

### **Interview with Jon Sorbo - Final part - 3**

**Q:What do you see as the greatest challenge to being on the road as a Coach?**

**A:** After the tennis and the training are done the challenge is to keep your player distracted and occupied. If he is on tour, he plays tennis for 2 hours and does 1 hour of fitness. There are still 21 more hours left in the day. He can't just sit around and think only about tennis. If he does that, he can grow mentally tired or stale. A good tour coach will find ways to keep his player stimulated and occupied from sources other than tennis. For instance, Frank enjoys playing chess, so I often bring a board with us on the road and we play against each other or against other players. Its fun and distracting all at the same time. I bring my computer along so we can watch DVD's or analyze some aspects of pro tennis. I also encourage Frank to watch matches with me - not too many - but it is a good idea to have the player and the coach watch some matches together

**Q:How do you keep yourself sane on the road Jon?**

**A:** Before Frank was older I was 50% coach and 50% baby sitter. Now that he is older I have my own hobbies and bring along books to read. Sometimes we watch tennis on TV. We get along really well, which is very important for two people spending enormous amounts of time together in a high-pressure atmosphere. It is not an easy part of pro tennis; it's definitely very challenging.

**Q:What do you do to balance your personal life with your life as a Coach?**

**A:** It is very difficult as I miss my family a great deal. If I am not coaching then I make it a point to spend all my time with my family. The longest I have ever been on the road is for 2 weeks at a time and that is because of my family. If Frank makes it to the finals of a Grand Slam, I could be away for up to 4 weeks, which could be very difficult. I think a traveling coach must put his family first and his player(s) second to maintain proper perspective and balance, not only for himself and his family, but also for the player. Being "over-involved" in your player's career is not healthy for anyone on the team. Balance must be cultivated and maintained.

**Q:How do you see your role when on the road?**

**A:** It is one of refinement and focus on the little things. All the major work has already been done. I never tinker with technique on the road. One mistake I see made daily at the pro level is coaches and players working with a technical focus during a tournament. Technique must be polished in a training environment away from competition, not during an important event. The exception would be a player who has unknowingly deviated from a solid technique that he or she was proficient at. Under these circumstances it is highly desirable to get the player back on the right track as soon as possible. Personally, when on the road I mostly work on the player's psychology and work on enhancing his confidence.

**Q:What type of match preparation do you do with Frank? Routine? When?**

**A:** After the match I make sure that a trainer stretches him out and a physiotherapist works on him as well. If no one is available I fill both these roles. We only have a short period of time to get the lactic acid out of his body. Then I ensure that he gets the carbohydrates and fluids back into him within one hour of

the match. Then he rests for a while. After he has rested, we prepare for the next day's match. First, I perform an abbreviated warm up with him. Since he is just coming out of match mode we need to focus on "clean hitting" again, so he does not get sloppy with his strokes. I find that tournament tennis over an extended period of time leads to players getting sloppy with their technique, so time must be set aside to clean up their strokes while they're in the midst of competing. The "cleaning" lasts for about 30-45 minutes only, focusing mainly on the tactics for his next match and hitting a clean ball.

**Q:Do you set up match objectives?**

**A:** We never set match objectives. At the development stage with a young player this would be a good idea to enhance the learning process. We try to maximize Frank's strengths, minimize his weaknesses, attack the opponent's weaknesses and stay away from the opponent's strengths in a match situation. 90% of the discussion between Frank and I is around what he wants to have happen or not have happen in the match. He obviously has his main tactics and contingency plans and he may have to come up with a plan C or D by himself in the match if necessary as well. If Frank is not in control of a match that is the other 10% that we work on afterwards.

**Q:Does he warm up with other players?**

**A:** He prefers to warm up with me. The only trade off is that if I am hitting with him, I can't be up close watching him at the same time. I prefer that he warms up with another player, as a player's ball will be heavier than mine and will more closely simulate the feeling that he will get in his match.

**Q:Which area do you feel is most important when on the road: psych, tact, tech, phys?**

**A:** Psychology is the most important. Preparing your player's confidence is huge. If I say the wrong combination of words or bring up technique at the wrong time I can do more damage than good. I use a special technique in the warm up before the match (the way I hit the ball and how I hit him the ball) that helps to raise Frank's confidence. Basically it is a "cleaning" warm up and a confidence building one. We also work on hitting the ball in the perfect position and at its ideal height. Since the warm up is performed a certain way, Frank comes off the court feeling confident and ready for the day's challenge.

**Q:How do you manage Frank's long-term plans, career on and off the court?**

**A:** I am Frank's Coach, Manager, and Agent. I have delegated the worldwide marketing to Octagon so that they can look after the business side of Frank's career, while I am free to help Frank play his best tennis. When Frank was a minor, his parents were very involved and they had final say in all the plans. Now that Frank is the age of majority, he makes all the decisions and we give his parents periodic updates.

**Q:Describe your relationship with Frank? Do you believe it is important to develop a personal relationship in addition to a professional relationship?**

**A:** Unfortunately (I am saying this in a nice way) it is multidimensional. We are good friends, almost best friends, as good as a 42 year old and a 20 year old can be. He is like family. He grew up in my house and my son regards Frank as a big brother. We also have a coach/student relationship. Truthfully, I wear too many hats. It is much easier to just have a coach/student relationship. It is easier for the student to just

hear things from a coach as opposed to a friend or family member. The trade off is that we have been able to maintain our relationship for a long period of time as a result of it being multidimensional. It is best to keep the distance as the lines get blurred. I always think that I could get more out of Frank on a professional level if we only had a coach/student relationship, but I feel really lucky to be so close with a great young man like Frank.

**Q: Do you believe in player independence? How do you foster this with Frank?**

**A:** Early on my belief was that if you worked with a 12 or 13 year old you should be with the player every day. This might be better at first because the player is a sponge and listens to every word being spoken as if it was "golden". Later they become less receptive because they see you too much and their attention gets dulled and he/she is not as eager to listen with the same intensity. I had a student named Joel Dechant that examined everything I said from six different angles, but that is very rare to find in a student.

I recommend that you work with a player 3 days a week and allow them to do other things during the remaining 3 days if you are working on a 6 day cycle. This way they are super focused when they work with you. Don't go to all their tournaments or competitions. I went to all of them to watch Frank because I didn't want to miss a thing. Visit the occasional tournament, make your notes and then work on things. Then later on as the player gets older you can spend more time with them and keep in closer contact.

**Q: What have you learned the most in the past 6 years with Frank- what advice would you give young coaches aspiring to coach at this level?**

**A:** The most important thing is commitment. It is most important how you feel towards the player and how much you care about what they are trying to do.

**Advice to Other Coaches:**

**Q: 1. What qualities do you believe are most important in a coach in order to develop a professional player?**

**A:** Again, commitment and communication is the key. Communication is very important because you may be the smartest coach and you may know everything in the world, but if you can't get it across to your student in a way that they understand it then the game is lost. Some players are more visual, others are more kinaesthetic, so you have to master several ways of communicating. From your first conversation with the player you must listen to how they phrase their questions and watch their eyes. You must teach them in a way they can learn best.

As far as commitment is concerned, I feel that if you do not spend at least two years with a serious player (one who is trying to become a professional), then you have to take a good look at yourself in the mirror and ask some tough questions. Two years is a good benchmark. If you get fired before then, or if you decide to leave your player before two years of working together, and this happens with all or most of the players you coach, then you need to do some soul searching about your career as a coach.

**Q: 2. For young coaches who aspire to work with a professional player... what advice would you give them?**

**A:** Work with a professional who is already developed and help them maximize what they are already good at. Once you have done this then you can circle around and come back and work with kids.

To be a high level junior coach or ATP coach you have to let them know of your own experiences as a player and that you talk their language and relate to them. This is not to say that you must have been a top player to be a top coach. Some coaches who were players are the worst coaches. Frankly, the higher their ranking as a player, generally the poorer their coaching is. Other coaches who have never played make very good coaches provided they can fill in the playing experience gap. They don't need to have played at the pro level to have talent. However, they have to be talented enough to learn how to communicate with their players in a way that the players will trust and respect them. They have to use their talent to see tennis through the player's eyes and understand them and feel what they are going through.

**Q: 3. Why do you love coaching?**

**A:** It comes easy to me. I always loved to play tennis and loved the tactical side of the game but the coaching seems to come easy to me.