

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN-CLAUDE MASSIAS (FRANCE)

Part 2

Q : What are some of the things that a player must develop at the ages of 7 or 8 years old. What do they need to have to continue tennis at the high level?

A : Well, you have to, certainly in the beginning years, you have to develop coordination and give good training habits on the court, respect for the opponent, how to respect the coaches, etc. Therefore, we teach basic skills. In the second period, there are many things to learn because they need to discover all of the techniques, and they already need to start the physical training even if most of this will begin at the ages of 12 or 13 years old, you already have to instil good habits to understand that training, what happens on the court but also physical training. Therefore, this is also a period where we work on the mental game, knowing how to concentrate, knowing how to surpass your expectations, becoming brave, etc. Then, when you become a professional, then it's a little like a jungle. Naturally, there are many players who are fighting in every corner of the world for a place in the ATP or WTA. That is the moment where the mental will play an important role. You have to know how to surpass your expectations, understanding the variations of the game, not succumbing to pressure, know how to be happy even when playing a tough match and that is also where the mental preparation is very very important. The physical aspect is also extremely important. Today, tennis has become a sport that is very demanding on a physical level and therefore, you cannot even think of becoming a very good player if we don't really have a high level athlete therefore there is an enormous amount of work to be done on the physical level. After, you have to know how to travel because tennis players travel almost 10 months of the year. You have to know how to live far away from home. You have to accept the fact of moving, to not have a home therefore you have to sacrifice everything for your career. It is really that aspect that needs to be worked.

Q : What are some of the differences in coaching a male player compared to a female player in terms of approach?

A : When you talk to coaches of female players, because I have mostly coached male players therefore I'm unsure of how to answer your question, However, when you talk to coaches of female players, they tell us it's very different. When you work with boys or men, you can have a very direct language. That is, when they do something wrong, you can punish them. You can approach the training in a way that is a little rougher, you can shake them up a bit if I can say that. It is very possible that the player understands that even if we are tough on them at a certain time, it is for their good, so that they will progress so that they generally accept it quite well and even when there are moments of tension, they forget very fast. With female players, it is very different. They often react, they are more sensitive, they often react badly to a language that is too tough on them. Therefore, you have to explain more, they need to understand, You really have to talk with them much more than with men. With the men, a few worked, they understand but with young women, you have to be much more present. They are less stable, some of them also get discouraged faster so you have to be extremely attentive, extremely close to them in such a way as to help through difficult times. Therefore, it's mostly at the mental level that things are different. It is true that women's tennis is different from men's tennis and I would say that over the years, I have a feeling that at least where the world's best players are concerned, women's tennis is getting closer to men's tennis. I won't be surprised that the things that are coming in the future, that women's tennis will get closer to the men's game in its conception, notably in its tactical conception,

will get closer to the men's game more so than it is today. The difference today is largely due to the physical qualities of the female players, they are not as developed as the men and though this is somewhat of a question of nature, I think that work on the physical aspect is not always being done with female players. When you look at some of the world's best female tennis players, I'm thinking here of Justine Henin and Kim Clijsters, Amelie Mauresmo, they are players that are extremely strong physically and so their game often resembles that of the men's game. Therefore, I believe in the future that the female players who do the same amount of physical work as the men, then their game will resemble each other's.

Q : To conclude, according to you, professional tennis is heading where and what are the elements of the game that coaches must concentrate on to develop young players?

A : So, the game is heading where. It's a difficult question because it's difficult to anticipate. However, you can see the evolution. Tennis has become, as much on the men's side as the women's, a sport where there is a lot of power, it's a sport that has become very tough. The matches are long, they are always so long, often much longer at the high performance level and there is a considerable intensity. I think that we won't go back on that issue. I don't know if it will go any longer but either way, we won't go back even if we changed the balls, the court size, if the racquets changed but I can imagine that things will evolve in one sense or another. But I don't think that in the future, male and female players will hit less hard. I think that we can only move forward by improving. I also believe that male and female players have made enormous progress on their mental game. There is a consistency in the game at the highest level that was not there in the past. The players are much more subject to highs and lows and it's still true today but I think there is a lot more consistency in the men's game. We could say, if we go back to the differences between the men and women's game, that there is today, between the number one player, and number two because that's where Federer is, but between the best players in the world, from the Top 5 or Top 10 to the player ranked 100, it is very close. When a player is ranked in the Top 10 in the world and meets a player that is ranked 100, he cannot play soft because if he doesn't play well, he could very well lose whereas in the women's game, I find there is much more difference between the top players and those ranked in the 100s. Therefore, that means that probably, we will see in the future, a tightening of the hierarchy in the women's game. That is something that will evolve. And the last thing that I can say is that the players are much more complete and that again, there will probably be an evolution there. Therefore, today on surfaces such as clay for example, you see players playing mostly at the baseline. They have considerably reinforced the baseline game but what will be needed to make the difference in the future is that they will have to have a better understanding of gaining points using the volley. Probably, and actually Federer is showing the example, it will be a player who knows how to do everything. And the reason he is so strong is because he know how to do everything very well. So, even if you don't know how to do everything very well, I think that in the future more than today, you will have to know how to do everything and express yourself in every facet of the game. We also have a great lesson given to us by Justine Henin, who was a more often than not playing at the baseline and for the past few months, have made a conscious effort with her coach to be more offensive, to go to the net more often using the volley. When you look at Amelie Mauresmo, who has also made efforts in this sense, there is enough effort to become very strong in every facet of the game and not just be content to be good at one part.

Q : Therefore, for a young female player, they need to be as complete as possible?

A : Yes, what we are trying to do in the younger years, between 5 or 6 years old when they are starting to play up until the ages of 10 or 11, we try to give them the fundamentals, mostly the basic technical skills but also the basic tactical skills so that they are not limited in the progression after. We really need to make sure that they have a technically sound game, that there be no major fault because with age, it becomes more difficult to correct these mistakes, change a motion, change the grip on the racquet, the older they are, the more difficult it is to change. Therefore we spend a lot of time learning the fundamentals of the game. That's what we try to do. We also try to, it's one of our strategies, we try to give all of the players the tools to play on all of the surfaces. Why, in a country where we have a championship on clay but we know that clay is only one part of the game and that players must after play on grass at Wimbledon, they have to play on cement in the United States and they also have to play on Rebound Ace. It seems important to me that all of the players have all of the tools to play on all of the surfaces. That is we want our players to be versatile. Then it is possible, when they reach the age of 17 or 18 years old, it is possible that they specialize on clay or fast surfaces but in the learning periods, we try to give them the tools to play on every surface. Why, well the season is very long, it's more interesting for a player to be able to win matches on all the surfaces rather than say just on clay where he will win matches during a certain part of the year which is relatively short and will then lose lots of matches and it won't be fun. We really have to teach our players to play on every surface. The last point is that we want to teach tennis in a way that is orientated more towards offence for 2 reasons. First, is that when you are able to win points, you have more fun than simply returning the ball so this notion of fun, we are trying to conserve it. The second reason is that for fans, it's much more interesting to see players who are offensive and even really offensive rather than players who return balls without ever scoring points. I think that we also have to think of, because the media is very involved in tennis, it is a sport for the public so we have to think of the public. But we always think first and foremost of the player and giving them the tools so that they can have fun playing tennis because when the notion of fun is gone, the results are generally lower.