

Interview with Robby Menard

Robby Menard , Robby Menard is an owner and the Director of Tennis at the Menard/Girardin Tennis Academy, one of the longest running and most successful tennis academies in the country. He is a Tennis Canada Certified Coach 4 who has produced a number of national champions and international players; Simon Larose, Cristina Popescu, Stephanie Dubois and Jillian O'Neil, to name just a few.

Q: Robby, you run one of the most successful academies in the country. What would you say are the keys to your success from a programming perspective?

A: Having an annual plan and a vision are the most important keys. The plan gets adapted year to year based on the trends of modern tennis and what we observe from our players. Plans are also specific to the different age groups that we coach, as well as to the individual players themselves and the vision of excellence will be transmitted through the academy at every level.

Q: How long are your planning cycles and how might an annual plan for your top players differ from that of a developing junior?

A: Our year is divided up into macro-cycles which last anywhere from one to two months. The micro-cycles we change up about every two weeks. Planning for our top players is much tougher than for juniors. You have to be very detail oriented and since the players travel more, it only heightens the challenge of being able to plan well. For example, a player might have to transition very quickly from playing tournaments indoors, to playing outdoors in heat, in a very short time. So issues like fitness, coping with heat, dealing with changing weather conditions and surface changes are challenges we have to adjust for in practice all the time. With juniors who don't travel as much you just don't have those kinds of obstacles.

Q: Robby, tell us a little bit about your academy. How many coaches do you employ and how many kids are in your program?

A: We have a staff of about 15 coaches that look after approximately 40 kids every night. We actually run our program out of two clubs, one in Pointe-Claire as well as one in Ville St-Laurent .

Q: How do you ensure the quality of your coaches in an operation as large as that?

A: There are several important factors. First, most of our coaches are experienced Level 2 or 3 coaches, over 30 years of age. Second, with every change in our micro cycle, we have a meeting and we physically get on court with the coaches for a minimum of one hour, where we go over plans and then spend time improving our skills. For example, we will watch a lot of video to improve our eyes and to stay on top of the latest trends that are evolving on tour. Third, we make sure our coaches improve their knowledge by bringing in experts to consult on fitness, for instance, and we ask a lot of questions. Louis Cayer and Tennis Canada are an important resource as well.

Q: Is there anything else you would add to that?

A: All of the coaches report directly to me, so a consistent standard is maintained and everyone is on the same page as far as what we expect in terms of quality and professionalism. I treat my coaches with

respect and I feel like that is reciprocated. It is absolutely a team effort and everyone has an important part to play. What I have found to be extremely important as well is to have measurable objectives for our coaches and not just our players. That involves things like keeping stats and charting, which might seem a bit dry, but it works.

Q: It sounds like careful planning and sound organization are definitely two important keys to the success of your academy. How did you develop these skills?

A: My academic background in sports science without a doubt gave me a great foundation. It was this background that initially brought me together with Louis Cayer to assist him with players like Grant Connell, Glenn Michibata, Martin Laurendeau and Chris Pridham. It was a special group and an incredible learning environment for me. Everyone in the group had a lot to offer and we all gained from that experience. That was the beginning of my career in the tennis industry.

Q: What advice would you have from someone starting their own tennis academy?

A: Put together a good team. That means individuals with a similar vision and level of passion and commitment since the work can be grueling and the hours, long. A good balance of strengths is vital as well. No one person can do it all on their own and expect to maintain a level of excellence in all the different facets that are involved with running an academy. That includes fitness experts, nutritionists and psychologists on the training side and lawyers and accountants on the business side. I strongly believe in 'growing' your own players. By that I mean starting kids off when they are young and developing them in house. We run about 6-8 tournaments a year, mostly during the summer, and they are all geared towards the younger age groups. Our coaches we try to sign for a minimum of two years. This ensures continuity and the kids have the opportunity to change coaches over the course of their development and still stay within the same organization. I find this fosters an extremely positive atmosphere where everyone has the good of the academy at heart.

Q: So, what are some of the problems that you deal with? For instance, what challenges do you face with your coaches?

A: Sometimes the goals of the individual coach differ from what is possible for them to do. An example would be when a coach is very keen and wants to travel with the high performance players. That might not always be possible if there happen to be very few players in that situation. Those numbers vary from year to year. Some cycles produce a lot of top players and some don't. In that situation, it might be difficult to keep that coach, because his/her personal goals aren't being met.

Q: What about the kids? How do you make each player feel important in such a large group environment?

A: We have a 'service plus' policy. That means that each coach is assigned to look after four to eight players for the whole year. That means that the coach will keep in touch with the parents, travel to the tournaments these kids play in, provide private coaching...in other words, all the little details that go along with making a player and their family feel like they're taken care of.

Q: Within that framework, how do you handle fairness issues like who gets to train with the top coach?

A: These are subjective decisions to a large extent and are based more on the potential we feel a player might have. We try to be very honest with the players and their parents so that they know that we have the players' best interests at heart. It's not always easy but for the most part, the parents and players respect the decisions we make because we treat them with respect also. A particular player and coach might have a good rapport, so we would keep them together. I've mentioned before that players might need a change, and they switch coaches, in the course of their time with us, and that's fine too.

Q: How do you create a disciplined environment?

A: We have very simple rules. We encourage the kids to be themselves. From there, it becomes very clear who the most committed kids are, and we keep them together. I find that putting kids together based on their level of commitment, and not just their level of play, is a good way of determining who trains together and with what coach. Also working on the parents themselves to ensure that they really believe in our way of thinking is crucial.

Robby, we thank you for your time and valuable insight.