

Interview with Hatem McDadi

Q: Before we ask specific questions, could you provide some context to this Q & A?

A: 2004 was the beginning of a new era for Canadian tennis. So many positive initiatives occurred last year, including the completion of the Rexall Centre and upgrades to the Uniprix stadium. Our distinguished board has turned its attention to accelerating tennis development in Canada by approving our new 2004-2008 strategic plan. In addition, our new President and CEO Michael Downey, and our new Board Chair, Jack Graham, have been leading the charge to ensure we meet our long term goals of being a leading tennis nation with ongoing Grand Slam, Olympic and Paralympic champions.

The above said, we must be able to face harsh realities. Our new strategic plan calls for an influx of an additional \$7-8 million in funding - money that will not be available in the immediate future. How will we deal with this and other realities? The following Q & A will reflect on the past, gaze to the immediate future of Player Development in Canada, discuss challenges and explain how we will implement the strategic plan during this exciting, yet challenging, time.

Q: How would you describe high performance success in the last four years?

A: Our last strategic plan (2000-2004) laid the foundation for our long term plan - building a system capable of producing Grand Slam, Olympic and Paralympic champions. We have made significant strides in laying this foundation. We are proud that more domestic tournaments are available for our top players, especially juniors who can compete against past and present Davis and Fed Cup squad members. We have enhanced the coaching and officiating system. On the wheelchair side, Canada now hosts 9 ITF sanctioned events that provide quality competitive opportunities for the national team members and rising stars. We are a national model for wheelchair integration and programming. Also, clubs and coaches are receiving more support. Other successes include: our ability to communicate effectively and the delivery of consistent value-driven programs as published in our handbook.

We are also proud of the success of many of our national teams. The Davis Cup team was in the World Group for the first time in over 10 years. The Fed Cup team had good runs and lost in the World Group Play-offs for the past three years. Our U16 Fed Cup team finished No. 2 in the world two consecutive years, while our U14 Fed Cup team finished No.3 in the world in 2003 and our Junior Davis Cup team finished no. 4 in the world in 2002. The World Team Cup, the equivalent of Davis and Fed Cup in wheelchair tennis, has consistently placed among the top teams in the world. In 2004 the men's team finished 4th in World Group 2, the women's team 4th in the world, and the quad team 5th in the world. Our Canadian team had a strong 2004 Paralympic and Olympic Games in Athens. And how could we forget Canada's golden moment in the 2000 Sydney Games. Many Canadians still reflect on Daniel Nestor and Sebatien Lareau's gold medal performance -- one of the greatest moments in the history of Canadian tennis.

These teams conducted themselves with pride and patriotism, displaying many courageous qualities as they represented Canada. Four years ago, our juniors competed in the Canadian Junior International tournament in Repentigny, and approximately twenty players lost in the first round. This year our top junior girls defeated the #1 and #2 world ranked juniors while many juniors were competitive in both draws. We now have seven juniors ranked in the top 100 ITF world rankings - this group of youngsters are the future of Canadian tennis. While other individual highlights are outlined in this publication, a

special tribute is in order for Daniel Nestor, who won the doubles at the U.S. Open and ended 2004 ranked as the no.1 male doubles player in the world!

Q: What challenges are currently facing Canadian tennis players?

A: Our current High Performance environment assists players, but falls short of providing the resources necessary to compete among the top tennis nations. We recognize we need to do more. The high cost of training, travelling and coaching makes it very difficult to pursue high performance tennis.

Tennis is recognized as one of the top two or three sports in Europe, Australia and South America. We do not have this luxury in Canada.

We are working hard to develop the proper resources to peel away the barriers that impede our top players from reaching their potential.

2005 will be a challenging year financially. While the new Rexall Centre and upgrades to the Uniprix stadium has helped secure our long-term well being, it has also meant Tennis Canada will be carrying an \$18 million debt into the next two quadrennials.

Q: How will Tennis Canada address these financial challenges?

A: Senior staff and board members have been working very hard to increase revenues to meet our short and long term high performance objectives. This includes increased revenue from the new Rexall Centre (Toronto stadium) and Uniprix Stadium (formerly Jarry Park).

We underwent organizational downsizing--Tennis Canada staff were reduced from 60 to 47--to save money for player development. As well, extensive fund raising plans are in the works to rally the friends of tennis. We hired Canada's leading fund raising consulting company - Ketchum Canada to help build a long term plan. Our goal is to raise \$10 million dollars to fund the tennis development strategic plan. This will not happen overnight - however, it is the right approach.

Q: What are the key areas of high performance development?

A: Canada, similar to many tennis nations, recognizes that five key components are necessary for high performance player development: proper training environment, proper competitive environment, excellent coaching, good talent ID, and proper sports science development. We have focused our energy on building these areas during the past four years.

Q: What is your current budget?

A: The success of the Rogers Cup and Masters Series Canada event has enabled us to assist many youngsters and teams and we are fortunate to have such successful events. The profits from these events support close to 75% of our budget. Sport Canada, ITF, sponsors, donations and other fundraising initiatives top up our tennis development budget.

The entire tennis development budget is close to \$3.5 million. Approximately 60% of this is used for High Performance player development. Running entry-level professional events, training centres, tours,

camps and coaching is not cheap! Our High Performance budget (roughly \$2 million) needs to triple or quadruple in order to fund a complete High Performance program. The Grand Slam countries have in excess of \$50 million available to develop the sport. France's U12 budget exceeds our entire Player Development budget. In addition, France runs 7 National Training Centres, hires national coaches for 36 regions, and offers over 30 professional entry-level events. We are competing against these countries, yet our resources are not comparable.

It is important to increase our resources and manage them wisely and effectively to compete amongst the world's best. We have touched some aspects of building a healthy system and assisting our top players. We have not dug deep enough - the resources are just not available at this time. Savings from recent staff cuts and revenues generated from fund raising and tournaments will be targeted toward supporting our top players, coaches and sport system.

Q: You talk about a new era for Canadian tennis, what are your plans for 2005?

A: We are very clear on what needs to be done to make life easier for aspiring Canadian tennis players and have a long-term plan in place. However, the long term plan identifies the end objectives - ones that are based on an influx of an additional \$7-8 million dollars. Clearly, we do not have \$7-8 million extra dollars. The question becomes how do we make sure we take care of our top athletes while we continue to build the long term plan?

Our 2005 annual plan includes recruiting, identifying and nurturing top talent in the system. We have a current group of young talented players that has been unprecedented. These youngsters need to be nurtured. Equally important is to recruit new young talented athletes to the game and ensure we identify top young talent within the club structure. Developing the national training centre(s) program will be a prime objective for 2005. Working together with the Provincial Associations and club leaders to ensure player's needs are met to become world champions is a key to moving forward.

A strong U12 system that includes using the Rogers Cup Men's and Women's event to recruit and identifying young talent to tennis is strategy #1.

Strategy # 2 will focus on the U12 club structure. Regroupings, camps, personal visits and developing fundamentals is a must. It is important that more U12 players develop an international profile to increase the odds of becoming the next Grand Slam or Olympic champion.

Strategy #3 will take an individualized approach for the 13+ aged athletes to nurture this talent. Using the National Training Centres, international tours and domestic competitive structure as tools to assist this group is outlined in our plan. A discretionary fund will be developed to assist this group too.

Similar long term planning development has occurred on the high performance wheelchair tennis side.

Hiring the best individuals to work with all of our athletes, aligning our budgets based on these needs mixed and spiced with some good fortune will ultimately determine our long term success.

Q: Who will work with the Athletes?

A: We currently have a great team of highly qualified and committed staff members. We are also looking to hire top international coaches to join this team and help us achieve our long term objectives.

Q: Do you have any final thoughts

A: Players should surround themselves with a strong support group including family, coaches, clubs, management agencies/agents, friends and private sponsors. National associations should lay the foundation for Player Development by creating an environment that allows players to reach their potential. Every stakeholder has a role in player development - working together is the key. It is important that players recognize this as they reach the higher ranks of professional tennis.

Lots of credit should be given to families, coaches and players for their ongoing commitment to excel at the highest level. The countless hours of training, familial and financial sacrifice endured by this committed group - often with modest assistance from Tennis Canada or the private sector - is our present reality. Many of these athletes have shown they are able to compete among the best in the world and their sheer effort, character and will has made this dream a reality for many aspiring juniors and pros. Our present group of youngsters have not had it easy, yet they possess an air of confidence. They are a special group with great potential and are the future of Canadian tennis. We were fortunate that the private sector raised money the last few years to assist our top talented players. More money entered the system via private fund raisers, clubs, management groups and charity events. Many thanks to our private sector friends for stepping up and assisting this group and sowing the seeds for many recent successes; especially the recent rise of many young talented female and male players, a historic crop of young talented players emerging into the Canadian tennis landscape.

On another note, there are misconceptions about Tennis Canada. Many people view Tennis Canada as an entity - it is easy to take shots at an entity. Tennis Canada is an organization of committed and passionate people who work extremely hard to run events and develop tennis across Canada. It has a face - the face of many committed staff and volunteers.

Another misconception is nothing is being done to develop players. Tennis Canada runs the Rogers Cup Men's and Women's event, which allow us to develop tennis across Canada. This includes operating, administrating or assisting the following programs: entry-level professional events, junior nationals, Davis Cup, Fed Cup, World Team Cup, Olympics, Paralympics, Pan Am Games, Canada Games, ITF wheelchair events, Junior Davis Cup, Junior Fed Cup, junior tours, player grants, TDCs, coach education, national camps, the college program and wildcards. 2005 will include talent ID/recruiting campaigns, U12 club development and the national training centre program.

All of the above support is assisting many players, coaches and clubs. What does that mean to a top junior, transition or Davis/Fed Cup team member? Our top juniors are able to access 16-18 weeks of junior tours/entry-level professional events, wildcard assistance into events we host, and close to \$20,000 of direct financial aid through various programs. On an average year, carded transition athletes playing Davis or Fed Cup are eligible to receive wildcard assistance to all our professional events (including the Rogers and Masters events), on-the-road coaching assistance, camps prior to Davis and Fed Cup ties, and financial assistance (ranging from \$30,000 - \$50,000) annually (including player grants, wildcards and Davis/Fed Cup compensation). We recognize that more needs to be done to become competitive with many leading tennis nations but there is a lot going on at this time that many people are not aware of. The above falls short of fully developing players since professional tennis is an expensive sport. Many top juniors and young pros spend over \$100,000/year to train and compete.

I encourage all tennis supporters to visit our web site and read our new strategic plan.

We look forward to your support and making Canadian tennis a leading nation that produces ongoing Grand Slam, Olympic and Paralympic champions.