

Training Female Athletes



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by Sujay Lama

A top ranked junior from Nepal, Sujay reached an ITF Juniors singles world ranking of #50. That earned him a scholarship to Luther College, where he amassed a singles record of 104-18, was ranked #5 in NCAA DIII singles and was a two time All American. In 2002, he was inducted into the Luther College Athletic Hall of Fame. Sujay was a traveling coach on the WTA Tour and has coached at 12 Grand Slams. He worked with elite players as Senior Staff Professional at Van der Meer World Class Academy. The University of Florida came calling. There Sujay served under Head Coach Andi Brandi from 1995-98, helping them win two NCAA Team Championships. Next for Sujay was eight years as Head Women's Coach at the University of Illinois, where he transformed the program and led the team to five NCAA tournament berths. With that reputation, he took his talents to a struggling women's team at the University of North Texas. In just four seasons, Sujay took the team from last to first and three conference titles. Fourteen seasons in, Sujay is the winningest tennis coach in University of North Texas history. In 2014, he was named the PTR Jim Verdieck College Coach of the Year.

Men need to win to feel good; women need to feel good to win.
- Mike Candrea, Head Softball Coach, University of Arizona

It was my second year as an assistant coach at the University of Florida when I started to really observe and be aware of the differences in training female and male athletes. One particular incident had a profound effect on me. Amanda Basica, a highly ranked player from Southern California, came for a lesson one morning in the fall of 1996. We started hitting and grooving her groundstrokes. Ten minutes into the lesson, I noticed tears coming down her cheeks. I let her be for a while and finally asked her, "Is everything okay? Would you like to stop and talk about what is bothering you?" Her response was a gentle, "No. I am fine. We can carry on." She cried the entire lesson and hit the ball crisply and moved effortlessly. Occasionally I would give her some feedback and she would receive it well and execute it. When the hour was over, she thanked me for the lesson and off she went to her classes.

I remember being a little confused at the time and asking myself, "Did I make the right decision to give her space? Should I have stopped the lesson and talked to her or let her go back to her room to regroup?" Twenty-four years later when I reflect on that encounter, I realize that the approach I had taken is the reason I have been successful coaching women for all these years. Coaching female athletes is about knowing what to say, what not to say, when to say it and how to say it. The following are five lessons I have learned about coaching female athletes.

Listen

As coaches, our first instinct is to talk so we can help our athletes. It is well intended but not always effective. When I became the Head Coach at the University of Illinois, I learned a great lesson. We were playing the #1 ranked and undefeated Duke team that was coming off of winning the National Indoor Championship the week before. We were ranked #49 and went into the match as huge underdogs. Half an hour into the match, we were getting destroyed in doubles on courts #2 and #3. Our #1 team kept plugging away and fighting. Momentum started to shift our way and you could notice the opponents getting annoyed and start to rush. We ended up winning the match in a tie-break.

As I was walking to the locker room, I was formulating the speech I was going to give to rally our troops. I had fancy words and quotes that I was going to use. When I approached the door, I heard a senior member of the team yelling, "We are not going to lose to that team! Did you see that they played us with their practice shorts on?"

I knocked on the door and went into the locker room and decided to scrap my speech. We huddled and I let that senior do the talking. We lost two singles matches quickly going down 0-3 in the match and the rest is history. We came back all the way and won the deciding set of deciding match 7-6 in the third set. To this day, it remains one of, if not the greatest upset in the history of collegiate women's tennis.

That match got me thinking about the importance of listening, because the answers can be right in front of you. All you have to do is to ask questions first and then listen carefully. Start meetings with the team's feedback. Start lessons by asking what the athlete feels is going well and in what areas s/he is feeling insecure. Keep your coaching short, simple and to the point. Effective coaching requires you to understand the emotions of your student. It goes a long way in coaching female athletes for them to feel that they are being heard.

Inside-out vs Outside-in Coaching

These days, more than 60% of my time is spent on talking and communicating with my athletes as opposed to my time with them on the courts or in the gym. The constant communication comes in the form of meetings, Skype or phone conversations, text messages and emails. I have realized the importance of keeping their souls alive and giving them ownership of everything they do. My job is to convey how much I care about and believe in them and to be honest in my evaluations of them. The most important ingredient in coaching female athletes is gaining their trust. Once that is accomplished, you are in for a magical ride. They are more coachable and listen better. You've probably heard women are more emotional and that emotions get in their way. Yes, that is true, but I like to say that when those emotions are channeled correctly, it ignites their passion and love for their game, and that results in quality effort and attitude. Yelling, screaming, threatening and other extrinsic motivation don't work because it doesn't touch the heart and soul. That's where it starts, because female athletes thrive on being loved, cared for and valued.

Valentina Starkova was ranked in the Top 100 in the world junior rankings. She came from Kazakhstan to play at the University of Arkansas, a Top 25 program at the time. In the competitive environment of the SEC, she had lost confidence after losing some very close matches. She transferred for her last two years of college, and helped us win two conference titles and ended up winning critical and deciding matches both years. From the first day she was on campus, our goal was to nurture her and express our confidence in her, regardless of her results. In fact, we made it a point to be extra positive after her losses. Slowly but surely we chipped away at her doubts and fears and started wrapping her with confidence and belief. Her first year with us, she played the deciding match in the semifinals of the conference championship against University of Denver. She was down 2-5 in the deciding set. On the changeover, I sat next to her and calmly asked her to look at me. She was tense, nervous and felt the pressure to deliver for her team. I smiled and asked her to breathe and told her, "Val, this is exactly where we want you to be. This is why you came to our program and why you worked so hard. This is your moment to shine, so go after it with no regrets." She went on to win seven straight games to win the match 7-5 in the third set. The next year, she did it again in the finals of the conference championship against Georgia State. Valentina is just one example that inside-out coaching can propel athletes to believe and in their ability and eventually execute under pressure.

Routines and Rituals

Athletes in general are mindful of their routines and rituals. It gives them a sense of calm and stability. The on court rituals of Rafael Nadal take it to a whole new level, bordering superstition, but it is interesting to observe the consistency of his routines. What I did not realize in my early years of coaching is that these routines start way before practice and competition.

I learned a hard lesson when I was at the 1993 Australian Open. This was my first opportunity to travel with Amanda Coetzer, a former Top 10 WTA player from South Africa. Coming off a high of watching Amanda play the Hopman Cup and win the Victorian Open in Melbourne the week before for her maiden WTA title, I was gaining confidence as a hitting partner/travelling coach representing the Van Der Meer Tennis World-Class Academy.

On the eve of that first Grand Slam, I noticed Amanda walk all the way across to the other side of the stadium to drop off six racquets to be strung. I wanted to impress her, so I woke up early next morning, picked up the racquets, stenciled the logos and put on the over grips. Later that morning, I proudly handed the racquets to Amanda. I still remember the look on her face when she took the racquets from me. If looks could kill, I would have been dead right there. With her gentle voice she calmly said, "Don't ever do this again, Sujay."

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I was fortunate to work with Amanda for 10 more Grand Slams and learned that this routine was her way of keeping her mind busy and calm. It's very important to recognize these routines and rituals, especially in female athletes. This is a way for them to calm their mind and keep relaxed. It is also a way for them to stay in the moment. Whether it's as simple as listening to their favorite songs before practice or competitions or taking a cold shower right before a match, these simple rituals go a long way in helping them reach the optimum level of output. In fact, embrace them and help them fine tune their routines.

Structure

Why? When? How? These are just some of the questions you'll hear every day when you are coaching female athletes. As coaches, our first reaction is, "Why do I have to explain everything? Just do what I am asking you to do." This simply does not work. This is a major difference between male and female athletes.

Every Sunday night, I send an email to my team giving them the schedule for the week for practice, conditioning and lessons. Before each lesson and practice, I explain what we are doing, the goal of each drill, and how these fit into the bigger picture of match play. In dual match seasons, I give the lineup the day before each match. I take the time to explain to the non-starters how valuable they are to the team and what they need to do to get back in the lineup. Being valued and having hope are critical for them to stay motivated and engaged with the team.

Female athletes like things laid out in front of them so they can process and mentally prepare to accomplish each objective. They seek clarity and don't like surprises. While they thrive on a structured environment, it is very important to give them ownership of themselves and the team. The Vince Lombardi motto, "My way or highway," is not an effective approach to coaching female athletes. While it is time consuming, it's sure rewarding at the end of the day when you've gone the extra mile to be organized and have a plan that details the goals and objectives for your practices, lessons and eventually for matches and competition. There is an initial push back from female athletes while implementing structure, but when there is consistency, they buy into it and take pride in it. Ultimately they thrive in it.

Conflict

Expect to resolve conflicts when coaching female athletes, especially in a team setting. I once heard a team builder tell our team, "All great organizations and teams face conflict. In fact, it is necessary, and when directed positively can take the team from good to great." This is very true and most of the time it's the little things that cause conflicts.

The root of most of these breakdowns stems from a lack in communication that results in misunderstanding. Men might resort to a shout fest or even a fist fight, but the next day they will be having a drink together or playing a game on Xbox. Typically, women athletes hold on to their anger and grudges a little longer. Like a dentist who treats cavities immediately, it is important to resolve conflicts sooner rather than later. Otherwise you are looking at a root canal that is more painful and complicated to treat. The best way is to bring the athletes together and have them talk and hash it out on their own. There are times you need to be a moderator and guide the discussion, but always stay neutral and keep the emotions in check.

In April of 2013, just one week before our championship run, my best doubles team told me they did not want to play together any longer. Dane Joubert was a sweet young lady from South Africa with very good hands at the net and a terrific doubles player. She was a gentle soul and deeply religious. Ilona Serchenko was an intense player and fighter from Ukraine. She was aggressive from the baseline and was great at setting up her partner at the net. The two contrasting personalities and styles made a lethal combination; the perfect yin and yang. The only problem was that they could not get along. Ilona's direct Eastern European way of communicating did not sit well with Dane, who had a softer upbringing in an affluent South African home. I knew they were a critical piece to winning the championship, but I couldn't force them to play together.

So I called a meeting and showed them the season's stat in which they were the most dominant team for the season and why the team would have a better chance to win the conference championship with them together in the lineup. I told them to go to my office for 15 minutes and that I would respect their decision, as long as both of them agreed, to play or not to play together. This was a bit of a risk on my part, but it was very important that I gave them that power and ownership. Fifteen minutes turned into 90 minutes and still no sign of them on the practice courts. After the two hour mark, I went back and knocked on the door. There was heated conversation going on that could have gone on forever. I told them that they had five more minutes to come up with a decision. Minutes later they came out and said, "Coach, we want to play together." The next week they won all four matches together to win the championship.

This is just one example of how conflicts can bring teams together and help reach a higher level of trust between teammates. Tension is necessary to have an edge, but it needs to be funneled positively to accomplish an optimum level of performance.



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