

Captain Fantastic

Camaraderie, courage and communication are crucial to being a successful team captain



Team sport
Andy Murray with Great Britain's Davis Cup captain Leon Smith

Tennis is inherently individual sport, but whether part of Great Britain's winning Davis Cup team or your club's third team in the local tennis league, there are times when it becomes a team sport.

The secret of any successful side is team spirit – individuals are playing for their club, region or country – not just themselves. And while having a world-class player like Andy Murray in the team

certainly played its part during Britain's historic Davis Cup victory in 2015, the role played by captain Leon Smith did not go unheralded.

"You feel like every member of the team is equally important," Dominic Inglot said of Smith, who boasts an impressive 14 wins from 16 ties since taking over as captain in 2010. "As a player you want to play for someone like that – someone who really treasures your input no matter if it's on the bench or on the court."

Depending on the level of competition and the back-up team available, the skills required of a successful captain vary from logistics and coaching to tactician and amateur psychologist.

A captain must be comfortable making tough decisions, such as leaving a player on the bench or dropping a player from the team.

In March 2015, Australia captain Willy Masur subbed in Lleyton Hewitt and Sam Groth for youngsters Nick Kyrgios and Thanasi Kokkinakis as Australia reversed a 0-2 deficit to beat Kazakhstan 3-2.

Hewitt, who boasts a 58-21 win-loss record in 42 Davis Cup ties, always produced his best tennis when wearing the green and gold of Australia, and the former world No.1 is now applying that passion to his role as captain.

"For me it's about instilling my experience and helping the younger players be their best," said Hewitt, who made his debut in 1999.

Whether a playing captain like Hewitt, or the more traditional non-playing role, a captain's job requires a full range of skills: tactical awareness, judicious communication, motivational and organisational ability, not to mention leadership.

TOP TIPS FOR TEAM SPIRIT

- ✦ Establish credible goals and objectives
- ✦ Build team ethic based on discipline, effort, individual goals and teamwork
- ✦ Introduce off-court activities such as team meals, outings and playing other sports
- ✦ Create a supportive environment, sharing responsibility for success and failure equally
- ✦ Understand players' individual needs and expectations
- ✦ Exhibit a positive attitude at all times
- ✦ Communication is key

BEFORE THE MATCH

- ✦ Adapt comments for each match, making no more than three brief suggestions and avoid negative language
- ✦ Encourage your players to give 100% and remind them to enjoy the challenge

DURING THE MATCH

- ✦ Be aware of negative body language during play
- ✦ If winning, encourage the player to maintain level of intensity
- ✦ If in trouble, make the player slow down and help find a solution

AFTER THE MATCH

- ✦ Exhibit positive body language such as a hug, handshake or pat on the back, regardless of the result.
- ✦ Choose the right time to evaluate the match, particularly after a defeat.
- ✦ Give credit for good performance and allow appropriate time to celebrate wins before focusing on the next match
- ✦ After a defeat, listen to the players' thoughts first
- ✦ Do not apportion blame,
- ✦ Focus on the performance, not the outcome

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