

Interview with Ben Armstrong

Ben Armstrong , has been coaching for over 15 years and is currently working out of Mayfair West Racquet & Fitness Club in Toronto. He is the coach of Sharon Fichman, who, at 13 years, is one of Canada's brightest stars in junior tennis. Her long list of accomplishments include an ITF ranking of 221 and reaching the finals of the U14 Orange Bowl this past December, a title she earned in the U12 category the year before.

Q: Ben, at what age did Sharon start playing tennis and at what point did you start coaching her?

A: Sharon started playing at around 5 years old when she would tag along with her father, Bobby and older brother Thomas, who is an accomplished tennis player in his own right. I started working with Sharon when she was about 8 years old, so that will be close to five years now.

Q: In your work with Sharon, what do you consider your most important role to be?

A: I see my role as being multi-faceted and ever changing. Apart from trying to always maintain a global approach to my work with her, I try to help her establish clear goals and objectives, so we are always on the same page about what she is trying to do and where she ultimately is going. So formal planning (like tournament and practice schedules) is still a huge part of my job. However, when she was younger, my approach was much more directive than it is now. As she gets older, I feel like my role is to provide guidance and to offer suggestions, rather than to tell her what to do.

Q: Can you expand on that a little bit?

A: Sharon learns at an incredible rate. Combine that with a very tenacious, determined and fiery spirit and there is no such thing as an 'easy sell'. I have to be very well prepared in order to keep up with her dexterous mind and her contentious spirit.

Q: So, how do you 'sell' Sharon on new ideas? It must be difficult at times since she's been so successful thus far in her career. Do you ever struggle with that?

A: Absolutely. Like I said, I have to really do my homework. I'm constantly reading and consulting with experts, like Louis Cayer as well as others, to be able to back up my ideas in a very rational way. I try to help her see what skills she'll need in the future, and how maybe her present way of playing would break down on the pro tour, to sell my points. Her first instinct is to argue, but don't get me wrong, she has a very open mind and if my points outweigh her arguments, and she's convinced, she commits one hundred percent to the idea.

Q: What do you think are the keys to developing Sharon, or any young player for that matter, into a top, international competitor?

A: Planning is essential. If you don't plan, you forget things and at Sharon's level, the keys are in the details. If you don't plan, all the details get lost. Goal setting is so important as well. Clear goals make it easier for everyone to stay motivated, especially when you suffer setbacks.

Q: What do you mean by that?

A: Well, for example, Sharon's goal was to win the Orange Bowl one year before she actually did. Because of certain limitations that were beyond our control, she felt like she had 'lost' a year. But the goal was still there and eventually, we found solutions to our problems.

Q: What are the challenges that you deal with then?

A: School work is one issue. Sharon is very committed to her education and sometimes it conflicts with tournaments, etc. Giving up school is not an option though so finding creative ways to balance both is a healthy challenge. Finding money in order to play ITF events is another obstacle. The distances you need to travel for these tournaments are so great, and the expense is so huge, that you can't do it without some help. This year we have a sponsor so there are definitely ITF tournaments on the schedule.

Q: OK, back to developing world champions. What else is important besides planning and goal setting?

A: Coaching globally. By that I mean addressing all the skills - psychological, physical, tactical and technical. Nothing can be overlooked and even strengths need to be improved. This is where the 'team' idea for coaching comes in. I don't have the time, or the skill to excel at coaching everything. That's why if I feel I can't do something; I will find someone to do it for me. For instance, if we're working on improving a certain shot, like the serve, we might get to a point where the skill is improved but then run out of time to maintain the skill over time. That's where her dad might step in and get Sharon to hit baskets of serves, for example.

Q: Ben, how do you help Sharon prepare for matches?

A: Again, I'm very big on details and being very professional about the things you can control before a match. That's things like the warm-up, food and following a routine that will help her relax.

Q: Ben, you coach a number of other players besides Sharon. What is your biggest challenge when it comes to coaching in general?

A: Finding balance! In the evenings and on weekends I find myself booked until 10:30pm. My life has changed in that I have a young, growing family now, so time away from them is hard. At the same time, the kids know that in the past, I used to spend more time with them, and sometimes they get hurt when I have to say no to more court time, and that's hard too. I'm still trying to find the right balance between family and coaching.

Q: So how much time do you spend coaching Sharon?

A: When she's at home, during a preparatory phase, I'll spend at least 6 hours a week privately with her (not including weekends). She'll train in a clinic format about 6 hours more on top of that and on the weekend, a couple more practice sessions. Sometimes we do some work before school. That's about 16-18 hours of court time a week.

Q: What about fitness and working with other people? How does that fit into her schedule?

A: Sharon does about 5 hours of fitness a week as well as daily yoga in the summer. In the winter, she'll do a little less yoga. As far as other people being involved, there are a few, like Louis Cayer, who help out on a regular basis. She has also spent some time with Rene Simpson and Adrienne Simmons which I think is very rewarding for her, since the female perspective is something I can't provide. And it's not just about the on-court tactics. Spending time off-court, getting advice and even traveling to tournaments (which she's done with Adrienne) is a completely different experience with a female coach. Sharon's parents are a big part of the whole picture as well.

Q: What is her parents' main role?

A: With the commitment that Sharon has made and given her goals and aspirations, it really needs to be a team effort and Sharon's family is completely committed to helping her achieve her dreams. One person cannot provide everything that she needs. Her father is very helpful in terms of setting up supplemental hitting partners, booking courts, researching tournaments and sending in entries. All of these things take a lot of time and her parents really are instrumental in helping her stay grounded in terms of school work. Her brother Thomas does a good job of that too.

Ben, thanks for your time and we wish you and Sharon the best of luck this year.