

## **Andre Labelle Interview - Part 2**

### **1) Based on what you've seen in under-12 players, what is the main difference between our players and top kids internationally?**

Internationally, players who are now under-12 have a competitive structure that is far better in providing more events for them. Also, players as young as eight or nine years of age are playing up to 70 to 80 matches a year, as opposed to ours, who are very good but only play up to 20 to 30 matches a year. It makes a huge difference because when you play more matches you become a better competitor and you learn how to play (proper point construction), so it's very important to increase the ratio of matches vs instruction and that's one of the weaknesses of our tennis system.

### **2) What would you say to a coach who is coaching a seven, eight, or nine year old...what can they do to provide more matches for them?**

We have to make sure that they adjust their program first. For example, let's say a six or seven year old comes to a practice twice during the week, one session is to develop the skills and one session is for them to come and play. There are already some TDCs that have made some adjustments to their program and they're already doing that...they are having the kids come on a Saturday to play and to be honest; this is what kids want the most, to play and compete.

### **3) Are there other areas where our coaches should be focusing on right now as it relates to junior development?**

The fact is that many of our schools across the country have dropped or have decreased the number of hours spent on physical activities. As a result, it is essential that our TDCs are integrating a fitness program as part of their tennis training so to develop the physical specific qualities related to tennis. A typical 3 hour/day TDC training program would be wise to use one of the three hours to spend time on athletic development of their players. For younger players, a two hour training session could be broken into a 1 ½ hour tennis and 30 min physical sessions.

### **4) What are the training habits that coaches should be emphasizing with younger kids?**

I believe that we need to always position the fact that the kids are always ready to be asked more of them. We need to create an environment where its fun but where the kids are working hard, so that it's a fun/serious environment. I think we have to raise the bar in terms of expectations for the kids we already have in the programs and we have to raise the bar in terms of the training we are giving to the kids. Even recreational players are reacting better and are much more enthusiastic when they are in a disciplined environment as opposed to a free-for-all environment. We need to ask more and the kids will pick it up and they will carry these higher standards overall.

### **5) What are the main issues or concerns that you've seen from U12 Canadian junior players that you would like to get coaches to focus more on?**

On the technical side, the most consistent one is the 'grip', both with the forehand and backhand. Whenever someone starts playing tennis, everything begins from the grip and that's one of the benefits of going into 'progressive tennis'. Because progressive tennis provides a lower bouncing ball, it will alleviate some of these issues that we have had over the past few years where you have kids using the incorrect extreme western grip. So with progressive tennis, we have kids using proper grips right from the start including the eastern and semi-western forehand grips.

For the backhand side, the most consistent mistake we are seeing is that the bottom right hand (for a right hander) is not adjusted to be a 'hammer/continental grip'. The kids are leaving the forehand grip instead so it makes it a lot harder to maneuver the racket and hit on a proper contact point. When you look at specific players on the pro tour, you don't see these extreme grips. These are fundamental issues and it is no longer acceptable to allow this to happen to our young players especially when we know the limitations it would result in their game.

I feel that our coaches would benefit learning from golf and the first thing that the golf coaches and instructors look at when you take a lesson is the grip because in golf, without a good grip, you can't stroke the ball properly. In essence, our tennis coaches and instructors should become stricter with the players they teach especially when they start playing tennis or those that are young enough that may have started with the wrong grip (s) and have the courage to change it regardless of the difficulties that the players may have for the first few weeks when those changes are made. By making those necessary changes at an earlier age, it will provide a chance for the player to play at a higher level later on.

#### **6) What about on the serve?**

Players are not introduced early enough to go towards the continental grip. They are kept way too long from it and are using the forehand grip instead, which does not allow for a proper racquet action. But with the addition of the tennis progressive equipment, it is a lot easier for young players to make the transition to the proper grip.

#### **7) Are there any other red flags that you would like to see corrected in our junior players?**

There is an incorrect player perception that when they look at professional players hitting their strokes on television that they hit the ball playing with extra-rotation. Obviously, they hit quite fast so it is difficult for the untrained eyes to see that from the contact point and forward, there is a lengthening of the stroke. Therefore the hitting zone is the 'red flag' that coaches need to improve with their players.

In the 1950's, when people were taught to use a continental grip, you would always learn to hit the ball flat and with long strokes. Now with those semi-western grips the problem with the kids is that they start to rotate too early and leave the contact point upward too soon without having the proper hitting zone. Coaches need to spend quality time in developing a longer hitting zone (the amount of time the racquet face moves forward towards the target).