

Burnout among Tennis Coaches: What is it, what causes it, and what can we do about it?

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Coaching tennis can constitute a rewarding and pleasurable voluntary contribution to the sport, a part-time job, or a life-time career. In any of these cases, promoting the skills, strategies and techniques of players and having a role in their development as persons can be positively challenging and personally gratifying. Being a tennis coach however, especially as we start to move up the competitive ladder to the elite level, can also mean living with pressure and strain. Think about how you are feeling about your experiences as a tennis coach in recent months. Are the following queries capturing what is in your heart and mind when you think about the sport and working with your athletes?

As a tennis coach, do you repeatedly have a sense of being overwhelmed and feel like you are not enjoying your coaching activities? Do you often find yourself feeling down and think that you are not accomplishing what you would like to in your coaching? Do you frequently feel tired and as if you do not have enough energy to meet the demands of your coaching? Does it seem like you are becoming more detached from your athletes? Are you finding yourself, on a more regular basis, thinking about quitting coaching? If you are nodding in agreement to such questions, you may be suffering from *burnout*.

Burnout: What is it?

In contemporary sport psychology, burnout is reflected in exhaustive psychophysiological responses exhibited as a result of frequent, sometimes extreme, and generally ineffective efforts to meet excessive demands" (Weinberg and Gould, 1999, p. 455). When we are burned out, we want to withdraw. We can manifest such withdrawal psychologically (e.g., feeling low in confidence and personal control over the situation), emotionally (e.g., feeling continuously "up tight" or perhaps not caring any more), and/or physically (e.g., feeling "flat" or tired). Clearly, it would not be possible for a coach to adequately and enthusiastically do her

duties and perform optimally when afflicted with such symptoms. Further, when intense and recurring, the characteristics of burnout could have important implications for the physical and mental health of coaches. Indeed, research has revealed burnout sufferers to be subjected to unplanned weight gain or loss, depression, heightened susceptibility to injury, poor sleeping patterns and/or suppressed immune systems. Finally, the mental, affective, and physiological expressions of burnout can and often do set the stage for behavioural withdrawal. That is, burnout can be a key reason why coaches drop out.

Burnout: What causes it?

It is generally assumed that burnout is the result of chronic, high levels of stress and dissatisfaction stemming from environmental stressors, such as the pressure to win, travel commitments, disagreements with management or parents, and/or trying to juggle multiple roles (Weinberg and Gould, 1999). However, heightened or conflicting demands that face coaches in the world of competitive tennis do not automatically translate into burnout. Burnout is the result of an "out of sync" and maladaptive interaction between the person and the situation. Specifically, it seems that the underpinnings to burnout are: (a) how individuals perceive those demands, (b) how they see their resources to meet the challenges, and (c) how they view the consequences of not meeting what they feel is expected of them. When coaches feel that they don't have or have no control over what it takes to match demands they deem very important and personally meaningful, coaches are at risk of burning out (Smith, 1986). If the coaches in question also do not possess effective coping skills to handle the stress resulting from such appraisals, burnout is likely to be evident.

In terms of past research on the degree and correlates of burnout in the coaching profession, Kelly, Eklund, and Ritter-Taylor (1999) studied male (n =

163) and female (n = 98) collegiate head tennis coaches (aged 25-77 yrs) from the United States. They found that the tennis coaches, on average, were suffering from levels of burnout similar to those of other helping professionals (e.g., nurses, athletic trainers). The researchers also reported that there were personality factors that directly predicted burnout in this sample. Consistent with the precursors to burnout described above however, Kelly and associates found it was the coaches' appraisals of situational stressors, rather than the environmental demands per se, that were central to the incidence of burnout.

We and a colleague (Balaguer, Duda, and Crespo, 2003) recently examined the degree and predictors of burnout among a large sample of junior-level international tennis coaches (354 male and 34 female). These coaches came from a variety of countries including Spain, the United States, Argentina, Chili, France, etc. As a group, they had been coaching tennis for an average of approximately 12 years. Overall, the coaches reported they experienced low to moderate levels of burnout. The mean values indicated that they experienced burnout one or twice at month. Burnout was negatively correlated with confidence in one's ability to coach and positively associated with the level of somatic (body-related; e.g., pounding heart) and cognitive stress (e.g., worries about performance), and problems with concentration exhibited by the coaches. Parallel to our study of the antecedents to burnout among junior international players (Duda, Balaguer, Moreno, and Crespo, 2001), coaches who tended to define personal success in coaching as winning and outdoing others were more likely to feel burned out.

Burnout: What can we do about it?

The information presented above regarding the causes and consequences of burnout does not paint a pretty picture. Obviously, there are no benefits to being burned out. This is an experience we want tennis coaches to avoid. Drawing from the literature and

applied work on the topic, the following are some suggestions for keeping burnout out of your coaching life:

- (1) Remember to keep it fun! We know this is important for athletes of all ages and at all levels, but this principle certainly applies to coaches too. Don't ever forget your sense of humour! Remember why you got involved in tennis in the first place and try to rekindle that intrinsic fire.
- (2) Take a hard and pragmatic look at what you need to do and what you would like to achieve in coaching. Which of these things come within your personal control? Which are outside your power? Focus on the former and put the latter in perspective.
- (3) Coaches often engage in goal-setting with their players. To keep those coaching demands from seemingly moving beyond your reach, don't forget the goal-setting for yourself. The goals you want to set should be realistically achievable with hard work (again, something that you can control!). They should be less tied to win-loss records and based more on your own coaching performance in areas such as strategising, the

effective teaching of skills or techniques, optimising training, positive thinking and emotional control, creating a motivating environment for players, etc. If you keep your mind on your development as a coach with respect to such aspects, you probably will end up more objectively successful as well.

- (4) Become familiar with and then regularly practice some stress management skills (e.g., negative thought stopping, slow and controlled breathing from the diaphragm, progressive muscle relaxation) that you can use before, during, and following important matches. Competent coping when the "going gets rough" is a skill!
- (5) Social support plays an important role in buffering the brunt of difficult situations (Kelly, 1994). Seek out those who sustain, encourage, and bring out the best in you and make sure you are not surrounding yourself with people who make you feel weak, insecure and/or anxious. Share your feelings and experiences with other coaches that you trust.
- (6) Remember down time and keep your priorities. Tennis is an

absolutely super sport, no doubt. But tennis, sport, are only one piece of your life and one facet of who you are as a person. Keep the balance and burnout will be obliterated!

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Remember to keep tennis fun to avoid burn out