

Contemporary Issues Facing Tennis Coaches: a Pilot Study

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Coaching, at all levels, is a stressful activity. One only needs to open the daily newspapers to read about the latest sacking of a high profile coach, or a coach who is under scrutiny because his or her team/player is not performing to expectations. Recently, in Australia, the UK and the USA, a number of high profile coaches have been in the spotlight regarding their health, including cardiac arrest and cardio-vascular related illnesses, and stress related symptoms.² Demands from the public, governments, sporting associations, sponsors, media and even coaches themselves placing stress on the job has been suggested as factors leading to their decrease in personal health.

But what of coaches who are not coaching at the high performance level? In Australia, for example, the majority of sports coaches are voluntary, with only a small percentage of coaches being full-time paid professionals. Tennis, on the other hand, is one of only several sports where the majority of coaches are predominately professional.¹ However, similar to many sports, the majority of these coaches work at the participation (club) level, and many tennis coaches never coach (nor necessarily intend to coach) an elite junior or tour-

ing player. So do club tennis coaches experience stress? And what issues do they have to deal with to remain in tennis coaching?

In view of the increased demands in coaching emanating from sources listed above, the aim of this pilot study was to begin to identify issues of concern to club coaches, both from a personal and/or "worldly" perspective. This was intended as a forerunner to a sport-specific investigation of stress and its causes and to provide possible strategies to the responses drawn out from the coaches forums conducted independently in two States in Australia, at separate times.

Method

Following consultation with Tennis Coaches Australia and its branches in Western Australia and Victoria, Tennis West and Tennis Victoria, an open invitation was made to coaches to attend a forum in their state conducted by the investigators. Forums were organised independently of each other approximately one month apart at the respective state tennis headquarters with nine club coaches attending in Victoria and twelve club coaches in Western Australia. The majority of participants were men for whom coaching was their sole source of income. The work arrangements of the coaches ranged from those who coached exclusively with one club to those who worked for several clubs and schools. No information was taken on the participants experience level.

Given that the states are approximately 3000 km apart, there was no reported contact between the participants.

A light meal was served to allow the coaches

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to fit the forums into their busy schedules. The forums were conducted using an instrument known as Nominal Group Technique.³ Table 1 summarises the steps taken using the Nominal Group Technique by the investigators to facilitate the forums; this was based on a version used by the Coaching Foundation of Western Australia in the late 1990s in the development of its strategic plan. One of the investigators acted as facilitator at both forums. The Nominal Group Technique combines both individual responses and group discussion to identify issues, followed by group discussion to formulate strategies. Further to information in

Table 1, explicit instructions were given to participants to respond to each step in any direction they felt; there was no "right" or "wrong" response; and facilitators did not intervene or provide suggestions at the risk of biasing participants at any stage. A laptop Nominal Group Technique computer and data projector were used for steps 6 and 7. The distinction of using Nominal Group Technique over other facilitated methods is the freedom the participants have in expressing their concerns. The investigators had no direct influence on responses provided by participants.

Using this technique, the forums in each state lasted approximately two hours.

Results

Table 2 and 3 illustrate all the responses given, votes and the ranking order from participants in each group. Victoria club coaches identified (or highlighted) on 23 issues of concern, and Western Australia club coaches identified on 17 issues. When considered together, ten issues were common to the two groups. Table 4 illustrates the similar issues identified and the ranking order of importance between the two groups. Other notable issues raised, but not common between two groups included.

Table 1 Nominal Group Technique – method of facilitation (Modified from Mitra & Lankford, 1999)

STEP 1	INDIVIDUALLY identify four (4) to six (6) issues related to coaching tennis that you consider need attention.	10 minutes
STEP 2	IN PAIRS discuss the issues raised by each other then consolidate your two lists into one list of four (4) to six (6) issues.	10 minutes
STEP 3	IN GROUPS OF THREE TO FIVE compare the results from Steps 1 and 2 and compile a list of issues identified by group members. It may be necessary to reword some of them quite distinct.	15 minutes
STEP 4	EACH INDIVIDUAL ranks the issues listed in Step 3. The most important issue is ranked 1, the second most important is ranked 2, etc	10 minutes
STEP 5	THE WHOLE GROUP (up to 20 individuals) then compiles a table of the issues raised by each group in Step 3. The best way to do this is as a 'round robin', that is, each group takes it in turn to add one of their issues until all the issues have been listed. The list could be very long.	20 minutes
STEP 6	EACH INDIVIDUAL has 10 votes to allocate to the issues listed in Step 5. Each individual must allocate votes to at least four (4) issues.	10 minutes
STEP 7	The votes for each issue in Step 7 are summed and ranked. The issue with the highest score is ranked 1, the issue with the second highest score is ranked 2, and so on.	15 minutes
STEP 8	GROUPS OF FOUR OR FIVE develop strategies to address the top six issues raised in Step 7. (Alternatively, each group may be allocated a specific issue for which to develop a strategy.) NOTE: When two or more issues receive the same score, the rankings are averaged. For example, Issues 5, 6, and 7 all receive 15 votes to rank number 2. Rankings 2, 3 and 4 are averaged to give a rank of 3 to Issues 5, 6 and 7. The next highest score is ranked 5.	

Table 2 (TCA Victoria, n = 9)

Items	Total	Ranking
Club coach relationship - job security, committee, business ownership	20	1
Opportunities for coaches to exchange ideas	11	2
School-based curriculum programs - e.g. TIS -	10	3
Improve link between schools, clubs and coaches, Ace tennis etc	8	= 4
Insurance		
Good will/handover	8	
Ongoing education of coaches - PDP	7	= 6
Marketing of business - advertising, developing business	7	
Education of parents and clubs in the community of coaches and their roles	6	8
Game base link to technique in coaching	4	= 9
Marketing the game - provision of resources and pathways	4	
No clear pathway for coaching careers	3	= 11
Retention of pupils	3	
Lack of role-models (players) and profiles compared to other sports	3	
Support and guidance from governing bodies (TA, TV)	3	
Closer relationships between coaches	2	= 16
Improved communications between coaches and players	2	
Education coaches coaching other cultures	2	
Coaching communication with people from other cultures	2	
Liaise between TCA administration and all coaches	1	= 20
Clarification of coaching providers	1	
Coaches image (more professional)	1	
Emphasis on all-round coaching- pre-match preparation, on-court activities, post-match analysis	1	
The recognition of the experienced coach - value to give to the game	1	

TIS = Tennis In Schools; PDP = Player Development Program; TA = Tennis Australia; TV = Tennis Victoria; TCA = Tennis Coaches Australia; WA = Western Australia.

- Opportunities to exchange ideas (ranked 2 in Victoria group)
- Good-will in selling tennis business (ranked 4 in Victoria group)
- Use of unqualified coaches (ranked 5 in Western Australia group)

Discussion

This study was designed to investigate issues of concern to club coaches. With two forums conducted independently of each other, using the same technique, and using only club coaches in both samples, it was noteworthy that a number of similar responses were elicited from both groups. This suggests that, rather than specific local issues causing concern it maybe that the environment of coaching at the participation level presents it own set of unique issues, relevant only to that level of coaching. As can be seen in Tables 2, 3 and 4, the issues raised were systemic ones in the sense that they all related to the organisation of tennis and its promotion by the respective national and state governing bodies. Interestingly, participants at neither forum raised any issues specifically related to the delivery of tennis instruction, suggesting by default that they believe that they are competent and not in need of assistance in this aspect of their work. Similarly, given that tennis coaching is predominately professional, participants did not broach the issue of minimal rates of pay for their level of coach accreditation. In Australia, there are currently three levels of coaching accreditation from the entry-level Development Coach, followed by Advanced Coach, and peaking at Elite Coach. However, to the best of the investigator's knowledge, no minimum award is set by either Tennis Australia or the Tennis Coaches Australia. Finally, the issue of working hours and the pressures associated with it, such as unusual hours, effect on family and social networks, was not brought up further understating the acceptance of coaches present to the demands of coaching. Interestingly, at both forums once the formal NGT was completed the majority of participants appeared reluctant to leave and some continued the discussion for over an hour.

When queried by the investigators, the participants indicated that they seldom had the opportunity for such open discussions, confirming the choice of the Nominal Group Technique as appropriate to the exploratory stages of research into stress experienced by club coaches.

Strategies

At the end of both sessions, strategies, devel-

Table 3 (TCA Western Australia, n = 12)

Items	Total	Ranking
Club contract, relationship with club, demands by clubs on coach's free time	23	1
Better infrastructure for players from grassroots to elite	13	2
Tennis in schools - consistent approach	12	= 3
Better education on business management	12	
Public liability for coaches and their assistants	8	= 5
Use of unqualified tennis coaches	8	
Pennant competition being uniform	7	= 7
Coach education - improve to each level - more professional, structure of coach development from introduction to elite	7	
Parents more proactive off court before age of 10	6	9
Apprenticeship scheme	5	10
Better marketing to gain first choice athlete	4	= 11
Code of ethics for coaches	4	
No official before 12 years old	3	= 13
Overemphasis on winning by players and parents	3	
General court etiquette	2	= 15
Impact of TCAWA	2	
Demographic changes - girls drop out at adolescence	1	17

TCA = Tennis Coaches Australia; WA = Western Australia

Table 4 Similar issues (as determined by ranking order) between Western Australia and Victoria forums

Major Item	WA	Vic
Club-coach issues - relationship with club, job security, coach's business	1	1
Tennis in schools	3	3
Insurance and liability	5	4
Education - upskilling/professional development, particularly in business of coaching	3	6
Provision of resources and pathways for players and game	2	9
Career pathways for tennis coaches	7	11
Marketing of programs/business	11	7
Parents	9	8
Player retention (focus was on female retention in tennis in WA)	17	11
Impact/communication between TCA and coaches	15	20

TCA = Tennis Coaches Australia; WA = Western Australia

oped by the groups, have been initiated to address the concerns raised in the forums. In Western Australia, an email forum group has been established to initiate on-line discussion between coaches to decrease perceived isolation between coaches. Further, two of the investigators are developing best practice case studies for distribution to the coaching fraternity as a method of developing good business models for coaches. In Victoria, Tennis Australia (based in Melbourne) has developed a nationally based professional development program to assist ongoing education of coaches and opportunities to create coach networking. To date, the concern of the club/coach relationship still remains a topical issue. However, Tennis West is also exploring options to address this issue.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It is suggested that further research is necessary to understand if these issues are similar to other states. Moreover, research overseas using Nominal Group Technique would provide interesting data to compare issues of concern from club coaches throughout the tennis world. Research should also focus on different levels of coaches (i.e. elite coaches, college coaches) and specific groups/issues (i.e. low numbers of female coaches) to give a greater spectrum of issues that affect coaches at all levels.

References

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