

Andre Labelle Interview - Part 1 - 2006

1. What is your role within Tennis Canada?

Right now I'm in charge of under 12-player development and to put a structure into place for the kids coming into system; from four, five, and six years of age until all the way to when they graduate at age twelve.

2. What do you think Canadian players are lacking compared to the rest of the world?

The problem is that (juniors) don't start early enough. I think the problem is also when they are in school, they are not having enough of a physical curriculum. Also, when they train at their tennis club, one of the issues there is that they don't work on these physical qualities which we're trying to implement into the club system. The clubs need to make sure they handle the fact that there is not enough physical activity happening when kids are at school. If a junior has a lesson for 1 ½ or 2 hours, you should provide at least half an hour of the total program on developing this.

3. Why do you think that other countries are able to produce many top 200 players and Canada has just 4 in the top 200?

I think before it was more the players. There would only be one individual player who would be developed. What we're trying to do now is to get a structure into place that would make a system develop where it's not just one club and one coach doing all the work. Right now we have programs for children aged four, five, and six years old when they advance to ¾ court tennis. So there is a natural progression in making sure that by the time they graduate from the under-12 program, that they have the tools, skills and the athletic abilities to be able to go the next step.

4. What do you think Canada needs to do in hopes of having a larger pool of top 200 players and to hopefully create Grand Slam and Olympic Champions?

We have a national under twelve squad system and a team now, but within that small group of players, if there is one kid that is going to be well above the others then we have to provide more for that person. We need to have a larger base of players and within the larger base of players, we have to develop a certain group. Within that group of players, if there is one girl that stands out then we really have to make sure we put a system in place that provides everything that person needs.

5. You are in charge of the U12 development for Tennis Canada. What are some of the changes you are making in order to develop a larger pool of young kids in this Country.

We're really trying to use progressive tennis. You cannot hope for a six year old in today's world to go on the regular court with a regular ball and with a regular racquet and enjoy tennis...it's unlikely. There is so much frustration. We're trying to integrate progressive tennis into all the clubs in the country. For a six years old junior, when they go to take a lesson, they are going to play tennis right away. So, it's not that he's going there and having to hit a big basket of balls, with his big racquet, and then he's going to learn tennis. That has been done forever, but with progressive tennis we really feel the purpose of that is to increase the base of young athletes.

6. You have recently done some travelling and researched around other countries such as France and Europe on their U12 development. What important information have you found?

They use progressive tennis, but the big difference is the competitive structure for those kids, because kids want to compete, and they want to play and have fun. They don't just want to go on the court and hit tennis balls; they have a purpose and the purpose is that they go to a clinic during the week and then compete on the weekend. Therefore, the big difference in Europe is that you have a competitive structure which we have never had before...but we are starting to put that into place this year across the country.

7. You are fully integrating Progressive Tennis into the National Training Centre programs across the country. Do you feel that we are stepping in the right direction by implementing this program across the Country?

When I was here this weekend (Toronto) for the NTC program and on Sunday afternoon after the program ended, one of the coaches in the program came there with one junior. The junior was using the ¾ court tennis method and he had just turned eight years old. It was just amazing to see him hit the ball, move and control the ball and this is the type of players you can develop using progressive tennis. When this kid graduates from the program at age 9, he's going to have all the tools to go to full court.

8. What would you say to parents who are sceptical of using the progressive tennis approach?

Look at other sports -- when you start skiing for the first time, what sort of ski do you start skiing with? What sort of hill do the instructors use for the kids? Or even soccer you have mini soccer fields. Most of the other sports have a progression, so why shouldn't tennis be the same? Right now tennis basically is being taught in a very old-fashioned way. However, now there is a huge development and even the USTA are beginning to integrate progressive tennis because we are seeing a real value for the kids to enjoy the sports the first time they play.

9. How long do you think it will take before we will start seeing the benefits of Progressive Tennis?

We are seeing the benefits this year. With the quality of the kids moving from to the progressive tennis program we are going to see the benefits this year. There are provinces that might be a little more ahead of others in terms of setting up a competitive structure, but you're going to see within a year or two years players playing a better game at an earlier age.