networking circle in tennis industry and colleges in the US</td>
<td>• No dormitory</td>
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<td>• Imported tennis experts from power house tennis countries</td>
<td>• Lack of good local coaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Systematic training and tournament programs</td>
<td>• Lack of promotion and marketing through media</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Pool of ranked players</td>
<td>• Lack of tournaments in Hong Kong and at the academy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Friendly staff, good service</td>
<td>• No academy on-site education system</td>
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<td>• Good locations</td>
<td>• No sports science support</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>THREATS</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Many children play tennis in Hong Kong</td>
<td>• Not being able to get enough courts</td>
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<tr>
<td>• No other well established tennis academy in Hong Kong</td>
<td>• Lack of progression and results from the players</td>
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<td>• Poor coaching quality in Hong Kong</td>
<td>• Stagnate due to lack of facility, financial resources and/or man power</td>
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<td>• Tennis is growing rapidly in Asia</td>
<td>• Unmotivated coaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sponsorship from multinational sporting/management companies</td>
<td>• Conflicts between clubs and the academy management</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Growing economy in Asia</td>
<td>• Politics and bureaucracy</td>
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<td>• China’s untouched market</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Franchise to other locations</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Business expansions (Managing events, players, clubs, etc)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Many toddlers aged 2 – 6 looking for sports activity</td>
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</table>

Figure 1. SWOT

Obviously your SWOT will not be completely the same, but Figure 1 should give an example of what is required for each field and will allow you make an initial plan for an academy (Figure 2).

Have an attractive website.

This is a must. A website which will capture potential clients’ interest and reflect the image of the academy will give a great first impression. Be very strict about the image and reputation of the academy and have this reflected in the design of the website. Have informative yet practical and useful information, tips and news in an appealing and attractive layout. When people open a sub standard website, they will most likely be hesitant to continue browsing, resulting in loss of clients.

Find a suitable facility.

In Hong Kong it’s very difficult to find a venue. If there is a venue, the court availability is very limited and restricted to just 2 – 4 courts at the most. When choosing a venue, make sure the location is good. Even if you had a good program, if your venue is difficult to reach or too far away, it would be extremely difficult to sustain clients and get new clients.

Another important aspect is the percentage that you have to give to the club. You need to have a preliminary budget and prediction of profit & loss. See if after deducting all the commission, staff salary, balls, etc., you can still make a living and whether it is worth your effort. Many coaches have to turn down coaching contracts because some of the clubs asked for too demanding commission.

“Hire competent, qualified coaches with heart and passion in teaching tennis and educating children.”

Recruit and visit schools.

Visit a few schools to talk to their principals to help those schools start a tennis program. Moreover, you can suggest a presentation or free trial on site or at your facility. From the schools you can recruit more children to your academy and various programs.
EXPANDING (FROM 40 TO 100)

Target- 6 Months (10 months Total). Manageable with 3-4 Full time Coaches

Create multiple programs.

In order to expand, we needed to run different kinds of programs to cater for the variety of players. At HKITA we started with just 3 groups – Elite, Junior Elite A, and Junior Elite B all divide by level of play. Before creating a new program check the market if there is a demand for it. One of the HKITA coaches’ was recruited from Japan because the academy in Hong Kong was very closely located to a large Japanese community. When he was recruited he didn't have any students, but currently because of the language specificity he is coaching over 60 players per month. Some of the current programs include Monster Tennis (Ages 3-6), Future Stars (Ages 8-10), Junior Elite, Elite, Development, Adult Clinics, Summer Camp and Overseas Tours (China, USA, Europe, Thailand). All of these programs target different groups of people with different needs and levels of play.

Create Newsletters and Updates.

This is very important to sustain business and get new clients. HKITA send out a newsletter once a month to all our clients and remember to always update the website. Update it with reports from your overseas tours, pictures or just news of your players, academy, etc. Beside the newsletter hand out Player’s Progression Report Card every quarter and plan a yearly schedule even if tentative.

Pay attention to your staff management.

Empower coaches who are hired. They are hired for their experience, knowledge, creativity and their urge to make a difference in a child’s life. Make sure every coach knows their tasks and own program, which they are responsible and accountable for. When a coach receives a contract offer, some academies give him/ her the academy Core Values for their careful reading and consideration. The core values highlight what is expected and what the academy believes is the best way to operate and run effectively. Coaches and staff first have to understand Core Values before they can start running a program as this attempts to create a clearer understanding as to what is expected of them and of every other staff member.

Administration.

You may be the best coach in the world, but if you want to start a tennis academy or expand, you have to do your administrative work. If you cannot or don’t have time, hire someone to do it for you. You can also ask a parent to help you out. Items like newsletters, websites and emails need to be updated and taken care of. Administrative work is vital and could make your academy more professional and prestigious.

Create a tournament calendar.

Tournament participation is an important part of players’ development and therefore for any tennis academy. Create a tournament schedule at the beginning of the season. Suggest to your players tournaments in which they have to participate as well as goals to achieve in each tournament. Your players then will have something to look forward to and goals to achieve which will increase their motivation and commitment to training.

Have your players join Leagues.

Coaches may not have any spare time to captain a league team, but what could be done is to ask parents to help out. The response is nearly always great as there are many parents who would like to volunteer. By joining a league, not only your players get to play and compete, they would feel they are part of the team more than before and in turn grow closer to the academy.

Invest in a conditioning coach.

We as tennis coaches usually are not as knowledgeable as those specialist coaches. By hiring a conditioning coach your academy would look more professional. Of course when you start your academy you would rather hire a tennis coach, but if things are getting better and if financially capable, you should invest in these specialist coaches as they diversify your program and create stronger healthier players.

DEVELOPMENT (150+ CHILDREN)

Target – 18 months (2 Years 4 months total) Manageable with 4-6 Full time coaches
Create Overseas Tours for your players.

 Overseas tennis tours are usually not very difficult to organize, however it takes planning and preparation. Overseas tours are a perfect tool to add sparkle to your overall program. The HKITA have a set of tennis tours that we do every year, including our US Summer Tour, Taiwan Christmas Break Tour and Thailand Easter Break Tour. We also cater to ITF level players and take them to ITF tournaments as well as to College Showcase. During the tour, you should send daily report with pictures to the parents of the kids you brought with you. You can also send a report to everyone in your academy if it is an important tour that you want everyone to learn about.

Market your academy using former and current players.

Always make sure that you monitor the progression of former and current players. For example you happen to have one former player who went to College in the US and just won Rookie of the Year. Make sure to put that in the monthly newsletter or make local newspapers or magazine aware about it. One of the most effective ways to get recognition is through the results achieved by your former or current players. Children want to be part of an academy that produces good players.

American Colleges Preparatory Program

This program is an excellent program to keep older teenagers playing tennis and to keep them motivated. Every year top players drop out of tennis because of their heavy school workloads. The majority of the parents know that their son/daughter will not make it to the professional level. By having a College Preparatory program an academy can open up a whole new chapter of tennis and for your players’ future using tennis as a pathway to academics. If an academy has a good player he may get a tennis scholarship into America Colleges or help them gain attendance to prestigious schools such as Harvard, Yale, Cornell, Brown, Dartmouth, and Amherst that without tennis may be very expensive or simply unattainable.

Additional player support

Once an academy is at the stage where you have a regular income and a regular participation of 150 plus children, the program can start to offer more extensive programs. This is a large step and further support should be applied only if there is a demand and is appropriate for your players. Further support which is part of your regular programs can include Psychological, Performance Analysis, Physio and sports injury clinic, even schooling and education. Use all these extras to market your academy as they are unique selling points.

Scholarships and Funding to attract talent.

It is important to have good players in your academy because they will attract more children so it is common sense that we have to take care of them. Discount is just a discount that you can offer to everyone, but scholarship is a grant that you get if you meet certain criteria.

CONCLUSION

The information provided should give a blueprint for starting and marketing an academy from the first child. It is very important however to use this case study along with academy visits to discover what other current academies provide and what you find appealing. Academies vary in size, price, location and climate, facilities, residential or schooling; so many variables that should be taken into account when setting your long term academy plan. All academies have their advantages and disadvantages but many of the steps mentioned will have taken place with most International Academies that have developed from nothing and now pull large numbers of children from all over the world.