

## Interview with Christine Picher

Christine Picher works out of Nun's Island in Quebec. With 20 indoor courts, Christine stays busy not only teaching privately, but also running the Tennis Development Academy. Christine is currently coaching several of Canada's top junior players including Valerie Tetreault, who recently won the National under 18 championships.

### **Q: Tell us about your playing background?**

**A:** I began playing at the age of 4, and went on to win nationals for under 16 in both singles and doubles. I was a finalist in Under 14 and 21 Nationals. I earned a scholarship at the University of Tennessee where I studied communications. After graduation, I played professionally in Holland.

### **Q: How does Playing in Holland differ from playing here in Canada?**

**A:** In Holland I played in an interclub league, this format does not exist in Canada; all my matches were on Sundays. This was a great opportunity for me to travel in Europe. The competition is very difficult.

### **Q: How has your experience as player impacted your training with Valerie?**

**A:** I think that a big aspect to being an ex player is the emotional side, knowing what a player feels at 4 all in the third set. When I was young I was said to be very talented but I had no coach or guide, as a former player I feel I have the experience to guide younger players. You can become very disorganized without proper guidance, not only technical training, but how to approach matches and how to get out of trouble. I have to teach players how to deal with winning, losing and how to keep things in perspective.

### **Q: How much of an advantage is speaking both French and English to your career?**

**A:** In Quebec it is not necessary to speak English, but it's a must as soon as you get out of Quebec. When you travel internationally it is helpful to translate for young kids who are often not bilingual. Being bilingual also gave me the opportunity to go to an American College.

### **Q: What advantages are there to being a female coach?**

**A:** I would say none; it's the person (coach) that makes the difference.

### **Q: What disadvantages are there?**

**A:** Compared to other countries Canada seems to be pretty open about male and female coaches, but it is still a man's world. I have felt a few times that you have to work harder to be taken seriously. There are far more full time male coaches in Quebec than female. There is often a perception that a male coach is better than a female, this usually comes from the parents not the kids.

### **Q: Is it challenging finding hitting partners and competition for Valerie?**

**A:** We have to do some traveling to find a good hitting partner for Valerie. Finding a man who can play a slower, flatter ball like the woman's game is also a big challenge. However, I also have difficulties finding partners for my male players. Fortunately at Nun's Island there are several good male players.

**Q: Is this a challenge exclusive to playing in Canada?**

**A:** It depends where you are in the US, if you are in North Dakota or Maine, it's a challenge. However if you are in California or Florida it's much easier.

**Q: How many hours a week does Valerie train?**

**A:** She trains about 24 hours per week, 3 hours on court plus 1 hour of fitness. Sometimes it's two hours on court and 2 hours off court during periods of peak intensive training. She works with Andre Parent who is with Tennis Canada; he is in charge of the fitness.

**Q: Can she do her fitness on the road?**

**A:** When she is on the road it is difficult, if she is here for 6 weeks at a time we can work more on her fitness and build her game. Many places don't have facilities or sometimes the player's schedule doesn't allow time for training, they may be playing in both the singles and doubles. That's always the challenge for players on the road to keep fit; in a perfect world, she would be traveling with a fitness coach.

**Q: How do you balance this time demand, with Valerie, with your other coaching responsibilities and your own personal time?**

**A:** Good question. I am also in charge of programs at Nun's Island (13 and under ) sports study, I have three other players who are doing very well, number 1 in 12 and under girls, number 1 14 and under girls and number 1 in 18 and under boys all provincially. I am trying to spread my time evenly with each player, they expect that. Valerie is often away otherwise it would not be possible. At the level she is at right now she needs individual attention, this can be very time consuming. Her training is very specific and we want to give her the best opportunity possible to achieve her goals. I think that she understands the balance that I need to have, so do the other players and their parents and somehow we manage. The personal time is a must...to rest.

**Q: How does your training with your top players differ from other students?**

**A:** The players that are at a higher level tend to be so focused on their goals. My goal as an instructor is to help them develop their full potential as a player. Their goals are personal. I never force my goals on the player; I concentrate on their learning and developing their game. I often compare tennis development with a musician, when you start learning to play the violin you are not yet a musician, you are an apprentice. What they want to do with their goals is their business, my job is to make them players, not apprentices and it takes years to become a player. If they want to join the tour or go to University that's their goal. The parents often see their children as Number 1 in the world, but I can't always control that. The only thing I can control is their effort on the court. Then after that we will see.

**Q: What has been the biggest impact you have had as a coach on Valerie?**

**A:** You would have to ask her that, I don't really know the answer. Maybe training habits, trying to improve your game every time you step on the court. I try to instill a good work ethic on them.

**Q: What will it take for Valerie move to the next level?**

**A:** A good balance between training, developing her game and competition at an international level.

**Q: What do you believe Canadian coaches have to do to produce more world class players?**

**A:** I can only speak about the Quebec coaches, I don't know enough about the rest of the country. I think coaches in Quebec are fine; they have lots of knowledge and will. The difference with other countries is the amount of youth in the sport; we have so few young kids going into tennis. We don't have a strong competitive structure, young kids of 14 and under have few opportunities to compete at an international level compared to French (France) players or Spanish players. They only have to drive 5 or 6 hours to find tough competition. I have a friend in California who says her kid has tough competition every two weeks. They have draws with 128 players. Every tournament has tough matches from the start. Our kids at provincials don't have tough matches until the semi-finals. . If they stay in Quebec they have 20 tough matches a year compared to Europe where they might have 20 matches in a month.

**Q: How do you keep up with current trends in tennis?**

**A:** I like the site tennis one, the TPA site is also good; The latest books, ITF Advanced Biomechanics for Tennis, World Class Tennis Technique, The French Federation who puts out interesting books and magazines from French speaking coaches; talking to other coaches; studying Humanity, how to deal with the person( human Nature).

**Q: Any advice for young female coaches who aspire to coach international competitive athletes?**

**A:** I would say to know what your motives are, are you there to: to teach and develop or personal stardom, or for money. Why are you doing it? Secondly, keep a balance life, and put athlete's needs and goals first. Think long term with athletes instead of wins and rankings. Help parents and kids to keep things in perspective. Finally and most importantly, Keep it simple and Make it fun.

**Q: Any advice to coaches who train young female tennis players versus male tennis players?**

**A:** I can say that it's easy to get into stereotypes, and if you read psychology it's very easy to get into stereotypes. In my experience which has been almost 20 years of coaching, I've seen girls who react like boys and vice versa. It's up to each individual person, and then again studying humanity or philosophy helps to understand the person. Overall we talk about integrating all the aspects of coaching, it's not always about technique, physical or tactical, there is also a personality that comes into play, the needs of the kids, and the will of the kids. Always put the kids first not the will of the parents or ambition of the coach.

I think that if I could send a message to young coaches... It's a great job if you can call it a job. There is a lot of joy and happiness in being a tennis coach, unlike a dentist people enjoy coming to our centre, we have good relations with our players. The atmosphere is often positive and fun, unlike a dentist's office.

For me it's not always about the money, I get a lot back from coaching.

It is possible to do this as a living in Canada, there will always be a place for good coaches in Canada.