

Interview with Louis Cayer on Methodology - Part 2

Q: Can you describe Tennis Canada's new coaching methodology?

A: The first thing to know is that our methodology is exactly in line with what the International Tennis Federation (ITF) is promoting world wide. It is based on 4 basic concepts that are widely accepted in the international tennis community.

The first Pillar in our teaching methodology is to consider tennis as an open skill. This area doesn't revolve around the technique of hitting a ball but instead the athlete's perception of the ball. The athlete first perceives the ball and makes a decision on what to do; it's only when you know what you are going to do with the ball that you can hit it with a specific technique. In this pillar "what to do precedes the how to do". The bottom line is that we develop all the open skills, which include anticipation, both partial and total anticipation; as well as recognition and reaction skills.

Technically our coaches are well equipped; we have a common vocabulary that will allow us to teach children across the country how to hit the ball properly, with the right spin, the right height and with the right depth.

The thing that is different here then in the past is that we used to emphasize projection skills, technique and how to hit the ball, now our focus is perception skills. This is one of the reasons we are getting away from basket feeds and more "live" or game like feeds. With a perfect feed you don't develop great perception skills, only technique.

The second pillar is the global approach. Global skills are internationally accepted, so we include them in our coaching methods. Players aren't just machines, they have to be developed mentally, and there is a thought process behind choosing certain shots. You also have to be able to train there ability to compete and understand their emotions. The global approach also emphasizes tactics; if the player makes a bad decision then you should correct the intension; there is no use correcting the technique. The last piece of the puzzle is the physical side.

The next pillar is not necessarily accepted internationally, but it compliments the first two pillars, the third pillar is called the game based approach.

There's a tendency for people to want to learn the stroke technique first before playing the game. Other people would prefer playing the game and then adjusting their strokes and improve their skills over time. It's similar to a sport, like soccer, where you alternate with one day of practice and one day of competition.

Many parents are taking the approach that their kids should be training for three or four years with lessons before starting to play matches. I believe it is better to have little leagues with special equipment for the kids to learn how to play and compete. We should also include workshops for kids at an early age so they do have a chance to practice the skills they learn and develop them in a fun simulated game situation with targets and points.

The main application of the game-based approach is to find the most frequent game situation you'll likely face. For example, when you are a beginner, you should focus on rallying. Whatever level of play

you are at, you must ask yourself, “What does the game require me to achieve at this point?” You are developing technique but always consider what the game is requiring of the player. What does the game require and how can we prepare our players to play the game better and it's very possible to develop sound technique throughout this process.

The fourth pillar, which is also universally accepted in the international community, is learner or athlete centered coaching. We're not in the business of coaching tennis. We're in the game of coaching people who play tennis. To be learner centered, we don't ask ourselves, “What am I going to teach today?” We ask, “What are you going to learn today?” It's a constant interaction where people have to agree on their objectives because if you don't, you won't be motivated to learn and you won't learn a lot. Ultimately, the goal of learner centered coaching is to evoke the emotion within the player to see what they want to learn in order to develop their skills more effectively. The opposite of learner centered is to be coach centered and that means you are very directive, you might say things like “I want you to do ... and the player would simply respond yes”. In this case coaches impose their will and give the players the solutions and tell them what “they” want. In our methodology, it's a cooperative approach between player and coach.

Q: Are there misconceptions about the game based approach?

A: With the game based approach, we are not just talking about special parameters that we place on the players to develop skills such as staying behind the baseline or no lobbing games. What we mean by games based is that they are able to learn the skills needed to become better players. In order to do this we create game-like situations, not just basket feeding. The game requires players to adjust to different balls, to anticipate and to perceive, this doesn't always happen with basket feeding.

Q: What is the misconception about Learner Centered Coaching?

A: People think that learner centered means the player always gets his way that the coach is at the “service” of the player. The coach can be: cooperative, confrontational or passive as long as he is being learner centered. You can be learner centered and be a tough coach, because if you care about your athletes and they have expectations then you have to be a strong source of direction for them. What learner centered means is that the coach has to be “directive” not a “dictator”. The biggest misunderstanding is that you are not “learner servant”, you don't always have to do what the learner wants.

Q: Why is important to have a coaching methodology?

A: There are three reasons why it is important to have a coaching methodology:

- 1) Coaches shouldn't just get information from the internet or books; they need to be able to interact with other coaches and a course conductor. The information is useless without learning how to use it.
- 2) Develop a vocabulary that can be used across the country. Players in Canada can go from city to city and TDC to TDC and understand the terminology.
- 3) A coaching methodology should inform coaches and give them suggestions on how to intervene and interact to advance the learning of the athlete. The methodology shows coaches the different ways you can develop skills, which allows for individualized training.

Q: How do you feel about having a methodology strongly connected with the development of world class players?

A: I like the question, but I will answer it a bit differently. For me, I think a learner centered or game based approach will help introduce kids to the game right away. A game based approach will develop players who enjoy competition and are better competitors because they have grown up in a system that has allowed them to compete a lot. I don't think it's very fun to just come in and take lessons.

Q: In which way is a global approach better?

A: I think we have the reputation of being too technical. Go into each session as though you are teaching performance and not just technique. Every time you're going to warm up, ask yourself if the player is focused, smart, technically sound. This will help develop more productive sessions.

Open skills are also important have. For example, open skill training is great for developing anticipation. The better you are able to anticipate your opponent's moves, they become more predictable and then there is less uncertainty in a match.

Q: What are the main arguments against coaching methodology?

A: Most people who haven't taken the course find the methodology to be complicated and the terminology confusing. Our books are based on course notes and there is no video to go with it, many people have difficulty understanding the information provided.

Many coaches have a "black and white" point of view where there is either a right way or a wrong way. They are not open to other possibilities.

Finally, I just want to say we are promoting what the ITF and the leading nations are promoting.