

### **Interview with Debbie Kirkwood - Part 3**

Debbie has worked in tennis since 1983. She has worked in Toronto, St. Jolie and in Saskatchewan as a High Performance coach. She has also been the National coach for the under 14 team and is presently working as the Director of High Performance at Tennis Canada.

#### **Q: What is the difference between a male and female player?**

**A:** There are a lot of differences between the sexes, as we are all aware. There are maturation differences both physically and mentally, there are also differences in game style, emotions and interests. It can be very difficult when you have them together on the road. One of the interesting differences I found is how they like to train, one was not better than the other; they were just sort of different. Girls tend to be very focused and path oriented, they like to focus on one thing at a time and work on it until they really get it. Where boys tend to be more game oriented vs. drill oriented, they like the drills to change often. This would influence how practices would be structured; some times you would almost have to have two different types of practices because the dynamics are a little bit different. As they get older, when the physical differences and the game style differences become more pronounced it definitely becomes more of a separate thing.

#### **Q: How is a coach able to overcome these differences in a group setting?**

**A:** I guess that is the “Art of Coaching”; it comes down to taking the time to plan practices in a way that combines the needs of both. Where talking male female but this also holds true for players with different game styles, you could train a kid who is an all court player or an aggressive baseliner or someone who likes to a serve and volley. With all these players on the court at the same time, planning is essential.

#### **Q: Until what age do believe that they should still be grouped together?**

**A:** I think probably up until about 12 or 13. They can effectively be grouped together, until the transition between acquiring their game style to perfecting their game style. I think once that transformation is occurring you have to start to look to tailoring the practices to look after individual needs of each athlete. It depends on what stage of development they are at as opposed to what age they are at. Once the player achieves sort of an international level of play you see that shift from group training to more individualized training.

#### **Q: In your opinion what are differences between a male pro and a male junior?**

**A:** From what I have observed it’s basically more physical differences between a 13 year old boy and a twenty two year old player. Basically how they compete and earn their points is a little bit different. At a younger age their weapons still haven’t been really developed, their serves aren’t the serves of a twenty year old, their ability to purely hit winners off the ground aren’t the same as how they will be when they are twenty. What you will see is that a lot of the juniors have really good three quarter pace first serve as opposed to that serve you see as a pro, with a Roddick or a Johansson. Although they had good serves when they where young, they couldn’t win as many points as they do now at the pro level. Juniors tend to earn their points more of the ground more by constructing, taking advantage of opportunities that they create. You still see that at the pro level, the tempo is higher the ability to

neutralize those tactics are higher but their ability to purely play with power is a lot different. From a young age you see the elements of the man in the boy, but just at a lower level.

**Q: What are differences between a female pro and a female junior?**

**A:** Well it's a little bit the opposite; in general the girls mature physically and mentally earlier so there is less of a difference between a 13 year old female tennis player and a nineteen year old pro. This is one of the reasons why a 13 year old female is able to compete at an under 18 level or 15 -16 year old girls are able to compete relatively well on the WTA tour. By the time they reach the full physical and mental maturity things like their tempo of ball is higher, their quickness is more pronounced, their ability to hurt with their serve is a little bit more developed. This is sort of a natural evolution from becoming bigger and stronger, but there is less of a difference between how they win their points.

**Q: How does a junior player approach difficult situations compared to an older player?**

**A:** Top players, at a very young age competed older than their age, so they had an ability to sort of manage the momentum of a match. Their ability to know what critical points were and their ability to be in front of crowds was already well established. They could play in an event like Tars??? in front of 4 or 5 thousand people. Thirteen year old kids are able to walk out on the court and be able to perform. As time progresses and they play bigger events, they have more opportunities to be around and deal with expectations. Expectations like, walking into a European championship and having to win or playing a grand slam and being designated the next... whoever! They get better and better at handling situations but at a young age they showed a pretty high level of composure and an understanding of the situation.

**Q: Is this more difficult for female players who seem to compete at a younger age?**

**A:** I would say that they could react differently because girls mature earlier they are in situation where they are playing girls that are older then they are or in an environment where they are surrounded by adults. So I think it can be more challenging. I saw an interview with Anna Kornakova; she was saying that at such a young age she lived in a world of adults and not around her peers or kids her own age. You don't see that as often with the men some exceptions like Nadel or Gasquee at 18or 19 or Hewitt at 17 who where at the pro level, but for the most part from 13 to 17 a lot of them were playing age group tennis. In the woman's game it's not unusual for girls to move out of the U14 into to U18 or the pro tour. Emotionally I think they handle it quite well.

**Q: At what age should young player begin to specialize in tennis?**

**A:** For me I think that it is important for an athlete to develop a strong athletic base, so when they are young they play multiple sports. This is very advantageous for developing that whole movement vocabulary. I think that soccer will help, hockey, basketball, tennis, the more overall athletic skills you can develop the better. If you are looking to play at a high level, your major sport should start at around the age of 12-13. At this point your focus should be on what's required to move your game to an international level. The time has to be devoted to tennis.