

SIDELINES SUPPORT: Boris Becker has been a high-profile addition to Novak Djokovic's team, but Marian Vajda remains a critical influence.



It sounds like a dream job. Travel the world guiding players who are competing for thousands of dollars each week. Share locker rooms with some of the greatest players in the game while capitalising on the opportunity to rub shoulders and learn from legendary coaches. For the professional tour coach the world is your office and you are involved at the highest level of the tennis industry. The cities and surfaces may change, but the job description ultimately stays the same - make your player better.

The job has few prerequisites or defined skill sets. Some are former players who transitioned to coaching, such as Scott McCain, Claudio Pistolesi, Magnus Norman and Marc Gorritz. Others are fathers (Pat Harrison, father of Ryan and Chris Harrison), mothers (Klaudiya Istomina, son Denis Istomin) and even brothers of players (Thanakorn Srichaphan/Paradorn and Carl Chang/Michael Chang). Then there are those coaches who never really played tennis at all (Nick Bollettieri).

How you got on tour matters little once you are there. What does matter, though, is can you do the job?

Top tour coaches understand the many qualities that help them perform their jobs well. At the same time, they also appreciate the many factors that can see some coaches falter in their development, and ultimately fade away.

One of the biggest challenges can be the lack of job security. "You get the job to do a job, not to keep the job," Martin Bohn, former national coach and Davis Cup coach for Sweden, Britain and current national coach for Netherlands acknowledges.

Others understand the intensely demanding nature of

their chosen profession. In roles as professional player and now a professional coach, Scott McCain has pretty much done it all and seen it all. For years he was in charge of the USTA men's pro players program. Now he is the coach for Somdev Devvarman, Rik De Voest and Scott Lipsky.

"Coaching is a profession," McCain states. "It is demanding and requires an understanding of partnership and collaboration."

The level of commitment can be extraordinary. Years ago, Stanford Boster had then teenagers Andy Roddick, Mardy Fish and other top American juniors living out of his house, while training and travelling with them full-time. Since then Boster has become known and respected on the tour for his countless hours of training and weeks on the road.

"Coaching is a passion," Boster, now the USTA men's national coach, explains. "If any other factor becomes the motivator,

you automatically have a disaster waiting to happen. You have to coach for the right reasons. If you do it properly, you are probably committed to 30-plus weeks on the road plus 20 training weeks. If the players' welfare is not your sole motivation it cannot work."

Doug McCurdy is another long-time veteran of the international tour who has a fine-tuned understanding of the harsh realities following Director of Development roles with the ITF, the USTA and now the Korean Tennis Association.

"Tour coaching is a very precarious career," McCurdy points out. "It is one of the only jobs that I know where somebody is employing you to be tough on them. Seriously, for job preservation, a lot of coaches make compromises that they would probably not make if somebody else was paying their salary. It creates an ethical dilemma."

"I think that a lot of people, in

effect become hitting partners or cheerleaders and not necessarily mentors and coaches. The relationship becomes complicated. Having said that there are other situations where an academy, a sponsor or federation pays the coach, particularly at the junior level. And now the player is not the employer. You are in a position where you can make the decisions."

And while making those decisions can be a massive responsibility, the rewards can be equally immense. There are many strategies for a coach to not only perform their job well, but achieve a high degree of job satisfaction in the process.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Sven Groeneveld has experienced a lot on both the ATP and WTA Tours. In his role as the Head Coach of Team adidas and also Orange Coach Network he has also seen many a coach

OVERSEEING *the* superstars

*Guiding a top player on the professional tour may be a dream coaching role but it's often accompanied by some harsh realities. **ROBERT DAVIS** explores what it's like - and what it takes - to be an elite touring coach.*

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ENDURING PARTNERSHIP: Rafael Nadal's coaching relationship with his Uncle Toni stretches back to childhood.



develop and go on to coach multiple players while other young coaches are one and done.

Often it's a case of the coach understanding their position. "I prefer to think of the coach/player roles as you (coach) are the leader," says Groeneveld. "You are on the same team, and the coach is the leader of that team. However, many times I have seen the young coach let his ego get in the way and he wants to be the boss. And oftentimes it just does not work."

CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS

Coach Chuck Kriese has spent nearly four decades training players and coaches. Many of his former players and assistant coaches are now national coaches around the world. Kriese offers some sound advice. "The very best way to develop as a coach is to be hungry to learn," says Kriese. "Learn all you can, ask questions and don't be

afraid to fail. The setbacks will teach you the most. And most importantly, find a mentor."

"Listen and learn," advises Groeneveld. "Remove your ego and learn from those who have been doing it successfully."

"It is important to be around good coaches and top players," notes Bob Brett. "Listen and watch everything that is happening both on and off the court. See what others do well. Pay attention and see if the knowledge you gain may be transferred to the player you work with."

COMMUNICATION

Just as there is more than one way to stroke a tennis ball, there is certainly more than one way to coach a tennis player on tour. Nobody has the magic. What they do agree on, however, is the need for the coach to be good at communicating.

"Coaching skill is probably 85 per cent communication skills and relationships," McCurdy claims. "If you can communicate

well and establish credibility then you can be successful even if some of your information wrong. But players are getting smarter and they can soon tell if this coach is telling me something credible or just telling me something to make me feel good. The coach of the future needs this balance between real knowledge and the ability to convey it. You don't need a master's degree in biomechanics, but it certainly helps if the coach understands how to generate force."

"Finding the right way to communicate with today's generation of players is not as easy as in the past," says Jack Reader, who has worked with Alexandr Dolgoplov and Viktor Troicki. "For most coaches, the player is the one paying the coach's salary. So you have to pick and choose your moments wisely. The challenge of the job is to get the player to improve, and if you don't take time to understand

your player you might lose him before you get started."

NOT WHAT THE TEACHER KNOWS, BUT WHAT THE STUDENT LEARNS ...

Not even the harshest critic could deny the positive effect that Joakim Nystrom had on Jurgen Melzer's rise up the rankings a few years ago. And what about Jose Perlas with Nico Pietrangeli and now Fabio Fognini? Magnus Norman is proving that his method worked not only with Robin Soderling but also with Stanislas Wawrinka. But even with so much written lately about the "Lendl Effect" on Andy Murray, none of these successful coaches mentioned are under any illusions that they have a magic wand to wave over players.

"When he (Melzer) wins, it is 95 per cent him and maybe five per cent me," says Nystrom. "But when he loses it is still 95 per cent him and five per cent me."

"Study your player and come up with a plan," says Jose Perlas, GPTCA national president of Spain. "And then work, work and more work. There is no substitute for putting in the hours on and off the court."

That's a reality that professional player Dmitry Tursunov clearly knows well considering his comments on former coach Jose Higueras. "I think sometimes I was not in the right state of mind to receive what he was giving. He tried to reign me in and bring some order to life and I was a little bit chaotic at that time," the Russian admits. "He definitely had a positive effect on the way that I played. It must have been frustrating for him to see. I had to go through that stage in order to get through the stage that I am at now."

McCain is among those who believe there is a time for tough criticism and a time for a softer approach. "Players hate to lose and some need a few hours

before they are ready to discuss what went wrong along with what went right. If the player is not receptive to the coach's evaluation of the match or series of matches then you have a difficult partnership," he notes.

BEWARE OF THE TRAPS

One of the most critical things for a coach to remember is that the player comes first. "It is never about the coach, although so many coaches don't get that," notes Boster. "It is about the player. You chose to be a coach. Your job is to guide, motivate, develop and if you expect credit for it then you are in the wrong line of work. It's your job!"

Maintaining control is equally critical. "This is a very sensitive area. I have always controlled the successful coaching relationships I have had. By that, I don't mean dictatorship, but the schedule, hours, training,

periodisation, technique and game style will all be decided by me," Boster says.

"I abandon any coaching situation where there is a 'tug of war' between myself, the player and a third party regardless of the financial ramifications or long-term reward. I also abandon any coaching relationship where any third party breaks down the player. It means the voice in their head will be diluted and in turn I will be ineffective."

"Then have a plan," adds Boster. "This is where I see so many guys going wrong. It leads to panic management and poor decisions. Have a vision of how the player is going to play and have a path that will be followed to achieve it. And finally, enjoy the journey. If a coach understands that it is a journey incorporated into a process then you will be able to thoroughly enjoy the relationship regardless of the 'up's and downs'. One of the traps, according to McCain, is the awareness that coaching is different. "Players at the tour level are more in search of guidance, advice, and, for lack of a better phrase, a master plan that makes sense to them," notes the American coach. "You can talk about the differences of coaching young players with talent, players with successful careers and the top of the game. Players at each level need something different than the other groups."

TIME TO SAY GOODBYE?

While Sven Groeneveld understands that job security can be a luxury in his profession, he also boasts an enviable career record.

"I have never been fired as a coach," he says. "Because I don't let the situation get that far. If I feel that the player is not listening to what I have to say, or does not respect my advice, then it is simple, it is time to part ways before it gets personal."

Australian favourite Tony Roche, who turned a legendary playing career into a legendary coaching one, possibly summarises it best. "I think that a good coach has to have the respect of the player. If you don't have that then you are not going to get good results," he says. **ATM**

Keeping THE PASSION

Roger Rasheed has worked with Lleyton Hewitt, Gael Monfils and Jo-Wilfried Tsonga in recent years. Since teaming with Grigor Dimitrov in August 2013, Rasheed has guided the Bulgarian to a career-high No.14 ranking. He talked to *Australian Tennis Magazine* about his pro coaching life.

What do you love most about your job? I thrive on achieving and helping athletes create an Elite Behaviour environment that can allow them to get the best out of themselves. To watch a player develop and believe in themselves is exciting.

Is it a dream job? For many coaches the ultimate job is to coach on the tour but you must ask some key questions - WHY you are doing it? Are those reasons strong enough to invest that time and travel with the individual player? Is the player willing to listen and collaborate together to reach greater heights? There are some fantastic experiences, like being at major events, being involved in major matches and being in the inner circle of the elite player, which allows you also to develop further - but there must be real direction you want to take if you are to be on the tour as a coach.

Do the fundamentals of coaching remain true at every level? Yes. Regardless of the level of player I would coach there would be an Elite Behaviour structure, which I would want delivered. I want everyone I come into contact with to see that they can climb the mountain which will deliver an enormous amount of enjoyment and fun. Players of all standards want and love to see improvement, that also keeps them coming back to our great game with the same passion - never let the passion leave your player. Passion, enjoyment, knowledge and attitude will take you a long way.



OVERSEEING THE STARS: (clockwise from top left) Mario guided Heather Watson in her most successful years on tour; Maria Sharapova is thriving under the guidance of Sven Groeneveld and Severin Luthi has an enviable role as Roger Federer's coach.