

Learning at the Higher Levels

Building Competitive Advantages for Performance Players



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As a tennis coach with thousands of hours on court behind you, it is highly likely that you have developed a confident sense of what it means to learn. Even if you haven't spent time wading through dusty articles or educational journals, your experience of teaching players how to progress and compete in our sport has almost certainly given you a gut feeling about what it takes to improve. You know that an over reliance on basket drills helps your players form automatic technical habits, but does little for match play savvy. You know that too much time spent talking while coaching can drain the energy from a lesson and can cause confusion among players. And you know that a successful coach/player relationship is built on far more than just instruction and encouragement.

What you may not know, however, is that lots of us unwittingly develop a strong, but often misguided, sense of comfort in our own coaching style. We become used to how we like to do things, and when a new player or team comes under our care, we conveniently slip into our regular routines of planning models, practice schedules and technical preferences. More frustrating still, we find that as our players improve and reach the professional grade, their ranking improvements stutter, performance plateaus, and our response is to do more of what we've already been doing.

As we observe our players' abilities rising ever higher, it is all too easy to overlook a critical aspect of our relationship with them. We watch them effortlessly execute technical skills, we see levels of performance that only few will ever achieve, and in seeing all of this, we make the critical mistake of forgetting that our **top players are still learners**.

Ask almost any coach to describe what a 'learner' is and you'll probably get a similar response, with a general sense of someone who is 'beginning' or 'making progress'. But failing to see higher level performers as learners does them (and us) a great disservice, creates a crack in the foundation of our professional interactions with them, and inevitably leads to a falling rate of improvement.

Far from the simple view that high level performers have somehow 'graduated' from their role as learners, the truth is that they have, in fact, entered a crucial and highly intense phase of learning. While commentators often focus on the tiny margins separating the top players and how hard it is to break-through to the elite levels, the huge opportunity that is often overlooked is that if meaningful performance improvement can be achieved, a leap across these tiny margins and up through the rankings is highly possible (and something we often see happening in our sport).

If you have ever worked with a high performance player whose rate of improvement has inexplicably slowed down, if you have consistently attempted to help a competitive player drop an old habit (or develop a new one) with little success, or if you feel that your training approach with a top player has become a little stale over time, here's five suggestions to which you might give some thought...

Start with the Coach as a Learner

No player will effectively maintain a steady rate of progress if the coach working with him/her fails to do likewise. We need to keep on top of everything; read, watch, listen, talk (we don't need to agree with every piece of information that comes our way, we just need to consider it, criticize it, experiment with it). If you travel with players, you are surrounded by performance players and by other top coaches. You have a world of information available to you online. And yet, we find coaches who have been doing exactly the same things for years, who are slow to genuinely engage with new information, and who are perplexed when the rate of improvement in their player(s) stumbles. Everything you observe as you interact with other coaches, players and experts, should either confirm what you are doing or cause you to question your approach.

Link Everything Back to You

Every performance indicator observed in our players should inform our strategy going forward. If our player doesn't serve well in a match for example, we need to question how we contributed to that; how much time has been given to working on the serve? What strategies did you use to build improvement in this area? Linking performance back to your input isn't to say that every performance problem is the fault of the coach, but rather that everything we observe on court is trainable and therefore, can be contributed to by us. If a player is outlasted physically in a long match for example, this doesn't directly reflect on the work of the coach. But it is the responsibility of the coach to identify improvements and to adapt training in a way that will minimize the likelihood of a recurring situation. The performance of a player should hold a mirror to our own performance as coaches. If we don't like what we see in competition, we need to question what *we* do in training.

Work on Coaching Flexibility

We know that there are multiple ways to work through a learning obstacle, and that there are risks associated with focusing only on a narrow range of teaching strategies. For a coach who has been trying for a long time to help a player overcome a specific weakness or to learn a particular skill, there is little to be gained by continuously employing the same coaching strategies over and over again. If a high performance player does not show real skill-development progress within a few sessions, repeatedly referring back to the same issue at training will, over time, actually reinforce in the player's mind that this area is a weakness for them (why else would we keep talking to them about it?). In these scenarios, it's time to either ask another coach to participate in a few of your practice sessions with the player (a fresh perspective and approach is often all it takes to get a player over a learning hump), or alternatively, it's time to make a real effort to consider a range of other possible teaching approaches to the problem yourself, before giving it a second shot to work with the player in a new way.

Gather Meaningful Feedback

Remember that the key difference between a novice learner and a high level performer is experience. Players at the top levels have years of training, matches and life experience behind them. Meaningful feedback therefore, becomes a crucial element of the coach/player relationship. In the past, formal feedback from players was suggested at various stages in the periodization process. Now however, the analysis of player metrics at the higher levels is a daily possibility. A coach aiming to make effective decisions about the training, practice, nutrition and rest requirements for a particular day, needs access to trends about sleep, well being, energy, confidence levels, stressors, etc. Recording and plotting key performance indicators like these over time, provides a benchmark and rationale for training decisions, and this patterned and instant feedback reduces the risk of only getting information about player development at the one time we don't want it - when the player under performs in a competitive situation! Smartphone technology provides easy opportunities now to incorporate athletic metric analysis into our daily schedule, and the data this provides can only improve the quality of coaching decisions we make.

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Honestly Assess the Environment

Skill development and performance improvements are not immune to the effects of the surrounding environment. A coach observing delayed or decreased progress might find value in suggesting a change in some of the environmental variables influencing the player. For example, changing the location of training, working with new hitting partners, scheduling practice for different times of the day, etc. Naturally (and often unconsciously), we tend to lean in favor of what is most convenient, or of what has worked in the past, rather than questioning what might be the most efficient, or being open to the possibility that something new or different may yield positive results. Openness to change and exposure to new ideas, approaches, strategies and styles, creates opportunities and possibilities for improvement that are otherwise impossible to achieve.

There is no doubt that touring professionals, college players and even top juniors, have reached a level of proficiency that is highly impressive. It is natural therefore, to be so impressed by their technical abilities as to forget that at every single level of the game, there are possibilities for improvement. At the high performance stage of player development, the search for performance gains requires a very particular approach. For coaches working with players in this category therefore, it is vital that time is given to reflect on how they themselves are approaching this highly specialized form of coaching, and to ensure that their strategies for session planning, data collection and player interaction are all fine tuned and specifically tailored for the particular requirements of the performance arena.