

Interview with Rufus Nel

Rufus Nel is the Director of Racquet Sports at Hollyburn Country Club in Vancouver, B.C., which has a total membership of over 7000 people. A Certified Coach 3, Rufus has been at Hollyburn for the past 8 years. Originally from South Africa, Rufus began his coaching career over 20 years ago. He is also a Course Conductor for Tennis Canada's new Club Pro stream of education.

Q: What do you do at your club that you are most proud of?

A: We are constantly challenging ourselves to come up with new ideas and setting the bar higher in terms of our programming and customer service. For example, we have had great success with programs that combine tennis with swimming, skiing, mountain biking or golf. These are usually one week classes that run during the summer. We've also modified the ladder idea into a 'Compass' Ladder where the players are grouped into four smaller sections and then the top and bottom people in each section move around the ladder.

Q: What about the customer service side? What have you done there?

A: We've recently initiated a 'Scooby Doo' program geared towards our 6-9 year olds. We sent out a personal letter to every 6-9 year old in the club outlining our junior tennis program and inviting them to join. The kids could also order the 'Scooby Doo' package that consists of a colouring book, tennis balls and a T-shirt. The response was tremendous. The children loved getting a letter addressed to them and the parents really appreciated the personal attention and the extra step that we took. Of course, Scooby Doo was a big hit as well.

Q: It sounds like a lot of thought and care went into coming up with a program like that. Where do you get your ideas from?

A: My first reaction to whatever we do at the club is "How can we make it even better the next time?" That philosophy drives me to keep updating my knowledge and looking for new ways to make tennis even more exciting and fun for our members. I draw my ideas from so many different sources: marketing, finance, organizational behaviour and business management courses, as well as the USPTA have all been wonderful resources.

Q: Has there been an individual in your life that has helped you along your career path?

A: As far as tennis goes, I never really had a mentor. I do consult on a regular basis with a business man with respect to marketing plans, organization and management related topics.

Q: To what else do you attribute the success of your tennis section?

A: I work extremely hard at maintaining a very high profile at the club. I want my members to know that I am available whenever they need me and that I am willing to discuss any concern with them personally. The days get long but the members appreciate our 'open door' attitude towards customer service. Also, I think our members appreciate the long standing relationships that they have formed over the years with not only me, but the five other pros that have worked with me since I first started here at the club.

Q: What are some of the challenges that you face at your club?

A: Our tennis coordinator, who was really the go-to person when it came to many issues regarding the day-to-day operation of the tennis section, has recently moved on to a new position, and that has created a lot of extra work. Getting off the court is challenging for me as well. When members are used to seeing you on court a lot they expect you to be there all the time.

Q: What about your pros? What's the challenge with them?

A: Since all of my pros are on contract, it's difficult to ask them to take on extra responsibility. However, I feel that in order to improve as a pro, you can never be satisfied with the status quo. Not if you want a career in the tennis business. It's too difficult to keep up a lesson load of 6-8 hours a day. By the time you're in your 40's, it gets very taxing on your body. Not to mention the ceiling you hit in terms of salary. So I'm constantly encouraging my pros to come up with programs that would require less physical effort and give them a foundation to move on in the tennis world if that's what their goals are.

Q: What other advice would you have for pros looking to get ahead?

A: Don't focus on just one area within the tennis section. For instance, if most of your time is spent with juniors, make a point to attend adult programs and functions as well. That includes on and off court events like socials and mixers. Be seen. Familiarize yourself with management and be willing to attend meetings. It's easy to become very comfortable in a role and to get complacent.

Q: What qualities do you consider important in your staff?

A: It depends on the position. Besides good people and communication skills, the individual needs to be able to relate to the group they're working with. For example, a high performance coach needs to be extremely energetic and willing to spend a lot of time on court. Different qualities are needed to coach a ladies league team, for example, or very young children. The pro really needs to be able to play the part and be flexible depending on who they're working with.

Q: How can pros maintain a good working relationship with their Head Pro?

A: Communicate any concerns immediately. I hold weekly group meetings with all my pros and individual half-hour meetings with each pro every week as well. This way, everyone is on the same page with what we're doing and it ensures that any issues get cleared up right away. It also creates a good team atmosphere where everyone is working together. My pros know that I am committed to them and I feel that loyalty is reciprocated.