

Interview with Debbie Kirkwood - Part 2 - 2007

Debbie Kirkwood, a two time Tennis Canada Excellence Award Winner launched her career in the tennis world in 1983. She began working as a professional coach at various community tennis clubs in the Toronto Area. From 1988 to 1993 she worked as the High Performance coach in the province of Saskatchewan. In 1994, Kirkwood was hired by Tennis Canada as the Under 14 National Coach where she traveled with many juniors that had top three performances at major international events. Kirkwood also captained four junior teams that finished top 10 in the world. In 2000, she was named Manager, Player Development for Tennis Canada where she continues to promote the game of tennis to this day.

Q: What systems are in place in Canada to help players and coaches stay competitive with the rest of the world?

A: Our coaching re-certification programs are internationally recognized and the work that Ari Novick and Louis Cayer have done to design our coaching development programs have made our system among the best in the world, and certainly, in Canada. They have just recently redesigned Coach 2 and 3, making it a lot more extensive and closer to the coaching requirements that are in place in Europe. The coaching systems are very extensive in those countries and by expanding and enhancing our program it will make our coaches better.

Our TDC player regroupings provide coaches with a unique opportunity to work with Louis Cayer and some of the latest international technical and tactical trends.

The TPA website provides educational opportunities for our coaches with a lot of valuable resources and videos, access to info and conferences. Tennis Canada is also hosting more domestic events like our Futures and Challengers, such as ITF Repentigny. This is a great opportunity because future professional players will use these events for development. It's a great opportunity to go and observe and watch these kids play.

Our TDC mailings include videos of top juniors when they are young, international coaching conferences, books, all of which can help keep a coach abreast of what's going on. This information can also be used to develop their centres.

Q: Is there a difference between how players are being coached today versus 5 or even 10 years ago?

A: Yes, I think the major difference is the whole level of sophistication that they require to coach a developing junior. From a very young age, these kids are competing on a global basis against international players. In order to prepare the athletes at that age and to obtain the future that they aspire to, there is a lot more planning, there are a lot more specialists that are involved at a younger age, and a lot more things that need to be coordinated for the player. They also have to coordinate with the touring coaches that players go away with. An overall year plan has to be compiled including when to train and what competitions to compete in. In general, the coaches need a higher level of expertise.

Q: What advice do you have for young coaches who are starting a Player Development Program for competitive players?

A:

- The first thing is to plan...plan...plan, planning both long term and short term, and from a global perspective. Second, to help the kids that you work develop as people and as an athlete. The

coach needs to have an idea of what he wants to accomplish, and that will help him decide where he wants to take the program and how. You need to plan around the competitive calendar as all the programs should revolve around the major events. If you are working with U12 athletes the major plan should consist of one cycle. If you are working with more U14 athletes there are two major competitive seasons, indoor season and outdoor season. If you are working more with high level international kids, it may be more like three competitive peaks.

- I think that they need to instill a real competitive mentality into their program so everything should revolve around competition, just getting kids to love to compete. (ie. In ladder matches, in drills.) If you watch television, you can see this competitiveness in all sports, and the way you learn that is to be in that kind of an environment on a daily basis.
- Ian Barkley was another coach that was working for Great Britain at the time. He was Pat Cash's former coach.
- They have to instill an excellence mentality, which is kind of hard because our society is not really excellence based. Schools can have more of a 'let you get by' attitude, ie. just do enough to get by- "I have my grade I can graduate". "Why do more then I have to?"
- Instill a love of the game, a love of learning. I think this is really critical because it will last them a lifetime, irregardless of results. You have to love what you do.
- They have to mix individual with group training because you want to have good players and it's difficult to excel in a group training situation. A lot of our top players from a young age received a strong component of individual training to help their development.
- They have to balance technical development with tactical development. The two go hand in hand, it's important to know what it is you are doing, and at the same time, how to do it and when to do it. So as not to have any of those "legs of the chair" become out of balance.
- And finally make sure all the kids have a good athletic base. A good physical training program is essential. Kids must be encouraged to work hard physically to become better athletes. A guy like Nadal has all those qualities; he is tough as nails physically and tough as nails competitively, when you step out on the court against him, you know you are in for a fight. He is willing to be out there all day long.

Q: Why would a club or pro want to be involved with the TDC?

A: I think they benefit from the resources they would have access to. I think as far as the juniors are concerned, they would directly benefit from an advanced training environment, being part of a recognized training program as opposed to a club that may not have this system. From a marketing standpoint it distinguishes the club from other clubs who don't offer the same service. It gives the coaches an opportunity to come together and sort of exchange ideas.

Q: What type of results have the TDCs produced?

A: Many of our top National level players have gotten their start with a TDC facility. Also, as this group of juniors has progressed, of those that have stayed in Canada for their training after the age of 13, they have stuck with this as their training environment and supplementing it with other things.

Some of these players and coaches include:

- Pelletier coached by Sylvain Bruneau at Repentigny
- Dubois coached by Martin Simon and Robby Menard at Cote de Liesse
- Tetreault coached by Christine Picher at Iles de soeurs
- Gloria coached by Martin Simon and Robby Menard at Cote de Liesse

- Shulaeva coached by Pierre Lamarche at Ace
- Marois coached by Christian Gingras at Advantage
- Dancevic (until 13) coached by Doug Carter (who is now at Niagara) at White Oaks
- Bester (under 14) coached by Rufus Nell at Hollyburn
- Polansky coached by Dean Coburn from the Player's Edge
- Fichman coached by Ben Armstrong at Mayfair West

A lot of our top coaches are involved with TDC clubs. There are currently 42 centres.

Q: What are some of the things you base your TDC rankings on and how can a club go about improving their ranking?

A: It's important to first clarify that our designation is really trying to describe the business that the club is involved in. It's not really a hierarchy of which one is better than the other, but it is a designation that describes the type of programs that they are really offering. A "Gold TDC" should tell you that this club is in the business of high performance training. Some clubs are able just by the nature of their facility and ownership to do certain things or not to do certain things.

So as far as what goes into these clubs:

- We evaluate their History of Development and their Planning and Management. What clubs are able to consistently develop high performance players? Also, which clubs plan? Planning is critical so we take into consideration the clubs that have great plans.
- We evaluate their infrastructure and reward those clubs that are involved with schools or parks and recreation. Many kids can enter the system through these programs.
- Training environment: so what type of programs do they offer? Six-day a week programs or three-day a week programs. Does the club have walk on privileges that allow kids to walk on courts that are empty? Fitness: whether or not they have a program and whether that program is supervised by a Fitness Professional.
- Competitive environment: do they offer ladders, league play, do the clubs take their kids on trips, and do they get international or regional opportunities?
- We look at player performances, player rankings, nationally ranked or provincially ranked players. We also look at under twelve development.
- Coaching; the number of quality coaches at a facility. Do you have a number of coach 4s?