



Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook

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Coaching Millennial Players Principles to Help Coach Your Players to Peak Performance

BY ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

The game of tennis is evolving. It is changing in all areas, from technique and strategy, to fitness and the mental game. Players are dominating the junior and professional ranks with semi-western and western grips, hitting inside-out and inside-in forehands at will. Strategy is also evolving. Serves are becoming bigger and more dominant followed by the lethal forehand. The role of fitness is playing a greater part in the game. Dynamic stretches and core strength exercises are helping kids become quicker, stronger and more flexible allowing them to hang in points and grind it out. Last, but not least, the mental game continues to evolve, players are becoming more aware than ever, looking for the mental edge which often proves to be the difference between winning and losing.

As the game on the court changes, so do today's junior players; we are now in the millennium generation. A key characteristic of this generation is what I call the "me now" trait. This is the idea that improvement and results happen quickly at warp-like speed. In fact, it seems results and improvements are expected by players at the speed of a text message and by parents at the speed of a blackberry email. Certainly, this is an unrealistic expectation. After watching Kristie Ahn break through three rounds of the qualifying rounds at the US Open last summer and then battle Darina Safina on Armstrong Court, it becomes apparent that to move deep into the rankings is truly a process. On the other side of the world, Christina McHale lost a heartbreaker in the opening round of the Australian Open. Patrick McEnroe commented, "I expect her to be in the top fifty in eighteen months." Clearly, this comment demon-



Rob Polishook, far right, demonstrating great energy during his presentation of "Coaching the Mental Edge."

strates reaching the next level will not happen overnight but will be a process involving many steps.

Another characteristic of the "me now" generation is that kids are being measured, sized-up, and evaluated every moment. This starts early in their lives as they try to qualify for schools, classes and tests and then carries onto the courts where the pressure to secure, maintain and improve rankings is ever present. Because of this intense pressure, it seems many parents try to protect their kids from inevitable adversity, setbacks and failure. However, this often becomes a counter-productive strategy because these setbacks are precisely where learning, choice, and growth take place. The reality is that the journey towards improvement is often filled with setbacks and frustration,

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and losing is disappointing, as evidenced by Federer in the Australian Open final. However, for forward progress, each setback can also be re-framed as feedback and a learning opportunity to reach the next level.

In light of the changes in the game and the speed of the millennium generation, I will highlight three key principles that coaches can incorporate in their everyday interactions with their junior players.

1. The athlete is person first and player second:

The way to reach your junior player is by treating them as a person first and player second. Simply put, when coaching your kids, take the extra time to know and understand your players off the court. Learn what other interests and pressures they have. Often times, peak performance can't happen until a player gets past the pressures they face off the court i.e. school, tests, friends. By establishing a relationship with them, your players will feel you care about them for more than tennis and revenue but that you are genuinely interested in them as a person. This genuine interest and concern will go a long way in terms of your player's dedication, loyalty and work ethic.

2. The Big Y is key to success:

It's important to help your players understand their personal big WHY. That is, what do they love about the game? What is their intrinsic reason for playing? All great champions have their own reason for competing, Sampras said "I never played for the limelight;

I just wanted to see how good I could be." Having a big WHY will help a player to compete and get past obstacles. Understanding your big WHY provides a personal reason and passion to persevere and go beyond the intersection called G.C.B.U (Get comfortable being uncomfortable) and enable players to reach their personal unlimited peak potential.

3. Focus on the process:

It's important to guide your players to become aware and focused on the process while letting the outcome (results) take care of themselves. This will keep them in the present and focused on what they can control. It will also keep them out of the future where expectations are rampant, and assist them to understand that setbacks are a necessary part of improvement. The true champion uses failure as feedback and an opportunity to learn and move forward.

These principles will be further discussed and expanded on in the upcoming quarterly USPTA online newsletters. The aim of these principles is to help coaches connect to their players and further the level of trust and communication. This will foster greater commitment and dedication to the overall learning process. Lastly, by employing these principles, coaches will impact their players on the court and help them off the court with regard to goal setting, reaching the next level, and the process of handling adversity en route to continued improvement and peak performance in everything they encounter.



Rob Polishook, MA, CPC is the founder and director of Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group. As a Mental Training Coach he works with athletes and teams at the middle school, high school, national, college and professional levels. His work focuses on helping athletes and teams gain the mental edge, often the difference between winning and losing. Rob has spoken to athletes, coaches, parents both nationally at USTA, USPTA, ITA conferences and internationally conducted workshops and worked with top ranked juniors in India, Israel, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. He was awarded the 2008 USPTA - Eastern Division High School Coach of the Year award. Additionally he has published articles in national publications including USTA and USPTA publications. Rob can be contacted about his private or team consultation at 973-723-0314, rob@insidethezone.com, www.insidethezone.com.