

Interview with Conrad Pineau

Q: Conrad, can you give us some career background info on yourself? (position, responsibilities, other affiliations or associations, etc.)

A: I started as a Club Pro and have worked with many different types of clientele across the country. Presently, I am the Head Pro at the Nun's Island Tennis Club in Montreal, Quebec. I am responsible for all the club programs as well as 25 full-time pros and 25 part-time pros working here. I have given a lot of coaching seminars throughout my career and have had the chance to work a great deal with Louis Cayer. Much of my free time was invested into working with Louis as his Assistant, helping him with teaching skills and various coaching seminars. I have learned a lot in the last 20 years from working with Louis. I also spent two years as a travelling coach, helping other coaches such as Andre Lamaire (coach of Sebastien Lareau and Sebastien LeBlanc), by travelling around with the juniors and coaching them in tournaments. I have visited a lot of countries and watched how they teach and train in comparison to our own teaching techniques. As well, I have invested a great deal of time over the last 14 years into developing my own teaching and coaching skills, while maintaining my work as a Club Pro, plus giving seminars and training other coaches. I have no affiliations with other tennis associations or agencies. I implement most of my energy trying to build and improve upon what we have here at our club.

Q: Tell us about your club.

A: We have 20 indoor courts at Nun's Island Tennis Club and no outdoor courts. We have a good relationship with other private clubs in the area so people who prefer to play outdoors can use their courts. We have a lot of activities at our club that people can join without having to worry about finding a partner. We guarantee you will have a partner to play with at our club. We have 3 or 4 different activities per day – that's about 30 activities per week. We start early at 6:00 a.m. with training, leagues and so forth. We have over 1700 members at our club who just play tennis. We also have squash courts but it is mainly a tennis place. We changed ownership about 4 years ago and the new owners have invested a lot into renovating the club to make it a newer, modern looking facility. We have put lots of money into resurfacing the courts, putting up new lights, etc. as this ultimately makes our members happier and lets them enjoy their tennis.

Q: You have been at your club for quite some time. What are some of the major changes that you have seen occur in the industry over the last number of years. How have you adapted with this in your club?

A: A lot of clubs in Montreal have closed within the last 15 years. The industry has been pretty tough and there is a lot of competition from other types of sports. It was important for us to stay alert and be selective in the type of clientele we wanted and the types of programs we offered. Many other clubs decided to take a loose-bar approach by adding a gym, pool, and other such services. We took the exact opposite approach of every other club – we decided to give the best service we could give in tennis. We hire the best coaches; we ensure all activities are appropriate to meet the needs of our clientele; and we deliver the best service when it comes to tennis needs. We made these adjustments to accommodate the lifestyle that people live nowadays. People don't want to be bothered with finding a partner and taking care of administrative things. So we find the partners for you and we offer the best quality service through our clinics and private lessons. We guarantee certain results within a certain time. This is what people like because they can continue to improve their game and not have to

think about administrative issues. We offer more convenience by giving our clientele what they want, when they want it. We're charging more, but we're also giving more.

Q: What programs have been the most successful at your club?

A: That is a tough question to answer. I would say that we have 2 markets: people who want to play and people who want to learn. We cater our programs to these two different groups of people. We offer a lot of intense lessons in a short period of time for our competitive players. We have a special clientele with very high standards who are very competitive. These people spend a lot of money to learn and do whatever it takes to be the best. Different from your everyday family club, our main clientele is very competitive and really work hard to improve their game. We give a lot of lessons in a small amount of time to satisfy these peoples' demands (25 full-time pros each teaching 30 hrs/ wk).

Q: What have been the keys to the programs' success?

A: Hiring top notch Club Pros to run the programs and utilizing the strengths of each individual Pro by giving them responsibilities that match their skills accordingly. For example, if a Pro is good on the court with drills, we're not going to give him the responsibility of recruiting new talent. On the other hand, a Pro who is tactically not so good on the court but who has good marketing and business skills will be responsible for selling and recruiting new members to join the club. We hand out responsibilities to each Pro according to his/her strengths and weaknesses. So, there are 2 keys to our programs' success – hiring good Pros and making the best use of their individual strengths and skills. It is also important to reward the Pros when they are working well, as an incentive to maintain successful programs and keep our clients happy.

Q: What do you do to initiate new members into the club?

A: It takes a lot of effort to get new members to join a club. Our club is very involved in what's going on in and around the tennis community. Our Pros get a commission for bringing in new members to the club. We also use a marketing firm to handle all of our publicity and marketing and to help promote our image. As well, we offer temporary memberships through our Access Club Program which allows people to come in and make use of our facilities to get more familiar with the club. Our Access Club members receive 9 hours of private lessons over a 6-week period, and they can join in on all our club activities, seminars, etc. A lot of flyers and pamphlets are also sent out to inform people of the programs and activities taking place at our club. This helps promote the club and gets people interested in coming out to play and possibly even join the club. We also set up a kiosk during the Rogers Cup tournament to promote our club and get new players to join.

Q: What would you say is the main key to member retention at your club?

A: Every member who is in touch with a Pro has a greater chance of retention than someone who does not maintain such a relationship. We start with this philosophy - that it is important to stay in touch with all of our members in order to retain them. We work very hard to call and invite people to join in on the activities and services offered at our club. We want to ensure members have constant contact with a Club Pro and are able to maintain this relationship at all times. We also give our members a points card that they can use to earn free court time, lessons, etc. The points card certainly acts as an incentive to keep people returning to our club, as do our monthly draws for the chance to win various

prizes and gifts. Every year we have a turnaround of 300 to 400 people, so we have to constantly work hard to bring in more players just to maintain a solid membership.

Q: What skills and attributes do you consider most important in being a successful Pro?

A: In general, a good personality is the most important attribute a Pro can have. Being compassionate and caring and maintaining contact with the members is extremely important. Also important is the quality of work and teaching skills of the Pro. Some Pros are too rough on players and do not have a good sense of the length of time involved in the development process. You cannot simply become a 2.0 level player within a 2-month period. Some Pros fear being truthful with players and do not tell them how far they have really progressed. Pros must be fair and honest and say the right things to players. They must tell them that training is a lengthy process that involves a whole lot of time and effort.

Q: If you could provide some advice to a young club pro on how to be successful in the business, what advice would that be?

A: Being a Pro is very physically challenging as well. Pros that are not as technically skilled have to spend more energy on court giving lessons. A good suggestion is to continue working on your coaching techniques, which will save you physical energy in the long run. You should also work on improving your organizational skills to make sure you can handle large groups of people, phone calls, organizing leagues, tournaments, parties, etc. When you are young you can put a lot of physical energy into giving private lessons, but gradually more time will be spent on the league, at least 25% when you are young. This helps to prepare a Pro for the transition from spending time on physical lessons to spending more time on organizing the league and club programs. Aside from the physical aspect of the job, your social life must become second to your work as a Pro. It is a job where people come to play tennis and have fun. They are not interested in their coaches' personal problems, which is why you have to put your personal life on hold as a Pro. You have to be willing to work the opposite schedule of a regular person – nights, weekends; whenever people are available... it's like working another shift on top of your daily schedule. I would say that is certainly the toughest aspect of the job.