High-Performance Coaching

The Coach’s Role in Developing Champions

by Kristen Dieffenbach, M.S., Daniel Gould, Ph.D., & Aaron Moffett, M.S.

It has long been recognized that in order to achieve success, great tennis players not only need to possess excellent technical skills, tactics and physical fitness, but superb psychological skills as well. In fact, in a recent issue of Olympic Coach Magazine (available free on the web at http://coaching.usolympicteam.com) we reported the results of our most recent research that examined the psychological characteristics of some of our most successful U.S. Olympic champions. Mental toughness, the ability to focus, the ability to set goals, confidence, sport intelligence, positive or adaptive perfectionism, coachability and high optimism were but a few of the important factors found among top Olympic performers (see Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2001). Beyond knowing what it takes psychologically to be great, we also wanted to know what influence coaches and other individuals significant in the athlete’s lives had on the development of these important mental skills and characteristics. The focus of this article is on reporting the results of our research related to the role coaches played in the psychological development of champion athletes.

In our study, some of our most successful U.S. Olympic champions, representing nine different sports, participated in confidential interviews. Additionally, each athlete identified one coach and one family member familiar with their career to be interviewed. The interviews with the Olympians’ coaches and family members were conducted to add additional depth and perspectives to the study. All the coaches and family members were asked to identify important skills and characteristics the athlete had that facilitated his or her success at various career stages, as well as institutions and individuals that assisted this development during each stage. The coaches and family members were also directly asked what coaches did during different phases of the athlete’s career that influenced his or her development.

The career stages were determined by each athlete using Bloom’s (1985) description of career phases of elite athletes as a guide. According to Bloom, elite athlete development is broken down into:

- The **early years**, when the individual develops a love of sport, participates for fun, is free to explore and receives encouragement;
- The **middle or precision years**, where with the help of a master coach, the athlete works on long-term skill development; and
- The **elite years**, marked by many hours of practice and the honing of technical skill and expertise into personal excellence.

“**We cannot map people’s lives in advance but much can be done to make desirable outcomes more likely. Acquiring high abilities is one such outcome. We can and should act to make it happen more often.**”

—Howe (1999)

**Coach Roles and Areas of Influence**

Coaches were found to play a very important role in the lives of these champions, particularly during the middle and elite phases of their careers. In discussing the role coaches played, the athletes indicated that their coaches were, at times, “like a surrogate parent,” “had a good bond,” “provided an adult-adult relationship” and were “like a good friend.” Overall, six main areas of coach influence were highlighted by the Olympic champions studied.

continued on page 4
In this issue of the High-Performance Coaching Newsletter, we feature an article entitled The Coach’s Role in Developing Champions. As tennis coaches, it is important to remember that we do actually play a very important role in our players’ long-term development. This article, which was based on an in-depth research study, reveals the roles and influences that coaches have in the lives of their players.

In addition to the feature article, you will find the ever-popular sequence feature that examines the slice backhand from three different tactical situations and the Sport Science article, which presents some new information regarding the area of dynamic flexibility and warm-up.

As always, we hope that you will enjoy this issue of High-Performance Coaching. If you have any suggestions or comments, please feel free to contact us at Coaching@usta.com.

Sincerely,

Nick Saviano
Director, USA Tennis Coaching Education

Paul Lubbers, Ph.D.
Administrator, USA Tennis Coaching Education

USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program Update

The USA Tennis Coaching Education Department continues to accept applications for the USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program 2003. The program is intended specifically for the high-performance coach who is working with players who are striving for excellence in competitive tennis (i.e., sectional junior players to collegiate and young professionals). See page 12 for dates, locations and application deadlines.

Applications for the 2003 program dates are available by contacting 305-365-USTA or e-mailing us at Coaching@USTA.com. We encourage all interested coaches to apply as soon as possible.

USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program Attendance

The following list of coaches attended the May 7-12, 2002, USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program in Chicago, Illinois, and successfully completed all three phases of the program. Congratulations coaches!
Many people were glued to their TV sets during the first week of September, following the progress of Serena and Venus Williams, Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras in the main draw of the US Open. Meanwhile, there was another big tennis tournament going on with some of the biggest future stars of the game. The Junior US Open, which is in its second year, starts with a 32-draw qualifying event for both boys and girls. This event is held at A.F. Veterans Park in Greenburgh, New York, and produces eight qualifiers for the main draw of the Junior US Open. Of the eight qualifiers on the girls’ side, three were American. On the boys’ side, four of the eight qualifiers were American. These players helped fill out the 64-player main draw of the Junior US Open tournament.

Seeding players in these junior events can be tricky because it is based on both ITF ranking as well as ATP/WTA ranking. The girls tournament showed that the U.S. talent is quite deep. Ten American players advanced to the second round while two players, Ally Baker and Kristen Schluekibr, made it to the quarterfinals. (America’s top-ranked junior player, Ashley Harkleroad, played in the main draw of the US Open and from there went on to play another professional event, therefore she was unable to compete in the Junior US Open). The final featured an exciting match between Russia’s Maria Kirillenko and Barbora Strycova of the Czech Republic. The No. 12-seeded Kirillenko beat top-seeded Strycova in two close sets. The girls’ doubles final featured the No. 2-seeded Belgian pair of Elke Clijsters and Kirsten Flipkens against the unseeded American team of Shadisha Robinson and Tory Zawacki. Although Robinson and Zawacki had a great tournament, they were overmatched by the Belgian duo who looked like they had more experience playing together as a team.

On the boys’ side, the draw was as strong as we have ever seen in a junior international tournament. Top-seeded Richard Gasquet of France showed why he is the best junior player in the world (he also won the Junior French Open) by beating No. 5 seed Marko Baghdatis from Cyprus in the final. Both players look destined to become successful pros. Americans Robert Yim and Brian Baker reached the round of 16 before losing to seeded players. Brian Baker also reached the finals of the doubles tournament with Australian partner Chris Guccione. In the finals, they lost to the Dutch team of Michel Koning and Bas Van der Valk, who were the No. 5 seeds.

Prior to and during the two weeks of the tournament, Pete Sampras practiced with a number of our American boys for 22 out of 23 days. This was a great experience for the young Americans and it didn’t appear to hurt Pete’s game either.

Overall, the Americans had a decent showing. However, to improve our performances on the international level, we first need to examine our tournament structure in the United States. American players need a natural competitive progression. It is our goal to evaluate the junior competitive structure in the United States and provide recommendations for the best possible tournament system to benefit players at every level. To foster proper development, players should compete at tiered levels of tournaments, encouraging a healthy and leveled competitive environment. Getting juniors of equal abilities together and having them push each other is a terrific way to encourage a strong competitive environment. The goal is to have different levels of tournaments, which are pathways to the next level. This way players are encouraged to compete within their Sections first, then move up to Cross-Sectional play and finally, play at the National level. By not skipping these steps and performing well at each level, players can then follow a logical progression to the top, which, for the very top players, means the US Open Junior Championships.

Although there is no one perfect system, we need to focus on improving our overall competitive structure and create opportunities that offer players at every level the best possibility of reaching their potential.

Junior US Open finalists, Americans Shadisha Robinson and Tory Zawacki
The Coach’s Role in Developing Champions

1. Quality Coach–Athlete Relationship

Across all interviews, the importance of a good coach-athlete relationship was highlighted, particularly during the middle and elite career phases. A good relationship was characterized by mutual trust, mutual confidence in each other’s abilities, good communication (especially good listening skills) and a sense of collaboration or working together. The importance of the coach displaying an interest and respect for the athlete beyond his or her athletic identity was also stressed in terms of the coach-athlete relationship. Additionally, many participants indicated the necessity of a good fit between the coach’s and the athlete’s personalities, needs and styles in order for the relationship to be beneficial.

Another important aspect of a good coach-athlete relationship was the coach’s ability to understand each athlete as an individual and to tailor his or her coaching style and attention to suit those needs.

The importance of individualization in coaching was demonstrated by two athletes discussing how their coaches helped them deal with frustration after a disappointing performance. One athlete indicated that her coach left her alone until she approached him, while another athlete indicated that his coach came to speak to him immediately. While the coaches approached similar situations very differently, both athletes indicated that his or her coach’s response was right for them.

Unfortunately, preliminary studies in this area indicated that many coaches are not skilled at recognizing the needs and moods of individual athletes, indicating that this is an important area for further consideration.

2. Knowledgeable, Competent Coach Style and Characteristics

Important components of coaching style included a balance between being strict and kind, personal dedication, passion for the sport and for coaching, being a disciplinarian, being enthusiastic, being organized and displaying a professional coaching style with parents and athletes alike. Having and demonstrating good knowledge of the sport, aspects of training and an understanding of competition—especially elite levels of competition—were also important coach characteristics noted by many of the interview participants.

Coach credibility also was noted as being an important influencing factor by many of the interview participants. Specifically, many athletes felt that having a coach who achieved an elite status by having competed at the national, world or Olympic levels was an important aspect of credibility. Several athletes also indicated that having a former elite competitor take an interest in them played an important role in enhancing confidence in their own abilities and in increasing motivation.

3. Multiple Coach Goals for their Athletes

All sources interviewed indicated that coaches had definite goals for the athletes they coached. The three goal focus categories included fun, development and winning. Fun-based goals included emphasizing fun, creating a fun environment for training and focusing on fun. Development goals included focus on tactical, skill and technique development. Winning goals were centered on performance outcomes.

The coaches’ goals for their athletes was one area where definitive differences were seen between early year coaches and those who coached during the middle and later years. During the early years of the athletes’ careers, coaches were found to center mainly on fun and development goals for the athletes. Later coaches had a balance of performance and non-performance objectives for the athletes. These objectives included fun and development as well as winning. Even in the elite years, where winning was of utmost importance, athletes and coaches indicated that it was important to have fun as a goal.

4. Coach-Created Individualized Motivational Climate

In creating a motivational climate for athletes, coaches were found to use many techniques. An important technique was exposing athletes to elite achievers, allowing the athletes to see that these individuals were regular people and that achieving the same status was possible for them. One athlete indicated that his coach exposed him to the Olympic trials and the athletes who participated in the trials and this made him, “realize that normal, everyday people can go to the Olympics.”

Other ways coaches created a motivational climate included pushing the athlete hard, providing a positive environment and opportunities, and providing appropriate challenges. For the athletes he worked with, one coach indicated that he was most effectively able to motivate them when he “challenged them in a fun way and let them rise to the challenge.” It is important to point out that the successful motivational techniques that the coaches used were successful because they were individualized to meet the needs of each particular athlete. As an elite level coach said “something that may work for one person, doesn’t really work for another,” highlighting the importance of remaining flexible and trying new ideas.

continued from page 1

continued on page 9
The Slice Backhand: Technique and Tactics

by Nick Saviano

The slice (backspin) backhand is seeing something of a renaissance in world-class tennis.

Virtually every Top 50 player on both the men’s and women’s professional tour uses the slice to varying degrees and in a multitude of ways. The ability to effectively hit slice, particularly on the backhand side, is essential to employing the strategies and tactics needed to be successful at the world-class level.

Professionals generally use slice for three tactical situations. First, for hitting a building/set up shot, which is intended to put a player in position to take control of the point or to win the point within the next few shots. An example of this is a slice backhand approach shot off the ground stroke or return of serve. The second tactical situation is a neutralizing shot, where the player responds to a quality shot by the opponent and attempts to neutralize their opponent’s advantage. For example, when a player is pulled out wide on the backhand, but not on the dead run, the player might hit a slice to provide time to get back into the court. In addition, slice is used to keep the ball low and out of the opponent’s power zone. The third tactical situation is a defensive shot. This is employed when a player is in desperate trouble and is simply trying to stay in the point. (Note: Although this defensive shot is not a slice backhand in the traditional sense, it does emanate from the same technique, so we have included it as a slice.) However, the pros rarely use the slice as an offensive “point ending” shot.

The primary reason for the proliferation of the slice backhand is to counter the increasing power of ground strokes and serves. Therefore, unless the player is as physically dominating as Serena Williams, who almost always is on the offensive, a slice backhand should be an important part of their repertoire.

This sequence highlights examples of the slice technique being used for each of the tactical situations indicated above. Taylor Dent is using the slice to hit a building/set-up approach, Paradorn Srichaphan is hitting a neutralizing slice and Nicolas Lapentti is using the slice technique to execute a defensive shot. We will focus in on the commonalities of technique in each of these players to illustrate what we believe to be fundamentals of technique for the slice.

It is our hope that all High Performance Coaches across the country will be aware of this subtle evolution in the game. We feel that it is critical that all of our country’s aspiring players have learned the skill of hitting an effective slice by the time they are 14 years old.

Top to bottom: Taylor Dent, United States; Paradorn Srichaphan, Thailand; Nicolas Lapentti, Ecuador.
The players have recognized that the ball is coming to their backhand and have started the unit turn. Dent is going to hit a backhand return and follow it in. Srichaphan is hitting a neutralizing shot, and Lapentti is hitting a defensive shot to stay in the point. Most likely, they have already determined that they will hit a slice backhand. It should be noted that Dent and Srichaphan both possess a one-handed backhand where Lapentti has a two-handed backhand.

Notice how all three players have significantly bent their right arm with the racquet head up and pulled close to their body. This is a key point technically for the preparation phase of the slice. At this stage, Srichaphan does not appear to be rushed, whereas the other two shows through their preparation (quicker turn of the front shoulder) that they do not have as much time to produce the stroke.

All three players have almost fully turned their shoulders (loading of the larger muscle groups) as they enter the last part of preparation. Dent quickly pulls the racquet head up extremely close to his head, making for a very compact backswing. This short racquet preparation is ideal for a return of serve. Srichaphan takes a higher and bigger backswing as he has more time to produce the stroke. Lapentti has fully prepared his racquet while he is on the dead run.

The technique mentioned in picture two really comes into play at this stage of the stroke. Once again, notice the following technique: 1) Right arm is bent at the elbow and held close to the body; 2) The wrist is cocked upward; 3) The racquet head is held above the point of eventual contact of the ball; 4) There is tremendous rotation of the shoulders, and the players will now swing forward as they extend the elbow along with slight forearm rotation. With this technique, the players can now generate excellent racquet head speed and maintain a controlled swing even when on the move (Srichaphan) and fully extended (Lapentti). Inexperienced players will tend to have inadequate rotation and a relatively straight arm as they approach the ball, this forces them reach straight out after the ball, which results in a “stabbing” action, creating little power or control.

All three players have started their swing forward and slightly downward to the ball. Notice that they start to extend the non-dominant (left) arm backward to aid in keeping their dynamic balance. Also notice how the head and eyes have tremendous focus on the hitting zone. Take note of the three different stances: Lapentti is open as he fully extends for the shot. Srichaphan is hitting with closed stance, and Dent is hitting with a squared stance as he transfers his weight into the shot.

Note the extension of the non-dominant (left) arm as the players extend their follow-through and strive to maintain their dynamic balance—particularly in the upper part of the body! This action also will help to generate more racquet head speed. The variation in their follow-through reflects the different shots they are hitting. Dent is executing a down-the-line, inside-out slice, return of serve, approach shot. Srichaphan is hitting a standard crosscourt shot with his follow-through extending out toward the direction of the ball. Lapentti is simply trying to get the ball up over the net by quickly opening the racquet face.

The players are now starting the recovery/positioning for their next shot. Dent is using a crossover technique to help him stay sideways as he approaches. Srichaphan plants the back leg to prepare to push off and recover back into position. Lapentti has more time because he has hit a lob. He is using his lower body strength to maintain his balance before recovering.
5. Coach Support

While pushing athletes to excel, coaches simultaneously provided athletes with support that was unconditional and that did not pressure the athlete. Coaches demonstrated their support by backing athlete’s decisions and goals, having pride in the athlete, by being present at practice, being concerned about the athlete’s accomplishments and by “being there emotionally” for the athlete.

6. Coach Teaching

One of the most important things that coaches did for athlete development was to teach, both directly and indirectly, the different skills and characteristics that the athletes felt were important in their achievement of their elite accomplishments. Coaches emphasized high expectations and standards that they expected athletes to achieve. These expectations and standards were felt to be attainable by the athlete and encompassed important aspects beyond athletic achievement, such as schoolwork, personal responsibility and good citizenship. Coaches also emphasized and expected hard work and self-discipline in training. Athletes indicated that through emphasizing high expectations and standards coaches taught them skills such as how to train hard and how to focus on performance improvements.

Athletes received positive and constructive feedback and criticism from their coaches regarding how to correct mistakes and improve skills. Coaches also were credited with teaching their athletes how to keep success and disappointments in perspective with personal achievements and in balance with other aspects of life such as academic and career goals. Finally, coaches both directly mentored athletes’ development and indirectly modeled the positive skills and characteristics the athletes needed for success.

Implications for Coaching Practices

The identified coaching roles and areas of influence that impacted the development of this sample of U.S. Olympic champions provides us with a number of important points for consideration in coaching junior tennis players.

- Early years’ coaches did not damage athletes by pushing too hard or placing emphasis on outcome, but rather they laid a strong foundation based on enjoyment of the sport and skill development.
- Development of the necessary psychological skills and characteristics took place over time and several different coaches often nurtured their development across the phases of the athlete’s career. This emphasizes the importance of Sport Governing Bodies, such as USA Tennis developing coaching systems, where multiple coaches understand their role in the players’ total career plan and coordinate efforts to appropriately work with players at different career phases.
- The coaching strategies used differed across situations, career phases and from one athlete to another. The most effective strategies were those that were based on individual needs, goals and career phase.
- Finally, a good fit between the coach’s and the athlete’s personalities, needs and styles are necessary if the coaching methods and lessons taught are to be well-received by the athlete.

Conclusions

This report provides a brief overview of important roles and areas of influence that coaches were found to have on the development of an elite group of U.S. Olympic champions. It is important to remember that not every coach interviewed was necessarily credited with achieving every aspect mentioned, nor were all of the roles and areas of influence necessarily addressed during all phases of each athlete’s development. Rather, the coaches who had the greatest impact on the lives of these athletes took the time to individualize their coaching style and practices to meet the specific needs and goals of each athlete. As one athlete stated, “I think the coaches I had at different times were good for me.” Ultimately, coaches should use the roles and potential areas of influence as a guideline in tailoring their individual coaching style to help the athletes they coach achieve the strong psychological skills and characteristics necessary to help talented athletes become champions.

Kristen Dieffenbach, M.S., Daniel Gould, Ph.D., & Aaron Moffett, M.S., Department of Exercise and Sport Science, University of North Carolina Greensboro

Reference


Footnote

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Dynamic Flexibility

by Todd S. Ellenbecker, MS, PT, SCS, OCS, CSCS, Clinic Director, Physiotherapy Associates, Scottsdale Sports Clinic; Vice Chairman, USTA Sports Science Committee

Introduction

Like many of you, when I attend a tennis tournament I spend most of my time watching players practice with their coaches. This year’s US Open was no exception. One of the interesting things to watch is how players warm-up prior to practice. This year, I saw Gustavo Kuerten use elastic bands to warm up his shoulder before he hit a ball, and Jelena Dokic skip rope for 5-10 minutes before she walked on the court to start a practice session. While each player uses his or her own methods, the common factor is that all of these players do some type of warm-up before they do anything strenuous on the court.

Various methods of flexibility exercise and stretching have been recommended through the years with the purpose of improving performance as well as preventing injury. Flexibility is typically defined as the range of motion available around a joint. Research conducted by the USTA has identified several areas of inflexibility in elite tennis players most likely in response to the repeated stresses of playing the game. The purpose of this article will be to briefly outline the types of flexibility exercises available to players and coaches, and to more specifically cover the area of dynamic flexibility and warm-up.

Types of Flexibility Exercise

The most commonly used and most frequently studied form of flexibility exercise is static stretching. Static stretching is one of the most effective methods of stretching and is the safest way to encourage elongation of the skeletal muscle. It involves quite simply, the isolation of the muscle’s origin and insertion through proper positioning of the joints followed by slow, steady movement to end range of motion and a period of static holding of the end position while breathing normally. Variations on this form of stretching include “PNF” (a commonly used term), which is a technical procedure involving a therapist, trainer or educated partner who resists a contraction of the muscle just prior to stretching. PNF uses the basic components of static stretching but requires the use of a partner that is not always available to an elite tennis player.

Dynamic stretching is quite simply the use of specific body movements to promote range of motion at the joints and ultimately elongation of the musculature. Examples of dynamic stretching might include butt kicks, jogging in place or performing tennis strokes without ball contact prior to playing tennis. Advantages of dynamic stretching are that tennis-specific movements can be used during dynamic stretching and it is easy to use these movements as part of a warm-up before playing.

Which Type of Flexibility is Best?

Until recently, sports scientists and sports medicine professionals always recommended static stretching before and after tennis play or any other type of vigorous exercise. The slow movements and periods of holding at or near end range of motion were found in many studies to provide optimal lengthening of the muscle tissues. Dynamic stretching and warm-up were mentioned but not necessarily emphasized.

Recent research, however, has identified temporary decreases in skeletal muscle performance immediately after static stretching. This decrease in muscle performance includes decreases in muscular strength and power. Applying this research to athletes has led sports scientists and medical professionals to now recommend static stretching before an activity such as tennis or training at least 30-60 minutes before that activity starts. Additionally, the use of a warm-up (jogging in place, riding a stationary bicycle for 3-5 minutes to break a light sweat) is now highly recommended along with dynamic stretches immediately before the activity. Static stretching after the workout also is thought to speed recovery and decrease soreness in addition to increase muscle length. Table 1 summarizes the recommended sequence for tennis players.

Table 1

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<thead>
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<th>Recommended Stretching Sequence</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Active Warm-Up</td>
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<td>(3-5 minutes to break a light sweat)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Dynamic Stretches</td>
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<tr>
<td>(several repetitions of tennis specific movement patterns)</td>
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<td>3. Tennis Play or Training</td>
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<td>(after activity when the body is very warm, static stretches can have an optimal benefit particularly for areas that are very tight and inflexible)</td>
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<td>4. Static Stretches</td>
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Dynamic Stretching Specifics

The best recommendation for integrating a series of dynamic stretches into a training program is to always perform a proper warm-up first. The warm-up is one of the most important aspects of all types of stretching programs. Recommended warm-up activities include slow jogging around the court, riding a bike, using a slide board or any other rhythmic aerobic type activity. Typical durations of the warm-up should be 3-5 minutes or more, however, these actions should be done with very low intensities. Once the player has performed the warm-up, several repetitions of dynamic stretches can be done, each repetition with slightly greater intensity. Examples of recommended dynamic stretches include butt kicks, front and side lunges, arm circles with racquet, jumping jacks, the stretch pictured in this article and high step trunk rotations. Little guidance from literature exists on how many repetitions of each stretch is optimal, however, each player most likely will have individual needs. Performing multiple repetitions of each movement is recommended with more movements recommended in cooler temperatures and during tournaments where frequent matches and overtraining may increase stiffness between sessions.

Should I Ignore Static Stretching Altogether?

Static stretching still clearly has a place in the tennis player’s training program. As mentioned earlier, certain areas in the tennis player’s body become characteristically tight from tennis play. Performing static stretching after tennis play and training sessions with particular emphasis on problem areas is still highly recommended. The timing of static stretching has changed but the relative importance and effectiveness has not. Performing the posterior shoulder stretch (racquet arm across body at chest level) is still a very important stretch for tennis players due to the specific range of motion adaptations that occur from repeated high intensity serving and tennis play.

Summary

A dynamic stretching program is an important part of a tennis player’s training program. Proper use of the warm-up prior to dynamic stretching as well as use of tennis-specific movement patterns can help to prepare the tennis player for practice and competition. Time-specific use of static stretching is still recommended to prevent flexibility deficits in problem areas.
## USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program Dates

### Program Dates for 2003

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Application Deadline</th>
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<td>January 2-7, 2003</td>
<td>Key Biscayne, FL</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 6-11, 2003</td>
<td>Missouri Valley Section</td>
<td>February 15, 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>August 12-17, 2003</td>
<td>West Coast</td>
<td>May 15, 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>November 11-17, 2003</td>
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Applications for the 2003 USA Tennis High Performance Coaching Program are available by calling 305-365-USTA or e-mailing us at Coaching@USTA.com