

Interview with Wayne Elderton - 2007

Q: To start can you give me an overview of your career in tennis?

A: I started in 1978 as a Parks & Rec Instructor and also helped out at summer camps at my club. All my friends were getting summer jobs at McDonalds or gas stations, so I thought tennis was a much better choice. From there, I continued at my club and moved from part time to full time. I took an assistant pro position with Bob Moffatt to learn more about being a full-time coach. I got my first Head Pro job in 1984 and continued doing the same old stuff until Louis Cayer came to BC in 1987 and forever changed my tennis coaching world. I was a Head Pro at two other clubs until I was appointed to my current position as tennis Director of the Grant Connell Tennis Centre in North Vancouver in fall 1999. It was a great opportunity to get involved in a public facility from the ground floor. I am also the Head Course Conductor for Coaching Certification in BC (since 1995). As I became more expert at the Actions approach, I began to write coaching material and articles for Tennis BC, Tennis Canada, Tennis Australia, the ITF and the PTR.

Q: How do you account for your success in tennis?

A: I attribute my success to being mentored by Louis Cayer, who imparted to me a passion for coaching excellence. I always seek to understand all his work and find it is the best and most effective coaching approach in the world. My analogy is this: I am an average carpenter (coach) but I know how to use a great set of power tools (the Actions method). You may be a better carpenter than me, but if you are using a screwdriver to put up walls, I will always put them up better and faster with my power tools.

Q: What new innovations in tennis have you been involved with?

A: My main contribution has been in coaching and coaching coaches. As the actions method has evolved, I have been honoured to contribute and innovate. I feel my role is to make the approach more accessible, understandable, and simpler so more coaches can use it. Many of the contribution I have made have been adopted and spread around the world. It is always neat when you read some article from another country and see them quoting your material. It is a great feeling to impact how tennis is taught and know you are improving the sport. I started my www.acecoach.com website to share some of the things I have learned.

Q: What innovative tennis programs do you offer at the Grant Connell Tennis Centre?

A: The unique thing about GCTC is that it has the full spectrum of tennis programming. From 6 year old Mini-Tennis to seniors, recreational to high performance, wheelchair and coaching certification, we do it all. Some of our most unique programs would be our national player training in the afternoons which includes nationally ranked juniors and our international wheelchair players. We also have what I call the 'seamless path' of clinics, and leagues, to systematically move someone from a 1.0 to a 3.5 level of play. Some of our drill programs are also very popular like our ATP, which provides an extremely time-flexible program. ORC is going to try it out this fall so I will be interested to see if it works in a commercial club environment.

Q: What will tennis programs look like in the future?

A: I think programs in the future will have more creativity and variety. In this customer service oriented environment, they will have to meet the needs of the participants since there are so many choices for people these days.

Q: How do you balance a participant's need to improve with his/her desire to have fun?

A: In the new upgraded instructor course, I have included the concepts of enjoyment and improvement. Both make the critical foundation for coaching. If a player only improves, but has no enjoyment and doesn't develop a love for the game, they will not push through the challenging times everyone faces while developing. If they only 'have fun', they may also lose motivation as the game will always be too challenging for them and they will build no momentum of success. If a coach can include both enjoyment and improvement, players will play for life and become the best they choose to be.

Q: What is your court utilization?

A: At GCTC we are running at 98% capacity during the winter months. In the summer, there are fewer bookings (since we are indoor only) but the programs run at full guns all year long. We try to balance court booking with programming by sticking to a percentage split of 70% total court time weekly reserved for court booking and 30% for growing the game.

Q: How do you account for this court utilization rate?

A: It is a nice facility with 6 permanent indoor courts and very reasonable court fees (\$18.50 per hour). The atmosphere we create is positive, friendly, and accessible. It is basically a great place to play. Also, all our programs feed into people playing.

Q: In your experience what are some good ways to attract new members?

A: The start is to have a great 'hook' program. Many provincial associations (PSO) have such programs where the PSO, a racquet manufacturer, and the facility can partner together to create a win-win scenario for everyone. In BC we have Tennis 1-2-3. It is 8 hours of instruction, a free Wilson racquet, and a free court booking, all for \$90.00. Our best coaches teach the program to ensure quality. The important component is that there must be seamless follow-up to leagues or the next level of clinic. Most clubs make the mistake of giving a beginner program, and then say, "now join us". They fail to realize beginners rarely join clubs as it's too much of a financial commitment relative to their commitment to tennis. Clubs need to provide the 'seamless path' I mentioned above to get players up to a 3.0 level of play (I have found that is the level where players commit to join clubs).

The other key component is who is your front-line staff? Clubs tend to try to save money by hiring inexperienced front desk staff. These people are your club to all who come in. Hire for attitude. Hire people who can maintain a good environment. This goes for your coaches as well. Our coaches have 2 rules: #1: Private lessons are a last resort (get people into programs to make relational connections and accommodate more players) and, #2: 'Sell' the next program (everyone should be given a 'vision' of how they can continue developing).

Q: Now how do retain those new members?

A: Retention and attraction are together. The items I mentioned above retain as well as attract. The glitch is when clubs see them as different things.

Q: What advice do you give to instructors who want to separate themselves from the crowd?

A: They will be an excellent coach if they master the actions method. I have seen it transform many coaches from poor to adequate, adequate to good, good to great. It is by far the best tennis methodology in the world. This is the direction every 21st century coach is going. Get there as soon as you can. Also, have a passion for developing yourself. Become the best coach you can be. If it is about the money, or just a 'job', you have hit your ceiling already. Passion and expertise will set you apart.

Q: If you could share one piece of information that you have gained over the years with the rest of the country what would that be?

A: A recent North American study showed the biggest growth market in tennis was the Pacific North West. BC was a big part of that, and GCTC is a key player in that. I believe if you build it right, they will come!