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## INTRODUCTION

- The last decade has seen considerable attention being spent on mental skills training.
- USTA Player Development was concerned that despite the availability of information for mental skills in tennis, very few junior coaches were not systematically teaching mental skills to their players.
- Little is known about how to teach coaches to teach mental skills to their players.

## PURPOSE

- To understand why mental skill training information was not being used by junior tennis coaches.
- Additionally, what opinions do coaches have about what would make mental skills training information more user-friendly and strategies for conveying this information to coaches.

## METHODS

- Four focus groups were held with 20 junior tennis coaches at a three day USTA seminar.
- Five coaches were in each focus group.
- Focus groups lasted 75 minutes
- Coaches were randomly assigned to groups after controlling for gender. Three groups were all male and two groups included two females so that one group did not have only women, but women had same-gender support in their group.
- Focus groups were used because very little research was conducted on this topic.

## PARTICIPANTS

- 16 men and 4 women participated in the focus group sessions.
- Coaches had on average 14.5 years of experience.
- Coaches represented all regions of the US.
- Coaches came from a variety of tennis environments including high school teams, country clubs, urban leagues, and college teams.
- On average, they had coached 17 sectionally and 5 nationally ranked players.
- 85% had USPTA or USPTR certification
- Coaches felt that they had a moderate degree of knowledge about sport psychology (M = 4.33 on a 7 point Likert scale, where 7 = extensive knowledge)
- Coaches believed that mental skills training was very important for junior player (M = 9.00 on a 10 point Likert scale, where 10 = very important)
- Coaches felt they had better than average ability to develop mental skills in their players (M = 5.03, where 10 = very good ability)
- Coaches spent an hour each on mental skills training.
- Coaches perceived mental skills as difficult to teach (M = 4.23 where 7 = very difficult).

## WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

### How do you teach mental skills to your players?

- Two categories emerged; general process strategies and specific exercises/strategies.
- General Process Strategies*
- Consulting with a sport psychologist
- Using videos to increase awareness
- Recognizing and adjusting to individual differences
- Parent education and guidance
- Teaching in a progression
- Reading articles
- Building trust/relationship (constructing plan for player, building relationship, being professional, giving freedom)
- Role models (coach or player)
- Fun and interesting presentations



### Keeping things simple

- Quality-focused practices
- Shaping behaviors
- Reflection and self-awareness
- Subtle integration into practice
- Analogies
- Audio tapes

#### ➤ Keeping Things Simple

*Well it seems like to me basically success in life is sort of like McDonald's. You take something simple and reproduce it. Mental toughness. I think moves along the same lines. You take a simple task and learn how to deal with it, and then you reproduce it.*

### Specific Exercises/Strategies

- Concentration drills
- Simulating pressure
- Imagery
- Goal setting
- Enhanced motivation
- Thought stopping
- Initiating team activities
- Discussion and teaching about mistakes
- Breathing and relaxation techniques

#### ➤ Simulating Pressure

*A lot of times we will do a set situation where I say, okay, you two are playing and the score is 4 all, finish the set, or each game you are down love-30, your opponents serving or you're up 30-love, or play tie breakers. Do anything to put them in a pressure situation more often.*

### Factors Influencing Mental Skills Training

- Age
- Ability
- Gender
- Culture

➤ Ability-Skill level definitely makes a difference. You can't possibly focus on the same things with a tournament player as you would a beginner.

➤ Gender-With some of the top boys – and not all boys – but some boys, you can bark at them a little more. You can be a lot more demanding, a lot more vocal, and sometimes a lot more animated. With the girls – some of the girls – not all the girls, you have to be a lot more genteel.

➤ Culture-The bottom line is, those two or three kids, their families ...their parents make less than \$50,000 a year. They'll do anything they have to become a better tennis player. The rest of my kids, their families make over \$150,000 a year. They don't care. They don't. They just won't do everything that they have to do.

## RESULTS, CONT.

### Why Coaches Do and Do Not use Mental Skills Training

#### 14 reasons emerged

1. Lack of training, Need for developing coaching education to teach coaches how to do mental skills training
2. Level of understanding mental skills training content
3. Knowing how to teach the mental skills/process
4. Need for learning alternative mediums of conveying information
5. Becoming more comfortable teaching mental skills
6. Coaches never use mental skills themselves
7. Need to individualize mental skills training
8. Getting players engaged in the training more
9. Difficult to implement and evaluate
10. Increasing motivation
11. Modeling other who provide mental skills training
12. Teaching parents about the value of mental skills training
13. Obtaining cooperation from tennis organizations
14. Other responsibilities

- Making Mental Skills more User-Friendly
- Make mental skills more concrete
- Provide various mediums for coaches, players, parents, and others
- Make mental skills more tennis applicable
- Relate to tennis mental competency levels
- Show how to individualize psychology principles

## COACHING IMPLICATIONS

- Interestingly, coaches felt they had the content knowledge, but not the process knowledge of how to teach, individualize, and make concrete the mental skills.
- There is some lack of comfort in teaching mental skills.
- More on-court demonstrations of mental skills training are needed.
- There is a need to create more concrete, hands-on mental training examples that come in a variety of mediums.
- Many factors influence mental skills training success including the age, ability, gender, and culture of the player. This is the art of mental skills training knowing how to individualize to the person and the situation.
- A model of coaching mental skills in tennis was developed based on these focus groups and is included in the mental skills and drills booklets.

## REFERENCES / RESOURCES

- Gould, D., Damarjian, N., & Medbery, R. (1999). An examination of mental skills training in junior tennis coaches. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 127-143.