

Interview with Pierre Lamarche

Pierre Lamarche is the director of the ACE Tennis Academy at Cedar Springs Racquet Club in Burlington, Ontario. He is a former national champion, Davis and Federation Cup captain and Team Leader at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. Pierre has been a leading tennis coach for Canada for over 30 years.

Q: Pierre, who are some of the top players you've coached over the years?

A: Davis Cup players like Doug Burke, Grant Connell, Brian Gyetko, Daniel Nestor, Chris Pridham, Andrew Sznajder; Fed Cup players like Wendy Barlow (now Pattenden), Karen Dewis, Marianne Groat, Jill Hetherington, Helene Pelletier; National Champions like Jillian Alexander, Robert Janecek, Hatem McDadi, Katherine Rammo and current top players like Monika Lalewitz, Erika Perez, Tania Rice, Ekaterina Shulaeva, Diana Srebrovic and Robin Stevenson.

Q: Did you have a mentor growing up? What did you learn from them?

A: Mac Kerim, a former world squash champion from Egypt who was brought up in the court of King Faroud was my mentor. This tall, gentle man taught me how to think and act like a champion and how to conduct myself in different situations on and off the court. Most importantly, I learned the values of personal integrity and respect for others from him. Mac was a personal friend of all time great Australian coach, Harry Hopman, who I also learned from. Former top Canadian player Harry Fauquier really helped me with the mental side of tennis. Also, I learned from my players every day, for as much as I shaped them, they helped me to develop as well.

Q: You've had so much success as a coach. What are the highlights of your coaching career?

A: Seeing the players I've coached develop into great people, irrespective of tennis, is the greatest satisfaction I derive from what I do. To coach a kid and watch he/she grow up to be a well-rounded, productive and happy adult and to know that I had a positive impact on his/her development as a human being is the best feeling. These kids (some now in their 40's) are part of my tennis 'family' and will always be a big part of my life.

Q: Canada has had more success on the world stage in doubles rather than in singles. What do you think the reason for that is?

A: There are several reasons. I think Canadians play a style of tennis, due to fast indoor surfaces, that lends itself more to doubles than singles. A bigger reason is that 15 years ago, we realized that 90% of Davis Cup ties are won in doubles. So when Tennis Canada was developing a strategic plan for tennis development, we decided to really focus on producing successful doubles teams to help us win more Davis Cup ties. And we achieved that. To produce world class singles players, your focus needs to be quite different.

Q: Can you elaborate on that?

A: You need to establish what your objectives are. There is a big difference between what you need to do to produce a top 200 player versus a top 100 or 50 or top 10 player. You have to know what resources you have available. Each progressive level takes more of a financial commitment to achieve. In

my opinion, presently there simply aren't enough resources to implement nationally what needs to be done to produce top 10 singles players.

Q: What is needed to produce top 10 singles players? You have been successful in producing many national champions and world class players, most recently, Ekaterina Shulaeva who is one of Canada's top female juniors. How do you do it?

A: In order to produce champions, I believe you need to identify players when they are young, train them together and be subjective in your decision making. I feel very fortunate because at ACE, I have all of these elements. We have the sufficient number of courts, we have fitness facilities on-site and we have all our kids training with each other every day. Good coaching staff pooling their knowledge and consulting with experts (like Louis Cayer and Ari Novick) is crucial as well.

Q: Are you coaching any differently now than when you first started?

A: In the past, I had different clubs and businesses going so I would have other pros implement my coaching plans. Since coming back from Tunisia, I've made a huge effort in updating my technical coaching skills as well as how to train physically on and off the court. So I am much more of a 'hands-on' coach now. In fact, virtually all of my time right now is spent on court with the kids.

Q: So, how is your training time allocated at your academy?

A: We have about 30 kids at the academy right now. They spend 25 hours a week on the court, of which almost half is spent in private or semi-private lessons. That ratio between group practice and individual work is so important. There are also 5 hours of off court fitness that the kids do each week in addition to their on court training.

Q: What about practice matches and tournaments? How much do they compete and is there anything that you do that makes the practice matches more 'real'?

A: They play 2.5 – 3 practice matches per week. These are highly competitive because of the format that we've established that makes these matches feel more like real competition. Number one, the kids have to finish their matches and number two, we post the results. We also run about 40 tournaments a year at Cedar Springs so the kids get a lot of opportunities to compete.

Q: How often do you travel with your national level players?

A: I see them play at all of the tournaments that we host as well as nationals that are in the area and all of the selection and qualifying tournaments.

Q: Pierre, you've developed Katie into one of Canada's top female juniors. What qualities do you look for in a young prospect?

A: I look for someone who has the ability to commit to the game for the long term. I look for a resilient person who has a lot of fight. I look for someone who really wants to learn and I look for strength of character. The relationships I have with people are very important to me so a lot of my decisions are also based on feel and the sense I get of the kind of person I think they are.

Q: What qualities do you think are important to become a champion?

A: A player needs to have vision, they need to know where they want to go and never lose sight of that. So a commitment to the process is very important. They also need to have the raw physical skills that will get them there – they need to be able to move extremely well, that's number one and they need good hands.

Q: What qualities stand out in Katie? What helps her win more than others her age?

A: Katie is so committed to her process. There is a fire in her belly and she plays with a lot of heart. She is incredibly strong mentally. By that I mean she has the ability to fight and keep on fighting whatever the situation might be.

Q: What is your plan for Katie?

A: The plan is for Katie to be on the WTA Tour by the time she is 18 years old. That means there are still two years left, so we are in no rush. I think it is important for her to stay home with her family and for me to be with my family so travel has been minimal so far. We are working on her getting better tactically and technically every day. Psychologically and physically she is already very strong but that is more of a long term process.

Q: What does she need to do to get to the next level?

A: Katie needs more international exposure right now. We are planning on her playing 10 WTA tournaments in the U.S. in 2004.

Q: What are some of the challenges you are facing?

A: Well, in short, funding. It is so expensive to travel and she will need someone to travel with. We're working on that plan though. Sponsorship would really help.

Q: What is your relationship like with her parents?

A: It's very easy. They have a lot of confidence in me and that parental trust is so important. Katie's father was a professional soccer player so he really understands the respect that is needed between a player and coach. Her mother really understands Katie so their support means a lot.

Q: What is the best way a parent can help their child?

A: A parent needs to understand what tennis means to their child and that not every kid wants to be a world champion. The parents' commitment needs to match the child's. Tennis can bring so much to the development of an individual – it helps develop strong values, integrity and respect for self and others. You don't have to be a national champion or play tennis for a living to reap these benefits and parents need to understand that.

Thanks to Pierre for sharing his experiences and ideas.

