

An Interview with Andre Labelle - Part 3

Andre Labelle is currently the Director of the National Training Centre in Montreal and under-12 program leader for Tennis Canada.

From a tactical standpoint, what would you like to see coaches emphasize more with younger players?

When you are dealing with younger players, you have to ensure that they are able to hit the ball when it rises between the hips and the shoulders, and coaches must be able to train those skills as it pertains to each athlete. The players should also remember to hit closer to the baseline instead of always going backward when you see a higher ball. In tennis you have to introduce the ability to hit the ball at shoulder height, and on the rise, very early in the development.

You've spoken about 'technique,' but what about 'tactics'?

Tactically, we want the kids from the 8, 9 and 10 years of age level to consistently develop a good rallying ball (ball rising to their opponent at the baseline) and to develop a stronger forehand. We also want to produce a mentality where they are controlling the point from the middle of the court with their forehand. So we need to spend time developing the weapon that is the forehand. They need the mentality that goes with the footwork, running around the balls in the middle, and taking the balls on the rise and at shoulder height. The backhand needs to be solid and consistent, but really a lot happens with the forehand. Tactically, you want to be consistent and really take control of the point as soon as you can on the forehand side.

Any further comments about the serve and return in terms of starting the point?

At a younger age, the kids should have the mentality to return every first serve that comes to them consistently with depth. On the second serve you should have a mentality to dominate and take control with the return of serve aiming for big targets aggressively. However, the young players should know that if they dominate or dictate the point from the second serve return they are going to have a lead into the rally that comes after the second shot from the opponent. This position should lead to winning more overall points. But to be able to do this, you want the kids to be inside the baseline when they hit the second serve. So, on the positioning we should not let the kids be too far behind the baseline on the second serve and at the time of contact they should be inside the baseline. The second serve will come in higher, and that's why it's important to develop the skills to hit the shoulder-height ball.

As for the serve with this age group, players should be developing a high percentage of first serves, executed with the proper fundamentals beginning with the continental grip. Players should be able to control their serve to the backhand of their opponents (weaker side) and when their percentage goes down, a successful option is to serve straight into the body of your opponent in the middle of the service box. It is most critical to instill in young players the "mentality" of serving a lot of first serves and not to be too ambitious at this stage with this stroke since they are not going to be "acing" their opponents.

What is the main difference between the way top-internationally ranked players and our kids play?

The one thing that our kids have to do better is make sure we are setting up for more quality time on the court in terms of footwork and hitting live balls so they can go crosscourt, change direction and overall increasing their ability to be consistent when they are moving. We want more full-court training and always having the kids move to the ball around. They have to be able to move and I think that coaches have to really focus on working the baseline movement going inside the court, going backward and moving behind the court. You should not just work on side-to-side, but rather working to move inside, backwards, hitting front pivot and back pivot. The whole string of footwork is essential. I think our kids are not drilling enough with live balls and using the entire court in the running mode.

What are your thoughts on ¾ court or half-court rallying?

I think with both ways you can do great things for court movement. The problem is that the intervals (of half court rallying) are too short. I think we need to increase the length of the time of the intervals for the kids to really be able to have a higher threshold because if you're allowing them to hit only a few balls in half-court rallying then it is not good enough. You have to get them to hit more than thirty balls. To do this you may need to have four players hitting crosscourt or having two players hit down the line. It really depends on the situation.

Is there a difference between the overall level of consistency with Canadian juniors and players top-ranked internationally?

The issue at stake is that the kids top-ranked internationally are spending the time on training more than our kids. Our kids simply do not train enough. We are now asking from our twelve-and-under girls that they must train three times per day. This means two sessions of tennis a day plus one session for conditioning. If they go to school at 9 a.m., then they must train earlier in the morning. They also should be hitting after school is over. There is a fundamental need to have five solid days like this. Saturday should have a light training period and Sunday should be used as a complete day off.

We must ask the question of why there so many top-ranked Russian girls? It is because they are training for many more hours than our kids. Our kids are simply not training enough hours. Therefore, a coach working with a nationally-ranked player has to really ensure that they understand the commitment in developing such a player because you would have to find the time for the kid to train more hours. Our kids are no worse than the other nations, they just don't train enough. It's all about work ethic.

What are your thoughts on Sport Canada's Long-Term Development Model as it relates to athlete training?

I think that the amount of training volume is pretty good, but you have to understand that there are more hours needed in tennis (in terms of training) than other sports.

Thanks for your time Andre.