

## Interview with Sylvain Bruneau - 2007

As our women's National Coach, Sylvain Bruneau has worked with the likes of Jocelyn Robichaud and Marie-Eve Pelletier. With a wealth of international experience, Sylvain talks about developing talent in Canada.

**Q: Sylvain, what got you started in tennis?**

**A:** From a young age, I really enjoyed the game. I thought it was a beautiful sport and started playing more and more. Eventually, I started coaching as I love working with younger kids. I found that I had a passion for teaching, and I was able to get youngsters to play and enjoy tennis. After teaching for two or three years, I was given the opportunity to work with the High Performance Academy as an assistant coach in Repentigny. I was 22 at the time, it was a great opportunity that grew and grew, and I eventually became the Head Coach after only a year and a half. The Quebec Tennis Federation asked me to travel with Sébastien Lareau and Greg Rusedski when they were U14s. Tennis Canada then asked me to do some things for them, and that was 15 years ago.

**Q: What is your role with Tennis Canada?**

**A:** I was named the Woman's National Coach on April 1st 2005. I am in charge of the woman's side from our top pro players, which right now is Marie-Eve Pelletier to our top U14 players. I am also Fed Cup Coach. I travel a lot with our transition players and professional players to tournaments. I also take our junior players to International tournaments. I spend a lot of time on their development and communicating with their coaches, with regards to their performance and future development. My time is split about 50/50 between the junior players and the pro players, whether it's traveling to challengers or trying to get them into other tournaments.

**Q: How does your international experience help you fulfill your role?**

**A:** Having the opportunity early in my career to travel to tournaments and see players outside of Canada and how they competed was of the highest value. I was able to observe countries like France and Germany. I then implemented some of their techniques with our juniors at home in Canada. If you are going to be involved with developing players at the International level you should put yourself out there, see what others are doing and exchange ideas with other coaches. I was lucky to have this opportunity early in my career.

**Q: What are some of the training tendencies (habits) of the top world juniors and how do they compare with those of our Canadian players?**

**A:** I would like to see our young players train more often on slower courts, I feel this would be to our advantage; our players seem to lack consistency. Slower courts would help them develop consistency because the points are longer. Tennis is going in the direction of faster and more powerful, but at a young age it is important to develop the fundamentals and the consistency. This is something other countries seem to do better than us. Because of the surface we use, our players seem to be able to hit the ball hard but cannot keep it in the court long enough. From the age of 9 to 14 we really need to focus on this part of learning the game and how to play a point.

**Q: Are there any players that you have seen that would be great models for our players?**

**A:** All the girls here at the Roger's Cup are! One of the best examples would be somebody like Anastasia Myskina. When she was a junior she was very consistent, had good fundamentals and a very simple game, as she grew, she was able to hit the ball harder, play a more aggressive game and develop herself physically. Myskina eventually became a French Open Champion but looking at her when she was 14 it would have been hard to predict. This is an example of a girl who systematically kept improving her game, however let's be clear, she was a very good player at the age of 14 but nothing that would have led you to believe that she would eventually become a Grand Slam Champion.

**Q: On the court what do the best players look like?**

**A:** Our coaches need to put a real emphasis on developing fluid strokes, there is a certain ease or rhythm at which many top players hit the ball. A lot of our kids are really trying hard to hit the ball; they are being really physical and trying hard to accelerate the racquet. You feel that they are trying too hard, their body is tense, and their arm is stiff. If you look at the top players, they generate a lot of power but they are able to do that with fluid and relaxed swings. This is something our coaches really need to emphasize.

**Q: What must be the priority of our Canadian coaches when developing athletes?**

**A:** We need to focus on starting our players at a very young age because they need to get the proper instruction early on. By a young age I mean they need to have started by the age of 5 or 6 and by the time they are 8 or 9 they need to have good fundamentals and by the age of 12 they should look like "little professionals". We often find ourselves in a situation where we are playing catch-up tennis. It's nice to be positive and think that we can always improve and that we have time but if I look at this tournament (Rogers Cup) I don't see many players that weren't doing very well at the age of 14. We always like to talk about the exceptions like Patrick Rafter who developed later, but especially in the women's game, they have to be playing at an international level by the age of 14 or 15. It is essential that we aren't playing catch-up at this age.

**Q: Can you walk me through the "development schedule" of a top professional like Justine Henin-Hardenne?**

**A:** Well I never saw Justine play at the age of 8 or 9, I have talked to her coaches and I've seen video and I can tell you for a fact that she could hit the ball very well at the age of 9. I watched her play Marie-Eve Pelletier at the Orange Bowl in Florida in the quarter finals and she was a tremendous player. She went on to win the Jr. French by the age of 15 and eventually became number 1 in the world. I can assure you that when Justine Henin was 12, she had all the strokes already it was just a matter of continuing to develop them. She could volley, she could serve, she could slice she could hit an overhead and she had all the proper grips. Everything was in place already; this is something we can't develop when our players are 15 or 16.

**Q: What does a top junior's daily or weekly schedule look like?**

**A:** With Marie-Eve Pelletier by the age of 14 she was already playing twice a day as well as doing fitness. She had two and a half hours of group lessons and 1 hour of private lessons on a daily basis. I

think we overlook the benefit of individual private lessons where you can really focus on the player's technique and develop their strokes. I believe in group training too, it's a great environment for them to compete and play points but too many of our Canadian players spend a big portion of their time in group training as opposed to personalized training.

**Q: Financially it must be difficult to do so many group and private lessons?**

**A:** I was fortunate with Marie-Eve that the club provided an opportunity to do group lessons on a daily basis and by the age of 11 Marie-Eve was very good and was able to receive funding from Tennis Canada.

**Q: Does this involve sacrifice from the coach?**

**A:** I did. I was young and single and I was able to charge a little less for my time but that was a personal choice. It depends on the coach's objectives at the time, I was very committed to Marie-Eve's development and if I was unwilling to make sacrifices then Marie-Eve might not reach her full potential. I understand that some coaches have other commitments (family) and are unable to make these kinds of sacrifices. However, this is what needs to be done; both the player and the coach must be willing to sacrifice. In a perfect world the coach shouldn't have to but we don't live in a perfect world.

**Q: What does their physical training schedule look like?**

**A:** Very specialized, early on you don't train them the way you would a swimmer or a rower, it has to be sport specific. Too many of our players work on general fitness, they may go for a thirty minute run which isn't bad but they need to be specific. Going back to Marie-Eve at a young age she played other sports, soccer is a fabulous sport to develop footwork. Many European players up until the age of twelve or thirteen play other sports to develop skills.

**Q: How important is it for a young player to have tough competition?**

**A:** So important. So important because being a competitor is as important as how you hit the ball. The only way you can develop this is by playing matches. It's one of the weaknesses of our country. We don't play enough matches! We need to make sure especially early on that our athletes are exposed to more competitive opportunities both domestic and international.

**Q: What must a Canadian player do to find tough competition?**

**A:** You can organize matches within your club by having teams; there is no easy answer; you just to make it happen!

**Q: Is it okay for a young player to play matches with adult members at their club?**

**A:** Sure as long as it is competitive. It's good but you want them to play matches that matter, tournaments and competitions.

**Q: What advice can you give to our Canadian coaches who are working with talented young players?**

**A:** My advice is that the early years are the most important; our coaches need not be afraid to work with players when they are young. We get ourselves into situations where we send our players overseas and they are already behind. This is not the way we want to start, it is very important to have programs at the clubs where they can play at the age of 6-7-8 and have fun while still learning. We tend to do this too late, this is even more important for women who are expected to compete professionally at a young age. We think they can improve when they are 15 or 16 and some do, but this should not be our model. A good coach can train a young player in a pressure free environment and make it fun and still develop all the things the player will need later on.