

# Long-Term Tennis Coach Development

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## INTRODUCTION

Tennis has experienced significant growth in the number of people playing the game worldwide. Coaches play a central role in the development of these players at all levels. In view of this fact, tennis, sports, and academic organisations have increased their efforts to provide better education to tennis coaches through the implementation of the most up-to-date coaching courses and the production of the highest quality educative resources possible.

The main goal of these coaches' education programmes (CEPs) is to improve the level of coaching, and as a consequence facilitate the development of more and better players (adapted from USTA, 2006). Research has consistently shown the positive influence of coach education programmes on coach confidence and efficacy (Brachlow & Sullivan, 2006; Malete & Feltz, 2000). In turn, access to appropriate coaching is considered one of the foremost contributors to the development of elite athletes (Ericsson & Charness, 1994).

In equipping coaches to operate effectively and ethically, coaches education programmes should be delivered in both practical (on- and off-court) and theoretical (scientific and non-scientific) contexts. The information presented should be relevant to their daily work and permanently supported by a strong Code of Ethics and Conduct designed to protect the safety, welfare and rights of all people involved (AEHESIS, 2006).

In many ways, the aforementioned growth in the game has coincided with the heightened, systematic integration of sport science. Subsequent training and coaching initiatives are geared towards improving both player performance and participation (USTA, 2006). The modern day coach is therefore challenged to keep abreast of these developments, and continue to enhance their coaching knowledge and expertise through coach education programmes.

## Competency based training

In recent times, an increasing number of nations have invested time and resources into reviewing their coaches' education programmes with a view to developing more competent coaches (Way & O'Leary, 2006). For instance, Canada, Australia and select European nations, among others, are currently in the process of adapting their coaches' education programmes to so-called "competency based training" or CBT. The ITF, with its coaches' education programme which is used by more than 80 nations

worldwide, is also leading the charge (Crespo, et al., 2005).

CBT implies that the organisation and delivery of coach training is based around competencies which are established for the profession in general as well as the different coach occupations (coach of beginner, intermediate, advanced and professional players). Competencies can be defined as the combination of skills (application of experience and knowledge - how to do the job), knowledge (facts, feelings or experiences known by the coach - what to do in the job) and attitudes (interpersonal features - what the coach is) that coaches should possess to do their job well, meeting market and customer needs, and the standard performance required of their employment (Morris, 2006).

These competencies are precisely defined and are based on the activities that coaches have to perform (i.e. training, competition, management and education) and the tasks undertaken within each activity (i.e. plan, organise, conduct and evaluate) (AEHESIS, 2006). CBT structures the education courses in units of competence, with each unit consisting of learning outcomes that have a set of performance criteria on which coaches are assessed (i.e. required to provide evidence to demonstrate competence). Current competence of the coach is recognised if valid, sufficient, consistent, current, and authentic evidence is provided (Morris, 2006).

## Development of coaching expertise

The daunting job of trying to first identify the competencies needed for tennis coaching and second structure tennis coaches' education programmes under the principles of CBT, revealed a crucial misrepresentation of coaching expertise in many current programmes. That is, the direct identification of coaching courses levels' (i.e. 1, 2, 3, etc.) with the standard occupations of the coaches (i.e. level 1= coach of beginner players, level 2= coach of intermediate/advanced players, and level 3= coach of elite players) implies that coaches' skills and knowledge increase incrementally with the standard of player that they coach.

This fallacy, previously highlighted by Roetert et al. (2000), ignores the fact that the coaches' roles will vary not just with their players' level of play but also with the coaches' career goals. Indeed, some coaches will assume mixed roles throughout their

careers (i.e. working with players of different age groups and playing levels), whereas others may specialise and work with players of the same level exclusively. In this latter scenario, coaches would likely develop their coaching expertise specific to that group of players (AEHESIS, 2006). Related to this, both science and experience have demonstrated that most CEPs leave the task of continuing education to the coaches themselves (Crespo et al., 2005a).

The purpose of this article is therefore to reflect on and elaborate a long-term tennis coach development (LTCD) model or career pathway. In the same vein as the long-term player and athlete development models propositioned by various authors (Balyi & Hamilton, 2003; Bloom, 1985; Côté & Hay, 2002; Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Monsaas, 1985), we will use relevant research where possible (AEHESIS, 2006; Way & O'Leary, 2006).

## THE COACH AND THEIR LONG-TERM DEVELOPMENT OF EXPERTISE

Much has been written about the qualities of a good tennis coach (Hassan, 1997; Roetert, et al., 2002; Stojan, 1997), with research even comparing the behaviours of successful and non-successful coaches (Claxton, 1988; Crespo, 1995). Along the same lines, popular reading also details the coaching tips of top coaches and the training systems of the best tennis academies. However, comparatively less is known about how coaches actually develop their expertise throughout their career.

As above mentioned, researchers have developed long-term player development models or matrices that delineate typical career paths of players, specifying the when, why, what and how of skill development. Parallel intents in the coaching domain have been scarce (Côté, 2006; Gilbert, et al., 2006; Trudel, 2006).

## Stages of coach development

Way and O'Leary (2006) presented a model of a coach's career pathway, involving four distinct mediums: 'at play' (the athlete's experiential pathway), 'at school' (the coach's educational pathway), 'on the sidelines' (the coach's experiential pathway), and 'in the office' (leadership development and on-going support). AEHESIS (2006), on the other hand, elaborated four coaching roles (apprentice or assistant coach, full coach, senior or expert coach, and master coach) that relate to the career path of the coach.

In combining these two different concepts, along with the model of LTAD proposed by Balyi and Hamilton (2003), Table 1 outlines an adapted Long-term coach development (LTCD) pathway for coaches.

### Considerations on the stages of coach development

The stages outlined in table 1 should be considered as flexible and not prescriptive. The principal focus of the LTCD is for coaches

to possess the necessary competencies to perform activities, as appropriate, throughout their coaching development. The model is also underpinned by the understanding that coaches acquire these

Coach's main role	Name of the stage	Main characteristics
Apprentice or assistant coach	Fundamental (early development)	<p><b>Age:</b> Throughout the playing career of the coach.</p> <p><b>Key skill:</b> As a player (ability to contribute to the own coaching ), as an assistant coach (ability to conduct training sessions).</p> <p><b>Knowledge:</b> Main characteristics of tennis play (rules and regulations, training and competition routines, etc.).</p> <p><b>Attitudes:</b> Love for the game, motivation, kindness, care, cheerfulness, and fun. Desire to acquire a deeper understanding of the coaching process.</p> <p><b>Comments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the event of limited or no playing career, this stage is covered throughout the involvement of the coach in the sport as a parent, official, fan, etc.</li> <li>Even though many great coaches have been reasonably good players, a good level of play is not an indispensable pre-requisite for being a coach, especially when coaching beginner players (Roetert et al., 2003).</li> <li>Where possible, this coach usually works under supervision and reports to other more experienced or qualified coaches.</li> </ul>
Full coach	Learning to coach (middle development)	<p><b>Age:</b> During, toward the end, or upon culmination of the coach's playing career (i.e. David Cup playing captain).</p> <p><b>Key skill:</b> Ability to conduct and plan training sessions to help players improve their playing level.</p> <p><b>Knowledge:</b> General principles of coaching for the level of players they are working with (i.e. sports science, teaching methodology, etc.).</p> <p><b>Attitudes:</b> Same as above plus basic leadership behaviours.</p> <p><b>Comments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In the event of limited or no playing career, this stage is covered during the first years of coaching, and can be combined with other roles such as parent or official.</li> <li>This coach may work under supervision and report to more qualified or expert coaches.</li> </ul>
Senior coach	Training to coach (late development)	<p><b>Age:</b> After a number of years of coaching players of any level of play (approx. 5 -10).</p> <p><b>Key skill:</b> Ability to plan players' training and competitive seasons or careers. Supervise other coaches he may be in charge of.</p> <p><b>Knowledge:</b> Specific principles of coaching for the level of players they are working with (i.e. sports science, teaching methodology, etc.).</p> <p><b>Attitudes:</b> Same as above and strong work ethic.</p> <p><b>Comments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally, this coach does not work under supervision but may report to other coaches in an organisation.</li> <li>When working with advanced players, these coaches usually are full-time professionals.</li> <li>Coaches working with beginner or intermediate players may combine their coaching role with others (i.e. school teacher).</li> </ul>
Expert coach	Coaching to coach (innovation)	<p><b>Age:</b> After a significant number of years of coaching players of any level of play (approx. 10+).</p> <p><b>Key skills:</b> Ability to innovate in coaching ( i.e. training systems , development programmes / plans, etc. ). Supervise coaches, programmes, organisations, etc.</p> <p><b>Knowledge:</b> As above plus general coaching and sport science principles applied to sports, not just tennis ; periodisation, etc.</p> <p><b>Attitudes:</b> Same as above plus strong leadership and role-model behaviours.</p> <p><b>Comments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally, these coaches assume full responsibility of the programmes or players that they are working with.</li> <li>The coaches' valuable experiences and knowledge can eventually enable them to mentor other coaches (coach of coaches).</li> <li>In some cases, these coaches may adopt new roles as administrators, managers, officials, etc.</li> </ul>
Master coach	Retirement (retaining)	<p><b>Age:</b> After the coach has retired from coaching permanently : often from 65 years on !</p> <p><b>Key skills:</b> Ability to reflect on own coaching practice and how it can be of help to other coaches.</p> <p><b>Knowledge:</b> All aspects of coaching practice.</p> <p><b>Attitudes:</b> Same as above plus desire to share life experiences with others .</p> <p><b>Comments:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Generally these coaches can act as advisers to other fellow coaches, programmes or organisations.</li> </ul>

Table 1. Long-term coach development in tennis.

competencies and develop their expertise at different rates (i.e. depending on playing experience, educational pathway, job opportunities, and coaching experience). Indeed, these different stages may be carried out in a voluntary; part-time or full-time capacity, no matter the coach's expertise. In general however, coaches working with high performance players tend to be full-time paid professionals, while part-time voluntary coaching is more common among coaches working with beginner players. Differences will also exist in the nature of these roles between countries.

Interestingly, professional players may finish their playing careers and immediately assume a coaching role with another top player without any previous coaching experience or coaches' education qualification. Conversely, coaches with a basic or no previous playing experience will start coaching beginner players (children or adults) and do that for the rest of their lives after taking part, or not, in different coaches' education courses.

The time at which coaches participate in their first formal coaches education course is often subsequent to the start of their coaching career and thus does not generally conform with the traditional academic pathway (Way & O'Leary, 2006). So, where both Bloom (1995) and Côté and Hay (2002) point to coaches needing more sophisticated knowledge and advanced qualifications in working with players in the latter stages of their development, the reality is that, in tennis, most coaches working with top players are former players with little exposure to formal coaches education. Coaches working with beginner players, on the other hand, are those that typically take part in coaching courses. The message then becomes that coaches possessing different amounts of expertise, work with players across all skill levels, and that coaches' knowledge doesn't necessarily increase along with the playing standard of their students. That is, coaches working with beginner players are no less knowledgeable than those working with top players, but they do possess different types of knowledge.

Gilbert et al. (2006) have observed that successful coaches of various sports devote

very little time to formal coach education on an annual basis. The results reinforce the need to consider the coaching context when examining coach development and when designing CEPs.

Fundamental to Long Term Coach Development, therefore, are the following core principles. Tennis coach education and development should:

- adopt an individual-coach centred approach and not treat all coaches in the same way.
- place the learning environment of coaches into a larger conceptual framework to account for their variability of experiences (Côté, 2006).
- view coach development as a long term process (30+ years).
- focus on optimal training/education and experience ratios to enhance development and avoid burnout.

In line with the LTCD principles, the design of coach education programmes should recognise different types of learning (lifelong, informal, non-formal, and prior) and competence, promoting a philosophy of continuous improvement. In general, we can state that progress through the stages of coach development depends on the coach's experiences, job performance and education.

### CONCLUSION

Many of the ideas underpinning LTCD are not new, yet we hope that they stimulate continued review of current coaching practice and CEPs. The application of such LTCD models will help improve the quality, consistency, transparency and relevance of future practice while also overcoming the language and cultural barriers to enhance understanding among coaches' education programmes.

Coaching tennis is an exciting and dynamic profession. Other leading global sports have assisted their coaching programmes evolve and tennis needs to follow the trend.

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*Attending conferences plays an important role in Long Term Coach Development*