

Interview with Bob Brett - 2007

Q: To start, can you give me an overview of your career in tennis?

A: I started coaching at the age of 20 when I worked for Harry Hopman for almost five years. And then, in 1979, which was my initiation year to the (professional) tour, I had an opportunity to start working with better players. I began travelling with groups of players until 1987 when Boris Becker approached me and asked if I was available to coach him. I worked with him for about 3 ½ years, then with (Goran) Ivanisevic for 4 ½ years, (Andre) Medvedev for 2 years, Nicolas Kiefer for 2 ½ years, and finally Mario Ancic. Ancic, who was the last person to beat Federer at Wimbledon, wanted a full time coach, which made me unavailable. Since then, I've been working at my tennis centre at San Remo, Italy while also helping out in Japan.

As a coach, it has been a very interesting experience because working with a group of players gave me the opportunity to see different game styles, personalities and characters. You can see that something that may work with one person might not work with another. You're always experimenting to find ways to get a player to improve. In a group, you have players sharing knowledge about how to play different opponents. It makes it much easier for the flow of information. Plus, in training, you have the opportunity to do the drills or exercises that are appropriate to get them as best prepared as possible. Preparation is really the key for success. Having the groups for eight years gave me tremendous opportunities. In working with Boris, it was great to see someone with the mind, the game, and the ability to executive everything and to see him deal with the pressures of being a superstar while also being at the top of his game. It was same thing with Goran to a different extent. But of course, every player you learn something different.

Q: What is progressive tennis?

A: Progressive tennis is when you start a player at mini tennis, then eighteen metres, and then finally progress to the full sized court. It is basically an evolution of the player. By starting with the small court and then progressing to the three-quarter court, the player has a better chance to adapt. What we found is that there is a big adjustment for younger players to start with the full tennis court when the balls are bouncing higher. To many of them, it can be discouraging.

With progressive tennis, you have the evolution of the player, not only in terms of bounce of ball, but the court is smaller which allows them relative to their size, a chance to cover the full court. Then, they will be able to develop further execution of shots because the ball is bouncing lower, and it is softer which makes it not fly as far. It encourages the players to be aggressive.

Q: What is the key benefit to progressive tennis?

A: With progressive tennis, you can use an assortment of spins and do exactly what the players are doing with the full court. But it mainly enables them to technically execute the shots and allow the development of different game styles. It's much easier to attack when you have the ¾ court and can help develop a player's instincts. I think this is one of the key things for the future development of tennis. In this respect, the game is more suited to juniors. They can attack more which makes it easier to have that 'progressive mentality'. It's very important to develop a player's instincts and you can start

that at an early age with progressive tennis. If at age 6 or 7 the player starts to become confident about going to the net, you find they will, invariably, develop into a good net player.

Q: How will progressive tennis help Canada achieve the goals of developing top international-level players?

A: With progressive tennis, more players will feel encouraged by the game and not get frustrated by the difficulties of the full court. This is where the 18 metre-court is a benefit for juniors to be able to make a transition to the full court. It should keep more children interested in the game because they will have an opportunity to learn the skills at a level that makes it easier on them. This is mainly due to the smaller court, and the ball is softer while not bouncing so high. It will also give them a variety of skills which, if taught the right way by coaches, can build the foundation for when they go to the full court.

A lot of juniors start by playing from the baseline without developing many of the skills that are necessary, such as moving to the net. With a $\frac{3}{4}$ court you can volley, hit approach shots, and work on the return of serve. It makes it possible to play an aggressive game. The coach has to have the imagination that a player they are working with can go to the net, to be creative, and to be an effective player. A good net player has an advantage over a good baseline player.

Q: How important is the proper equipment to progressive tennis?

A: When you talk about racquets, the size of it is smaller (in progressive tennis) because it is also relative to the size of the player and this is really what's important it makes it easier. Because even when players are playing full court, they are generally starting with a smaller racquet. It is also important that the ball be softer because it won't bounce as high and secondly it won't go as high which encourages players to hit through the ball which is something that is very important. You see players like Clijsters and Federer, and they actually spend quite a long time with the ball.

Q: What should a coach tell a parent who is sceptical of this approach?

A: At the beginning, it's an evolution and if the player is progressing quickly then the player will be moved to the full court. Of course, there will be certain requirements such as winning a tournament in order to move up. But it is also important that the coaches have a good relationship with the parents and to be able to tell them when the right time their child should move up to the full court. They should see it as a 'step' and some players will improve faster than others.

Q: Will there be a competition to support this type of tennis?

A: Yes. TDC's (Tennis Development Centres) will contact their provincial associations and request to put on $\frac{3}{4}$ tennis tournaments. This is not only important for the players, but it helps to promote this type of tennis and encourages more people to play.

Q: Should coaches add a fitness component to their progressive tennis program?

A: Without a doubt, but relative to age there is LTAD (long term athlete development) model and it's very important that we follow that not only for younger players but all the way through the age groups.

We must ensure that there is a consistent bodied development for the athlete. A fitness component for a 6 year old will be different than an 8 year old, but its very important follow the LTD guidelines.