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Masters of Their Domain

Components of the best coaches

by Karl Summer

The only way to begin any story listing the best...is to cop a plea. While every effort has been made to compile a comprehensive, insightful roster of international tennis coaches the inventory will fall short. There is certain to be an individual or two who has been overlooked. To those a sincere apology is extended.

Moving from a request for understanding to justification, a worldwide group of authorities, fellow coaches, federation administrators and players provided input for this piece. Their opinions form the basis of the best tennis coaches list. It should also be mentioned that most, but not all of those mentioned, work with players on the ATP or WTA Tours.

Broadly speaking, a coach is part guru, mystic and psychologist. The occupation also calls for technical and tactical understanding as well as mentoring and parenting skills. In short, it's at times a daunting thankless task. A job that many feel they could easily assume, yet all too few have what it takes.

Qualifying as one of the best was both a quantitative and subjective exercise. Results, as all contributors stated, are the best measuring stick. Production, however, was not the sole source for inclusion. Those on the list possess many of the qualities that those consulted termed essential.

Total commitment (here the old cliché 'giving 110 percent' is applicable) is a major component. It's not simply being a traveling companion, enjoying financial gain and the accompanying Tour perks. For those at the top, coaching is consuming.

Responsibility is another issue. A coach must assume responsibility for all that happens. Not only for what is currently taking place, but also in the future. This involves developing realistic objectives and a plan for achieving them.

Honesty forms the core of a player/coach relationship. Communication makes it happen. As one source said, "A coach has to tell a guy when he sucks." Directness creates respect and a coach either has it or doesn't. It's a must and is an outgrowth of discipline. Some people try to be disciplinarians and they don't have respect. Without respect a coach can kiss off being successful.

A player needs to see progress. Improvement keeps circumstances fresh, so does winning. Creativity also plays a role in keeping the excitement, which requires continually finding aspects of a player's game to work on. Even more critical, a coach must have the ability to realize when and how to push a player. Being good is not enough, particularly when the performer has the ability to be great.

Bottom line, coaching is at least 80 percent confrontational. Continually asking—why?—

brings this about. Still, a coach needs to fit his or her style to a specific player to make the equation work. The idea is to solidify strengths and fortify weaknesses.

A final thought—not all player/coach matchups are made in heaven. The key is having the all around ability to minimize stress and maximize talent.

Who? *Unknown to outsiders but insiders know how good they are:*

Ian Barclay—has made an impact with the Brits evidenced by Samantha Smith's Wimbledon run.

Daria Kopsic—feisty, fiery and gets girls on the right track as work with ITF team, including Cara Black and Irina Seljutina, brings out.

Gail Lovera—the former Aussie is one of France's secret assets when it comes to the development of the new generation of women.

Tomas Petera—Petr Korda's clock still hasn't reached midnight because Petera is such a good repairman.

Peter Pfannkoch—the Germans have Nicolas Kiefer and Tommy Haas along with several other promising performers because of his work with them in their junior days.

Alberto Riba—responsible for upgrading the level of coaching in Spain.

Alex Reynders—Jacco Eltingh, Paul Haarhuis and Sjeng Schalken are not household names and neither is he.

Richard Schönborn—renowned for applying sports science to tennis.

Brett Stephens—the former Aussie Rules fitness buff brings adventure and flair to the trials of the Tour as the likes of Byron Black and Sandon Stolle can support.

Donnie Young—made the difference when it came to Kimberly Po's top 20 rise.

Frank Zlesak—plays a major role in the continued success of youngsters from the Czech Republic.

In The Game: Hiroyuki Banba (Naoko Sawamatsu's coach); Charlton Eagle; Hugo Ekker; Alejandro & Carlos Gattiker; Patrice Haguleur; Nicolas Kelaidis; Jun Kuki; Junichi Maruyama; Kaoru Maruyama; Eiji Takeuch. TW