

Vic Braden: The legacy of a coach, researcher and visionary

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ABSTRACT

Vic Braden, one of the greatest tennis coaches of all time, passed away in October 2014. Braden was a player, teacher, coach, psychologist, journalist and author. However, above all, he was a major force in tennis due to his vision which influences how tennis is taught at all levels. This article is a reflection on some of the facets of his career through the books and resources he produced. "Vic Braden doesn't just teach you how to play tennis; he teaches you how to love it".

Key words: coaching, instruction, vision, humour, legacy

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INTRODUCTION

Vic was an educator who always looked for creative ways to help people play tennis better. This personal goal provided him with plenty of excitement and new knowledge. He truly believed that playing a sport should be one of the finest treasures known to mankind.

He felt that tennis had lost too many people because we lack the knowledge to find ways to keep them involved. His method to retain people in the game for a lifetime was improving while having fun.

Most of his books and resources are essential readings for those who want to improve their game. In this article we will review some of the main principles of his work and pay tribute to his contribution to the game.

RESEARCH

Vic Braden was one of the first tennis coaches to use sport science by doing research and applying the results in his daily coaching. When talking about five elements of success in tennis (1993) he mentions genetics, physics and engineering, psychology, experience and conditioning. He used scientific data to confirm many of his beliefs about how to hit a tennis ball and to explain some common myths and fallacies that hold players back.

His first book "Tennis for the future" (1976) he explained how his tennis college was built specially as a teaching facility complete with an array of ball machines and TV cameras for video replay. He also built special courts, individual instruction lanes, and sophisticated classroom equipment.

Vic was very grateful to many scientists who helped with his research over his career. These experts came from different fields such as biomechanics (Gideon Ariel, Andrei Vorobiev, Jack Groppel and Bruce Elliott), psychology (Rainer Martens and Arnold Mandell), motor learning (Richard Schmidt, Richard Haier, Ray Brown and Dean-Brittenham), physics (Howard Brody, Hans Liepmann and Patrick Keating), medicine (Charles Dillmann) and neuroscience (Daniel Amen) to name a few. He always encouraged coaches to trade lessons and knowledge with any scientists that belong to their particular club(s) (1998).

HUMOUR

One of the key characteristics of Vic's instructional approach was the constant reminder to have fun while playing. He had a great sense of humour and in all of his books he showed readers how to get more fun out of the game. In his book "Laugh and win at doubles" (1996) he explains his "laugh and win" philosophy in the words of Tracy Austin: "We worked unbelievably hard, but we also laughed hard and we had a lot of fun." He was adamant in the idea of the laughing coming before the winning.

He considered doubles a game that should be competitive and enjoyable, not a war. He always loved tennis doubles as a player, a coach, and a spectator. He saw the doubles game as a great opportunity to retaining people in the game when he said that "the

doubles aficionados practically go to their grave before they give up the sport." The title of one of his books "Sportsathon: Puzzles, Jokes, Facts & Games (Puffin story books)" (1986) is self-explanatory.

This section can be summarised by saying that Vic's philosophy was a combination of principles to boost the player performance while enjoying the game. As he said: "And don't lose sight of my motto, 'Laugh and win', the heart of my teaching philosophy".

PSYCHOLOGY

Braden was a licensed psychologist and the mental side of the game is very present in the vast majority of his books. In his doubles book he covers issues such as brain typing, personality matchups, competitive spirit, communication, concentration, anticipation, choking, coping, partnership, choosing partners, etc.

In his book "Mental tennis" (1993) he explained tennis as a psychological game by using four concepts: the mind-body connections; the psychological states, moods, affects, feelings and problems that impinge in the game; the importance of "smart" and "intelligent" tennis; and the relevance of strategies. He covers crucial topics such as fear and anxiety, stress and choking, self-esteem, self-doubt and self-fulfilling prophecies, distractions and external stimuli, anticipation and cues, anger and toughness, as well as the fear of winning and failure.

He stressed the importance of assessing and knowing yourself mentally in order to set goals adapted to the reality of your personality. He also dealt with the coach-player relationship which has to be based on mutual respect. He obviously wrote for the parents and suggested the importance of re-evaluating the winning concept to get what everybody wants from tennis by achieving what he explained as the "win-win" condition.

Finally, he was one of the first to speak about mental practice, and meaningful practice on the court by practicing with the data and breaking habits.

PARTICIPATION

Now that the tennis world is focusing on the importance of increasing participation worldwide, Vic constantly campaigned for the sport's growth by promoting schools programmes and the doubles game. As a former elementary school teacher, he saw hundreds of young children who could benefit by being involved in tennis.

His Junior Tennis Ambassadors Program created in 2007 is an amazing project since it teaches young elementary and junior high students to coach any student in their school at no cost. He applied the results of his experiments with young students, in which he found that they possess amazing abilities as athletic coaches, when properly trained. The Program provides free instruction for adult volunteers who will supervise young elementary and junior high school tennis coaches. The young tennis coaches also receive free instruction that qualifies them as permanent tennis coaches for classmates throughout the school year.

TEACHING AND COACHING

Vic was very grateful to all the students who had taught him how best to teach them. He also respected a lot his fellow teaching professionals by recognising their investment in helping people and thanking for their friendship.

As he stated: “The big issue is to teach the scientific principles to students in such a manner that they maximise performance and enjoyment of tennis in the shortest period of time.”

Braden was a true coach. He wanted people to improve their game. He was a master of intervention and correction techniques. When I first met him, I found him in front of a TV explaining the backhand to a veteran beginner player who wanted to learn the topspin effect.

In his book “Quick fixes” (1990) he not only presents the majority of problems tennis players come across and lists the cures to each problem, but also he addresses some of the many common errors that are taught in tennis instruction. In other books, he also covers very practical aspects such as dealing with performance slumps, changing the learning environment, using the most of practices, etc.

CONCLUSION

In his last book “If I’m Only 22, How Come I’m 82?—Tennis Is More than Just a Sport” (2012) he reflected on how tennis has changed people’s lives and recaptured some highlights and anecdotes from the couple of thousand events in his tennis career.

It is very sad, and somehow annoying, when we find young coaches and coach educators that do not know about the history and the impact of great teachers, coaches and scientists such as Vic Braden, Stanley Plagenhoef, Svatopluk Stojan, Jean Brechbühl, Gilles de Kermadec, Harry Hopman, Roberto Lombardi, Jelena Gencic or Larisa Preobrazhenskaya, to name a few. I feel that we have the obligation to pay tribute to these great personalities of tennis coaching by spreading out their knowledge and their contributions to our game (Martin, Pestre & Peter, 2014).

Vic was a visionary, a terrific game changer who revolutionized tennis by using an amazing combination of sport science, coaching experience and fun. He has impacted tennis as a player, teaching professional and broadcaster and his legacy is present in every single tennis lesson taught by coaches willing to help players to improve and enjoy the game.



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