

## ***Coaching Mastery—Book 3***

### ***Section 3:***

#### ***Working with Teams and Large Groups***

*In this section of COACHING MASTERY, I will describe how to design your Team or large-group program to be efficient in on-court training. In addition, I will show you how you can set up your team's practice schedule as well as how to manage large groups, how to create a challenge ladder that helps motivate all players, and how to avoid the need to cut players from your team.*

### **Chapter 10:**

#### ***Designing a program that gets the most out of your TEAM!***

**W**hen a coach is successful in recruiting and attracting large numbers of players, it can often become a daunting task in handling, organizing, training and teaching such large groups of players. For some it becomes a 'be careful what you wish for' scenario. But, this should not be the case.



**Figure 1:** When you follow the advice I offered in Chapter 3 (in Book ONE of Coaching Mastery), on attracting players, you will indeed reach your goal of having large numbers on your team or in your program...Now what? Here, over 75 players took part in one of my tennis programs in one day!

The aspect of coaching or teaching a large group of players should not only be rewarding, it should provide you with years of team champions and a large number of skilled players! I know that when you follow the coaching and teaching 'formula' I have set forth, you will not

only look forward to working with large numbers of students, you will enjoy seeing the improvement rate that members of large groups can achieve. For the teaching pro at a club, resort, or public tennis facility, the same practices I describe here are completely applicable to those individuals as well.

This chapter will deal with the programming, drills, and procedures that a coach or large-group instructor can follow. You can go by this information to the letter, or you can add or embellish parts of this program to fit your particular coaching model.

## High School Team Coaching

This is, perhaps, the most important chapter in this book for the high school tennis coach. Certainly learning how to attract players is important...but many coaches might already be blessed with great interest in tennis at the school they teach. And, your understanding of the Advanced Foundation and your comprehension of 'player potential' is certainly important to understanding what techniques will lead to player success. And, knowing what stroke patterns, drills, and progressions to use will help you as well.



**Figure 2:** How you run your 'day-to-day' coaching and teaching procedures will have everything to do with accomplishing your team goals. Here is my academy high-performance group during a clinic.

However, this chapter will deal with the day-to-day coaching procedures and programming in accomplishing all the things that have been discussed this far. Without a clear idea of how to 'run' your team, you will fail to reach your 'team's potential' and fail to capitalize on all the things previously discussed from the previous chapters of this book.

### **Cut or not to Cut? *Big decision, don't blow it!***

Creating a program that attracts large groups of players is a benefit many coaches simply don't want or don't take advantage of. Many such coaches believe that every kid over a certain number of team members exponentially makes coaching less effective and that much more difficult. Certainly, having large numbers increases the number of personalities, parent issues and the like. Yet, in my opinion, having large numbers of players coming out for your team is absolute heaven.

#### **Author's Quote**

"No one knows how—  
or when—a youngster  
will mature."

Consider this: if you have 12 boys or girls on your team, the 12<sup>th</sup> boy or girl doesn't have any pressure of anyone below them...there is no one coming after their spot on the team. Obviously, the 11<sup>th</sup> kid on your team is going to be pushed by the effort of this 12<sup>th</sup> and final member of your team. If number twelve is not going to be pushed to get better (by having players below him or her looking to get past them on the ladder), then you can see how the players above each of these players can be effected by how hard the last kid on the ladder wants to work. The idea of having twenty or thirty kids makes all those kids in the middle of your ladder have kids below them working hard to move up and over them. (I will talk more about challenges in a moment.) Every kid that you have on your ladder makes each kid on that ladder have to work harder because there is another kid below each kid striving to make it to the top. I call it the 'trickle up' theory...the stronger your last kid is, the better your team is. Obviously too, every team will have a 'last' kid on the ladder and thus every team will have this element of no one below them wanting to get up. But the idea of having many more players within your team's ladder increases each player's desire to move up. Knowing there are 20 kids looking to move up certainly can be more motivating to all players above them than only having two or three kids wanting to move up.

### **Author's Quote**

"If you cut a kid from your team—any kid—do you honestly believe you are going to inspire that kid?"

Cutting players is, in my opinion, not only a lazy decision, but the worse coaching decision a person can make. I have heard coaches remark, "I'll encourage the kids I cut to come out again next year." This is almost laughable. Most kids who have basically been told they 'aren't good enough' are not going to be motivated to face that coach and those other kids again the next year. The vast majority of cut kids will find another interest to occupy their time. It would be a rare case where a kid in such a situation would want to return to that team.



**Figure 3:** You never know when a child—at any age—will develop and mature. If you cut a player from your team or program, you will probably never know how good that person could have been.

A great example of this was when I was teaching a freshman boy at the tennis club I was working at; a boy who had never played before and was showing some real promise even after just a few lessons. His high school coach, ironically a fellow teaching pro at another club in our area, cut 4 kids off his already small team. Now consider this coach had six courts, and he cut 4 kids from the 21 he had...making his number only 17 players. With six courts, you should be able to coach at least 40 kids effectively! (Too bad this pro/coach was too proud or too arrogant to ask for advice!)

**Author's Quote**

“When you cut a player from your team, you basically eliminate ever knowing what that kid could have become.”

The sad part about this example is that the kid was really getting into tennis. Just one week before the coach cut the player, the kid's dad came up to me and told me that this was the first activity that his son was truly interested in. He never came out for the team again and quit playing altogether.

Even worse was the way this so-called coach cut this boy. He had all the kids challenge over a week's time. This new kid was working on skilled tennis strokes and, having only played a few weeks, lost to several of the kids who basically pushed the ball over the net to get it in play. Not too many kids just starting out, who are learning more effective and challenging techniques, are going to win matches against hackers and dinkers, especially those who have been 'playing' tennis longer! Yet, I would say that the vast majority of coaches across the country decide on who will be cut on this very method. I certainly understand it...it is easy, it is clean, and it takes the 'choice' of who to cut out of the coaches hands, in most cases. Yet, there are better ways to cut if you absolutely have to.

I will talk more about challenges and effective use of challenges in a moment.

The only situation that I would even consider cutting players from a team would be if the team was extraordinarily large and you had some juniors or seniors who had never played tennis decide to come out. Such players are going to be valuable only for one or two years at best in terms of potentially making the competing squad. They obviously may take up playing time and coaching time of younger players who will be with you for three or four years. However, I have never cut even these players for the reasons I have stated earlier: They can give you depth and make the other players compete harder to earn their spots. And, in reality, such players can give your team added maturity too.

**If you REALLY have to cut**

There are limitations to any team's size. Obviously, if you only have two courts and fifty kids come out for tennis, it would be nearly impossible (but, in my opinion not completely

impossible!) to effectively run a tennis program in such a situation. (I'll talk more about how you actually could keep such a team with so few of courts in a moment!)

My suggestion is to NOT cut players based on performance in challenge matches at the beginning of season. Such a method does not recognize players who are working hard on their game nor those who are dedicated and have the desire to improve. And cutting players based on initial abilities won't allow you to recognize those players who may suddenly or steadily improve within a single season. I have seen so many cases where several players, those who even I didn't believe they would—or could—improve, developed to the point of reaching very high positions on my ladder. Often, those players with potential and who are looking to learn better strokes and technique will lose to players who play tennis with little or no form, only using familiar, comfortable shots. Thus, such a method is counter productive to developing a successful team of players.

Instead, I would use the following procedures if I was faced with really having to cut players:

1. **Have all potential members write a two or three page report on a particular tennis player.** You can assign pro players or have them pick from a listing you give them. This assignment will tell you if the player is sincerely interested in tennis and is willing to do something 'extra' to prove it. In addition, they will probably learn something about the game by studying a particular pro and their accomplishments, strokes and personality. Those who don't complete the assignment obviously don't care enough about being on your team. In addition, kids who really want to play tennis will usually look at an assignment like this with a level of actual enjoyment as it deals with something they really want to learn and do. (Not always, however, but most kids who are worth keeping will look forward to completing this assignment.) Those kids that fail to complete this you can put on a probationary list. I would not cut directly from this assignment per se, but it would contribute to your knowing if they really want to be out for your team. It can be used in conjunction with the following procedures. (It would help to provide an outline for your students to use when looking for information about a player. A list of things such as: Style of play, years played, major tournaments won, contribution to the game, player personality, how they started playing, when they started playing, and other interesting facts.)
2. **Conduct a 'tryout' period where you assign them certain fundamental tasks to practice:** bouncing a ball up with the continental grip a certain number of times, perform a number of catches, or, how many alternate bounces they can accomplish in a row. (All of these drills are discussed in Chapter 7.) Chart each player's ability in each of several of these drills over a one or two week period. All of these drills can be practiced at home so there is no excuse for anyone not being able to practice such drills. By basing a decision to cut on such drills, you will find out several issues that are pertinent to your team's success: One, you will find out who is willing to practice hard (and outside of a regular team practice) to get really good at such drills; Two, you will improve every potential player's skill with the racquet and the continental grip through such a 'challenge' procedure.

*I do recommend that these 'tryout' challenges might only be conducted for new players coming out for the team. Your returning players, (those who have already 'proven' themselves either by having done such drills in the previous year, or have been on the team already), will probably already be fairly skilled to the point they could do hundreds of these consecutive hits already. Finally, it is always very interesting to see the competitive spirit each player puts into such a challenging 'tournament' to make the team.*

Such 'tryout' methods would prove which players 'earned' the right to make the team in addition to providing a vehicle to get them improving on the very concepts that will indeed help them reach skilled levels of play!

Even if you don't cut or run a 'try-out' session, I would still implement this 'tournament' at the very start of your season for all new players. It would really speed up their mastery of the continental grip for the serve, volley, slice and the two-handed backhand. It sets up a level of competition right from the start...even before actually have your first practice.

3. **Run a 'Grand Prix' set of tournaments.** (A Grand Prix is usually a set of tournaments where players earn points on their finish in each event; points are added and a winner is decided on the total number of points.) However, instead of deciding a winner based on points won by competing, base it only on participation. If you run a set of tournaments that are 'short sets' (first one to four games and each game starts at 30-All, or some variation of this), you can run them every day or every other day for two weeks. You will quickly find out who is committed to participating on your team and they will learn to compete early on. (You can always have trophies or suitable awards for the winners of each event and the winner of the Grand Prix...but, not make winning the requisite to making the team.)
4. **Rules, Etiquette and Strategy Test:** As mentioned in **Chapter 4**, it is a good idea to issue a Rules and Etiquette handout to all new players before season begins. You can test all the new players on their knowledge of this information and use the outcome of this test to help make your decision to cut players, if you have to.

Your handout should contain a basic list of the rules of tennis, including: Scoring, positions, tie-breakers, change-over, how to choose serve and side, etc. In addition, you should include Tennis Etiquette and proper on-court behavior. Also, I would include basic singles and double strategies. Additionally, you should provide a short list of techniques used in advanced play. This could include grips, footwork, swing path, and other techniques you want them to know as well as situational use of specific shots in competition such as the 'when and where' of approach shots, where to stand in doubles, etc.

## **Setting the Tone: Your first day of practice**

If you are a new coach or, you are a return coach but looking to establish a new program, your first day of practice is very important.

Certainly, the first day of practice should NOT be the first time you have had contact with your players. As discussed in **Chapter 4**, you hopefully have taken advantage of communicating your program goals, player expectations, and player responsibilities through pre-

practice contacts. Thus, the very elements that you have communicated will be the foundation of your practice ‘tone’.

Your personality will dictate some of this first practice tone. Regardless of whether you are a ‘Type A’ personality or you are reserved and exhibit a calm leadership, your effectiveness will include how you handle the first day of practice as well as how consistent you are with succeeding practices.

## ***Practice Schemes***

There are five areas that you must include within your practice routine to get the most out of each and every player. They don’t have to be practiced every day and they don’t have to be given equal time. You, (as the coach, pro, or tennis parent), will have to identify which of these areas need the most work and adjust your team’s, or player’s, practice time to accommodate such areas. The duration and regularity of each will also be dependent on your student’s level of play at that time. But, these areas should be considered and practiced with some regularity.

### **Five Areas of Practice:**

#### ***a. Stroke Grooving Drills***

These are drills designed to allow the player to work a very specific stroke repeatedly. Once players learn the correct stroke mechanic and can emulate it without breakdown, then grooving drills can be instituted. These drills include hitting the same shot with the same footwork and speed over and over until the stroke becomes permanent and can be repeated successfully. Every possible shot should be practiced this way; from topspin forehands and backhands to angle volleys, from overheads to drop shots and passing shots, all shots must be worked and polished.



**Figure 4:** Stroke grooving drills include specific repetitive movements that make the uncomfortable, comfortable; the unfamiliar, familiar.

The idea of stroke grooving is to teach the body (and the mind) how to reproduce the shot without thinking—much like being able to do what we call “everyday tasks”. Imagine if we still had to think about how to walk, or to open a door! Yet, many tennis players, even after years of playing and practicing tennis, still attempt to “think” their way through each shot!

There is a time and place to think about each shot. It is during this practice of grooving our shots that identification and isolation of certain moves or mechanics should be thought out and concentrated on. This is the “fine-tuning” of our strokes. As we get better, these subtle adjustments are necessary to facilitate the continued

improvement of our mechanical foundation. Modifications to our strokes can include things like adding that extra top spin for a dipping passing shot or hitting inside-out ground strokes for more angles to open the court up. Or, they can simply include working to hit deeper approach shots or volleys.

Obviously, beginners should focus on this type of practice early on and with great emphasis. It is well worth the time of a high school coach to work with all newcomers to tennis in the first two or three weeks in establishing the grips, form and footwork of every new player. I will talk more about this in **Chapter 11** on Team Practice. It is a critical element to any team's success to work first on making sure each player establishes the Advanced Foundation. When you do, your players will be able to employ the remaining four Practice Schemes with great success and progression. (Instead of having to figure out how to change poor stroke habits at a later point!)

### ***b. Game-situation Drills***

These drills include the sequencing of shots which players will want to successfully hit in match-play competition. Serve-approach-volley, baseline to baseline ground strokes, closing-in volleys followed by an overhead, blood-and-guts movements and poaching are but a few of these drills. Unlike grooving drills, game-situation drills focus on several different shots that are sequenced based on sound singles or doubles strategy.



**Figure 5:** By teaching proper mechanics and then providing the tools to create a repetition of such desired patterns, players will soon be improving by leaps and bounds! Here, Sam Moyle, a top junior in St. George, uses great form in his serve.

Like grooving drills, game-situation drills “program” a player to hit the right sequence of shots when needed. And like grooving drills, the repetitive nature of hitting a series of desired shots will increase the likelihood of being able to repeat it under pressure of competition. While high level tennis involves improvisation and the ability to adjust, working specific situational drills helps make them become ‘automatic.’ Through the ability to not specifically have to think about certain game-situation sequences, players are actually more free to improvise since they are not thinking...only reacting to situational forces.

It is important to make sure that players work on the desired form within these drills. Often, when players are put into hitting sequences, they abandon the stroke mechanics in favor of ‘steering’ the ball into the desired area of the court. Game-situation drills are the spring-board to using proper form in match play, (instead of reverting to more rudimentary patterns in competition).

***c. Rounding-out Drills***

These are unique drills that do not necessarily feature shots hit regularly in competition. They are, however, drills which can increase a player’s hand-eye coordination, agility, anticipation, and the ability to react to and hit shots from unlikely positions on the court.

For example, without developing hand-eye coordination, having the greatest strokes in the world will be useless to you. Your lack of timing and spatial relationships will result in errant shots despite having perfect form.

A player who has truly mastered the game of tennis can react to situations that don’t necessarily fall within the norm. Tennis players have all been faced with that freaky frame shot by their opponents that seems to be moving in slow motion. Players often react to these anomalies in what seems to them as slow motion! Sometimes we panic while at the net and our opponent’s shot clips the net tape, the ball jumping up and over our racket. Great players seem to be able to relax under these and other uncommon conditions to not only get their racket on the ball, but to turn these potential disasters into winners!

By incorporating as many “rounding-out” drills in your practice, you will learn to be calm and have the presence of mind enough to hit the right shot when these occasions do arise.

Examples of rounding-out drills that I often use in my teachings include: fast-hands drills, overhead reaction drills, sharp angle volley drills, the “oh-so-close-to-the-net” drills, “volleyball” tennis games, and even trick-shots such as behind-the-back shots and between the legs shots! (Yes, there is some value to those shots as well!)

**Author’s Quote:**

“Often, the problem is not learning a specific stroke technique. The problem is that beginners and intermediate players add TOO MUCH to specific shots. Pros make many shots look easy because they are so much more efficient. Most players add one or more elements to a swing that are not only unnecessary, but are usually detrimental to having a more advanced stroke.”

One of my favorite rounding out drills is learning to catch the moving ball on the racquet strings. (As discussed in **Chapter 7**) You probably have seen pros do this, and thought, “How do they do that?” It isn’t as hard as it looks! Not only is it fun to

do, by learning the technique, hand-eye coordination and timing needed to accomplish it will help your tennis!

Standing on one foot to serve, volley and even to move (by hopping!) to forehands and backhands are excellent rounding out drills. One-footed drills help develop balance and teaches players to swing ‘within themselves’, (since a player can’t overswing on one foot without falling down!)

Ply-metrics is another method of training. This is a training technique that does not change your mechanics but changes the essence of power, speed, rhythm, and timing of your strokes through distinct practice routines. These too don’t necessarily follow stroke patterns or strategies of match-play or competition. They do, however increase the players “holistic” being. That is, they exercise specific stroke segments through repetitive and magnified drills.

***d. Endurance and Conditioning Drills.***

When players develop a good foundation of tennis strokes, it is important to begin pushing the body in drills while maintaining solid mechanics. Player’s strokes tend to break down when fatigue sets in. Like any other sport, as a tennis player gets better, the demands on their body are increased. Beginners first learn to simply get the ball over the net and in the court. Consequently, the majority of their shots land near the middle of the court. Not too difficult for the beginner on the other side of the net! As a player improves directional control, balls now are hit further away from the opponent and thus, more movement takes place.

Advanced players must increase this area of practice. At high levels of competition and all things being equal, the player in better shape usually wins. Thus, advanced players will want to balance their practice with drills that also include extra movement. Look at what conditioning did for Andre Agassi in 1999! And in 2001, Jennifer Capriati took the first two major championships of the year, the Australian Open followed by the French Open, acknowledging her aggressive conditioning and training regiment as having a huge impact on her comeback.

In addition to the endurance and conditioning qualities, these types of drills teach players how to reach difficult shots and still have the composure to do something productive with them.

Generally, when beginners attempt to hit shots that they have to move for, any semblance of the strokes they may have learned goes out the door; arms go flying, footwork is entirely out of sync, and balance is completely lost!

**Author’s Quote:**

“Challenges on a school team’s ladder often provide more pressure than playing in a tournament or against another school. This is because the challenge will effect position on the team.”

The hardest part for beginners, when having to rush to get to a ball is controlling swing speed. Most beginners get to ball only to swing so hard that even if they make clean contact, the ball is hit a mile out! There is a golfer’s phrase I’ve

heard which I ascribe to these players who swing too hard: “It’s a hard shot; hit it hard.” Of course this is the worst thing any player can do! By swinging hard on a difficult shot, you multiply the chances of error almost exponentially! Watch as good players rush to a ball only to swing with a simple motion. They make it look easy.

In reality, it is!

Top players get to these tough shots and literally make it as simple for themselves as possible. They take a shorter backswing; they use their body’s momentum for power and usually take pace off the ball by the addition of extra slice or topspin. The follow-through is shortened and, consequently, by using all these methods, they cut down the likelihood of missing the shot.

Most players improve in gradual increments, usually first learning not to overrun shots or over swing. Once this is accomplished, a player learns how to slow their body down just prior to contact to maintain balance and control. Finally, accomplished players begin turning these difficult shots into offensive shots. (For example: hitting winners on the run or controlling a tough shot for a good defensive or offensive lob.)

To improve this area, your practice should include drills where the player must move to the ball. A “single shot” drill is where players move from one spot and attempt to get to a ball hit to another spot. An example of this is where players stand against the back fence and must hustle to reach a ball hit near the net. Players work on not only getting to the ball but also maintaining enough control to hit the ball back to a specific target.

“Multiple shots” drills include a series of movements that are more game-situation in design. “Blood and Guts” is one of my favorites where the pro or coach feeds random forehands and backhands to an individual. Usually 10 to 20 shots are used depending on the severity or difficulty of the series of shots. Players try to hit each shot to a target under control. (Usually all down-the-line or cross-court.) This drill can be used at the net as well. Players are fed shots at the net and are directed to hit the volleys down-the-line, crosscourt, or drop shots or angle volleys off difficult shots or reaction shots hit by the pro or partner.

### **Author’s Quote:**

“Every kid on a ladder is a ‘threat’ to the other kids. This is one reason why having so many kids on your team helps build depth: The more kids—the more they are challenged for a spot. Every kid tries that much harder.”

#### ***e. Match-Play Competitions***

All players **MUST** learn to play under pressure. Basic drills can’t simulate all the real pressures of competition, mainly because drills don’t offer the same intrinsic reward (or penalties!) that tournaments or other forms of competition do. However, different types of competition “scenarios” can be instituted in practice to help players learn to handle tournament competition. Coaches can utilize these “mini

competitions” in the form of ladder challenges to further impress their significance. (I will be discussing a variety of these mini competitions in just a moment.)

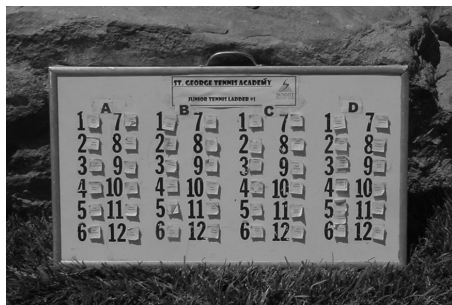
Although I don’t encourage betting, some kind of reward between players who challenge one-another is another way to increase the pressure of practice sets. It can be as simple as the loser buying a coke for the winner or the loser having to do something for the winner such as washing their car or mowing their lawn.

## ***Practice Theories: Challenges***

The number one controversy I’ve heard during my years as both a coach and a teaching pro is the way coaches conduct challenges. From my experience, there really is only one answer to this enigma if you want to produce great teams: Challenge consistently and often.

Some coaches don’t believe they need to challenge often. Some feel it takes away the ‘power’ of the coach in deciding who plays where. However, with this power comes a tremendous amount of discord and disharmony among the team players as well as from the parents because it sets up a perception of ‘favorites’ and coaches ‘protecting’ certain players so they don’t get knocked off.

Tennis is, for the most part, an individual sport. During a season, players can improve dramatically... especially if they have the right training, opportunity and motivation! Because of the aspect of tennis being both individual and having players improve, challenges are the best way of deciding who is worthy of being on which team. When you remove the threat of one kid knocking off another kid from their ‘spot’ on the team, you remove the inspiration for improvement that permeates all the way down the ladder. Challenges are a sure way to develop mental toughness since each challenge has potential consequences that can’t be matched through any drill or competitive situation.



**Figure 6:** A “team” ladder motivates players to want to ‘reach the top’. Use a challenge ladder to see which kids are going to ‘get tough’!

Over the years, I have had kids who were the last kids on my large teams—players who initially showed little or no talent for tennis—move up my tennis ladders, ended up being some of my most competitive players.

A classic example was in 1990, I had a Vietnamese boy, a freshman, come out for my large team. He, not only, was the last kid on my ladder, he seemed to possess not an ounce of natural athleticism. He had difficulty ‘drop-hitting’ a tennis ball and making contact with the ball! I was tempted to cut him just to save him the embarrassment of not having much—if any—success in tennis. It was my assistant coach who convinced me to stick to my guns and keep him. After all, the kid would stay long after practice and try and hit balls against the hitting wall or with anyone who would help him. By his sophomore year, he had become the number one

ranked doubles player in CIF and finished his three years on Varsity with a 175-5 record! Imagine if I had cut him!

## **Challenge Formats**

In addition to challenging often (we had challenges for half the team every single day except for the two weeks before our state playoffs where we wanted to have the team set so they could practice together), I recommend varying the type of challenge match every week. If you have a small team, you can challenge with regular sets or matches. However, you can train players to be both mentally and competitively tougher if you vary your challenges in the manner I am going to describe.

### **Short-Set Challenge**

This is where the score starts at 3-all or 4-all and each game starts at 30-all. This helps players learn to start tough and not get behind as many often do when they know they have a full set to play. In most of the following games, you can add this short-set format to make them go faster too.

### **One-Serve Challenge**

Players only have one serve instead of two to get the ball in play. This obviously emphasizes the ability of players to develop a strong second serve.

### **Deep-Ball Challenge**

After the serve, players must hit the ball past the service line on all shots. This drill teaches players to work on depth and placement.

### **No-Winner Challenge**

To win a point, the player must hit balls that are within legitimate reach of the opponent. This competition is a great way to teach players to not go for winners too soon as well as teaching consistency and winning by not making an error.

### **Down the Line Challenge**

Here, the players use only half of the singles court and must serve to the service box down the line instead of crosscourt. This is a great competition to use when you have huge numbers of players and you need to get more playing competitive matches. You can have four players on each court playing singles in this way. While you will have some points where players hinder the player next to them, this is actually not that common and, more importantly, it really fine-tunes a player's ability to control the ball as well as work on down the line strokes and volleys.

### **Serve and Volley Challenge**

Every player must come in behind the serve. This challenge develops players to learn how to get to the net, how to hit transition volleys better, (excellent for doubles players!), and how to work on passing shots and lobs. It gets kids out of the realm of staying back and hitting groundstrokes all day.

## Slice-Only Challenge

In helping players learn how to use the slice more effectively, you can have the kids only hit slices in all shots. They will often discover how to hit better drop shots, slice approach shots and defensive slice strokes faster when forced to use them in a set.

## 21-point Challenges

No serve, players instead drop-feed the first ball and play out the point after the first two hits. Players alternate the feed every two, three or five points. You can decide which way. Play first player to reach 21 points. This is a fast way to play a challenge and it takes away the serve as a weapon for the players and makes them have to win the point through the rally.

### Author's Quote:

“Make your ladder an inspiration to your team and to your players. Think of your Ladder as a ‘trophy case’...a place to recognize past and present champions.”

## Mini-Tennis Challenges

Serve underhand from behind the service line down the line and play the point out with the service box as the court. Rules can include: the receiving player must stay behind the service line until the serve is hit; Volleys must be hit with under-spin (no smashes), score like a regular game or like a '21 Point' game. Great way to teach touch and to include two challenges on each court. Also, you can use this as a great game of 'King of the Court' where you play for a short period of time (2 or three minutes usually) and score where only the server gets a point if they win a rally when serving. Each winning team moves up to the next 'court' and losers move down. Play for 10 rotations with the team that wins on the 'King Court' on the tenth rotation wins the tournament.

These are but a few of the ways you can diversify your practice and challenges so that they are kept fresh as well as allow players to focus on specific strategies.

## When to use a Different Challenge Game

In most cases, I would only use regular sets if the challenge was between one player on one team (i.e.: varsity), and another on the lower team. Because these more unique games (listed above) usually focus on one type of strategy, they are often not the best to use for determining a change between teams. I recommend that you use them for challenges between the top player on down to the next-to-last player on that particular team within the ladder. Because the last ladder position on any team is the 'hot seat', I prefer to make the challenges between that position and the one above him as well as the one below him on the next team be regular sets.



Figure 7: A team or program ladder should be designed so that players can have goals of reaching the top of one section and then challenge onto the next.

## The Ladder Itself!

Many coaches fail to take advantage of a huge motivating tool: The actual LADDER! Too many coaches keep a little clip board that is hard to read and isn't very 'public'. The whole aspect of having challenges is that it motivates players to not only get better, but to 'earn' a spot higher on the ladder. And, when you make the ladder a very visual and 'public' device, kids are that much more motivated to reach higher spots!

At every school I have coached at, I built a new ladder just for that team. The ladder should be of decent size, mobile, and as attractive as you can make it. (Refer to **Chapter 3** for information regarding Challenge Ladders.) I used vinyl covered plywood and attached a metal frame around it and a handle. Your ladder should have several extra items which I will describe here:

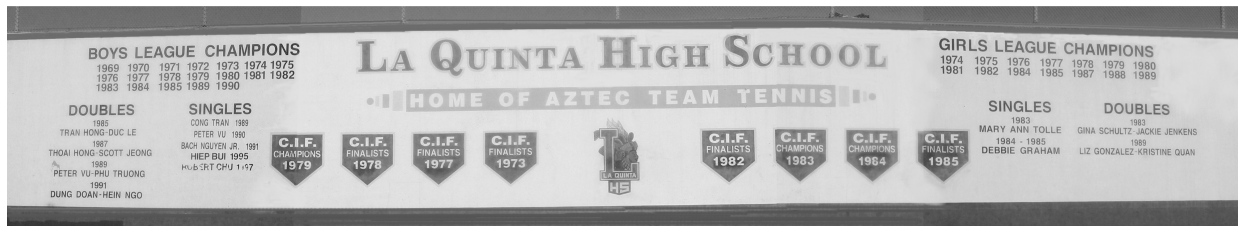
1. Space for every kid with movable name plates so that you can move each player's name up or down. In the past, I used engraver's plates which were metal holders that you could slide a 'Dymo' label in and out of. (Dymo are those products that you can punch letters on different sized and colored plastic label strips.) Eventually, it became harder to find the holders for these strips so I then got Velcro squares and glued on a player's name on each square. You can move the names easily on and off the Velcro back piece that is stuck on your ladder.



**Figure 8:** Including school logo or emblem on your ladder adds a sense of connection and ownership for each player on your ladder. Above, the proud "Aztec" logo at my former school LaQuinta H.S.

2. Group your ladder by levels: Varsity, J.V. Frosh-Soph or 'Challengers' or another such level. Number each spot for each name. For example in California, we had nine players on each level. So, each level was numbered 1-9. You can add a second number, a full numeration for the entire team...so a player could be number 4 on the J.V. team but also he could see that he was number 13 overall. You can put this second set of numbers on one side of the name plate, and the actual level number on the other side.

3. Create enough room to add school stickers that signify that you are a TEAM playing for that school.
4. Allow a place to list 'League Champions' for individuals who play for your team to have recognition on that ladder. It adds a flavor of history for kids to see past 'champions' and instills a sense of wanting to be another name listed!
5. Allow another areas for your past team records. This also supports the TEAM feel and reminds players that they are playing for the team, not just themselves.



**Figure 9:** Your team ladder should be a smaller version of a "Wall of Fame". Include as many team and individual accomplishments as you have room for.

This simple device, your tennis LADDER, will be one of the best motivating tools you will ever have on your team. Knowing this, take the time to build your ladder to be one that your kids will be PROUD to be on and can be SEEN on!

In the off-season, you can remove any graduating seniors, move up the remaining players and have them challenge. Tell all players they must agree to accepting a challenge within a period of time (usually within a week), or the challenging person below him or her gets to move over them.

### Using the Challenge Ladder

Some coaches have a ladder but then 'override' the ladder order and play students above others who have 'earned' their spot. Unless you want to have your players lose respect for you, please don't do this! In fact, if you insist on 'setting the team' yourself, don't use a ladder at all. But if you don't use a ladder, as I have said, you are ignoring the most important teaching, motivating and coaching tool you could have.

The problem with a ladder is when you get that one kid who plays challenges great but can't play well against the other schools or teams. This is rare, but I won't kid you, it does happen. From my experience, you should stick to using the ladder to identify each team's membership. Here's why: Once you abandon the ladder to accommodate one kid's performance (or lack thereof!) you will cause havoc in your team. The kid you move down who should be on the team because of ladder position, will despise you. (And so will his parents!) And, the next time another kid loses a 'team match' the other kids will wonder if you will move him down too. The measure of playing well or not, winning or losing, against other teams is a subjective decision at best. Sure there will be kids that choke and play poorly against other teams. However, if such a player can beat the kids below them on the ladder, then, in my opinion, they have 'earned the right' to choke, so to speak, against other teams. You can tell the kids below that

player to work harder to prove THEY belong in that other kid's spot...and in the long run, you will probably end up with a better team by sticking to using the ladder.

In your pre-practice communication, declare how the ladder will be used. That is, if you are going to 'freeze' the ladder prior to a big tournament, regional or other playoffs, make sure you identify when this will occur. I always liked to stop all challenges 10 days before our Team Playoffs. That way, the players know they will indeed be competing and can focus more on fine-tuning their game instead of facing the possibility of losing their position right before the big match. I always made sure that the next three or four kids that did NOT make the playing squad for the playoffs still practiced as if they were. You never know when a player on your team might get hurt, sick or become ineligible or has a family emergency and can't play. Making sure those next few kids are well practiced helps you not panic if and when something like that occurs.

### **Singles or Doubles Ladders?**

Having taught tennis in three states, I can say that there are differences in many states in how they run tennis. In California, the team is made up of three singles players and three DIFFERENT doubles teams. In Arizona, they use a 'college' format of six singles players and three doubles teams that can be made up of those same six singles players or others. In Utah, they use three singles players and two different doubles teams.

Obviously, you may need to identify who is going to play doubles and who isn't. This sets up a question of whether you should use one singles ladder to determine who plays Varsity or J.V., or whether you use a separate singles ladder and a separate doubles ladder.

Again, from my experience, here is my suggestion: Use a singles ladder only to determine your competing team. Here are my explanations:

1. Using a singles ladder, each player must 'prove' themselves through singles play.
2. Singles play usually helps all players become better players, singles AND doubles.
3. Doubles teams often end up switching partners for part of the season until the teams are set. This prevents the ability to run a doubles ladder.
4. With double's ladders, you can often get players who are 'carried' by the partner; this can create dissention and unhappy players among those who might be better than the carried partner.
5. Using a single ladder to determine your team will diminish the chance of having unhappy parents who can argue that their kid might be a better player than one you have above their kid because of the doubles ladder.

It is much easier in most cases to make up who your doubles teams will be from the singles ladder than trying to work through the problems I listed with a doubles ladder. Of course, if you have a team that works well together, and one of the partners gets knocked off the team, you will have some difficulty for sure. However, I have seen players work with their partner that they like to play with so that they don't get knocked off. This is a win-win for you! Your players

are motivated to work hard, and you know that if, indeed, someone still beats them, they are going to be the better player.

### **Challenge Ladder Rules**

I have seen many coaches use a ladder but never establish ‘rules’ of the ladder. This is important as the integrity of the ladder rests within the rules you set up. Because I have coached for so long, I can offer these ‘rules’ that have been well proven to work for me over the years.

### ***Up Challenges***

When a lower kid challenges a higher kid from one team to another, (like the number one J.V. player challenging the last Varsity player), we always made the lower kid have to win two out of three sets. This way, the lower kid had to ‘prove’ that he is indeed better than the person he would be replacing on the higher team. If you only played one set, it is not uncommon for the higher player to start slow or that the lower player plays a little ‘out of their mind’ in a first set. Making the lower player win two out of three sets helps insure that they deserve to be in that next position. If the higher player wins the first set, the challenge is over. Only if the lower player wins the first set do they have to play two-out-of-three sets.

### ***Challenge Sequence***

If a player loses a challenge, that player must take another down challenge and win before he or she can challenge up again. If a player wins, they should be able to challenge the next player above them without having to take a down—until they lose.

### ***Jumping Players***

I always allowed players to challenge up to two players above them within their team. (A number two J.V. player would not be allowed to challenge the last kid on varsity. They would have to wait until they were number one J.V. to challenge the last kid on varsity.)

By allowing internal jumping, it allowed players to have more diversity in their challenges. Also, it is not uncommon for one player to end up having to play the same kid above him or below him all the time when you only allow one-position challenges. It also allowed for challenges over kids who might be out sick or couldn’t be at practice for a day.

### **Absent Players**

When ever a player missed a practice with an ‘excused absence’, they would have to take a down challenge when they returned. This is because if they missed practice, the player who missed would have to ‘prove’ that he was still better than the kids who were at practice.

Players who missed practice without an excuse would be moved down one position automatically for each missed practice. Obviously, there might be other consequences that you might have for such a student. And, you might have degrees of unexcused absences. Here are some of my unexcused absences and the consequences:

1. A player who has detention with a teacher because they did something wrong in a class: Automatically dropped one spot on the ladder. (I don’t consider this excusable as doing something wrong in a class is inexcusable for my players.)

2. A player who has to make up a test, homework or assignment because they didn't complete it on time. Automatically dropped one spot on the ladder.
3. An absence because of a family event that was not discussed prior to having to miss practice. Automatically dropped one spot on the ladder.
4. An absence due to 'ditching' practice: Suspended from playing team matches for a period of time. Must still practice and challenge and not have any other infractions. (This is major in my book. I have kicked kids off my teams for missing practice because they wanted to hang out with their girlfriends or go to the mall, or something. If they have made a commitment to my team, they better fulfill the commitment fully.)
5. Missing practice due to another school activity that was not discussed prior. I have seen kids miss practice, matches, and even state playoffs because the player was in a musical, played in the school orchestra and it had a competition, or other conflicting programs. My belief is that if they are out for tennis, they are to commit first and foremost to the tennis schedule. I'm not ruling out that players can't participate in other school or outside programs. But during tennis season, they are to commit to the team fully. If they can't do that, then they can't play on the team.

### **Setting up your Challenge Ladder**

If you do not maintain a year-round challenge ladder or if you are a new coach or have never used a ladder, setting it up and establishing the player order can be a bit challenging. However, if there are returning players, you can probably set up their positions based on the previous year's position.

I suggest you have a 'try out' session. This is where you have the kids drill or hit and you use a clipboard with all the player's names listed with a space to 'rate' each kid as you see them drill or hit. Not too different than the National Tennis Rating Program (NTRP), you can classify your players by their ability to hit certain shots, by how they can keep the ball in play, and by their overall experience. Give each player a number between 1 and 7. Here is a simple guideline you can use to classify. You can always make your own too.

1-2: Beginner with average hand-eye coordination and rhythm.

2 -3: Beginner but more advanced abilities to get the ball over the net and in play.

3-4: Intermediate: have some strokes, footwork ok

4-5: Higher intermediate: good strokes, good first serve, can volley correctly

5-6: Low Advanced: Can rally with pace and good aim; excellent first serve, good second serve. Can volley deep and with sharp angles and has some weapons

6-7: High advanced: Strong 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> serves; weapons from several positions, good touch and knows how to manufacture points and change strategies.

Once you have rated all your players, you can put them in some logical order on your ladder. Explain that the ladder is far from set and that there will be many challenges throughout the season for all players to ‘earn’ their spots.

Another way to establish your ladder, if you have more time, is to set up mini round robins based on the ratings you have given each player. Let’s say you have 30 new kids. Eight of them are 2-3 levels, ten are 3-4, and twelve others are in the 4-5 range. Set up round robins where the first eight plays each other, the second ten are grouped in two round robins of five each, and the last twelve are in two round robins of 6 each. Between the ladders within the same division, you can have the winners of each group play, the second place finishers play and so on to determine their initial positions prior to being put on the full team ladder.

This does take time, but it sets up the ladder a bit more accurately from the start and the players can feel they earned their spots more than if you just put them in based on your observations of them hitting.

## Rainy Day Practices

As mentioned in **Chapter 4**, defining and capitalizing on every “opportunity” is an area that team coaches often fail to recognize. If you are like most schools or tennis teaching facilities, you most likely have outdoor courts. Most coaches send their kids home when they have a rainy day. It always amazed me that many coaches would cancel team practice at the first sight of rain clouds or a little drizzle! In contrast, I welcomed rainy days for many of the reasons I mentioned in **Chapter 4**. Because I know that during those days which other coaches sent their kids home, my kids were always getting better! In addition, rainy days offer a change in your normal practice routines allowing you to work on other tennis-related practices that you might not normally do on a regular day out on the courts. Below is a list of things that I did as a coach (and as a tennis teaching professional at my own tennis club) that you can use to improve your players on these days which on-court practice is not available.

1. **Gym Practice:** In many cases, I had access to the school gym during rainy days. Understand first, that other sports might have coaches how, like you, look for ways to practice on rainy days too...so, some communication with these coaches or sharing of facilities is often important. For example, if the baseball team wanted to use the gym, I worked it out with the baseball coach that for the first hour, I would take my kids in a classroom and discuss strategy or watch tennis videos while the baseball team used the gym first. We would then take the gym and the baseball coach took his team in a classroom to talk baseball elements.

### Inside the Gym:

You can do many of the same drills that you do on the court, including volley drills (over an imaginary net) and “Toss and Block” drills. (As discussed in **Chapter 7**) In addition, you can do conditioning drills like “Jog & Volley” drills and Large Group Volley Circle Drill, as discussed in **Chapter 11**. Here are some other tennis-related skills you can work on in the gym:

1. **Drop shot Practice:** Have a 5-gallon bucket placed in a corner of the gym and have players line up working on hitting drop shots to land in the bucket. (Place a wad of

newspaper or a towel in the bottom of the bucket so the balls don't bounce out when they land inside.) Players work on under spin drop shots working on the footwork and form associated with this shot. (See **Chapter 9** for drop shot information.)

- a. **Drop Shot Game:** Have two or more groups form a circle around each bucket, each player standing about 20 feet from the bucket. Give each player a tennis ball. When you yell "go", each player tries to hit their ball into the bucket. If they miss, the ball will go across to one of the other players in the circle who will try to hit the ball in the bucket. When one team has all their balls in the bucket, they win.
2. **Volley Drills:** Have your players paired up with equal ability players in two straight lines with each partner facing each other about five to seven feet apart. Start with forehand to forehand volleys where they keep the ball in the air and controlled. After every 30 seconds, have each player step two steps to their right. This will set each partner at an angle to each other. After another 30 seconds of volleys on the angle, have them move two more steps apart and continue volley practice on these more and more severe angles. Do this until the players are about 20 feet apart. Reverse the direction and shift to backhand volleys until the players have moved together and then apart again in the opposite direction.
    - a. You can move through nearly all the live-ball volley drills that are outlined in **Chapter 7** in this same type of practice with partners.

**Note:** While it is hard to run a practice in the gym with groundstrokes, depending on the numbers, you can put up a rope or some portable nets and have players at the "net" work on put-away volleys off a drop-fed or short ball toss feed to one player who hits to the net man who in turn plays this live ball to a target. Because most gym floors are slick, I don't recommend trying to rally any live ball groundstrokes with players.

### **Rainy Days in the Halls**

I found it necessary to practice in other locations at the schools I have coached at, including indoor halls and outdoor covered halls. Even within confined spaces, you can do nearly all the volley drills you can do in the gym or on the court. You might have limitations as to the movements or the pace of some drills. However you can find ways to improve even in such small places. Another drill I would do is put kids up against the walls in hallways and have them learn to volley against the wall and keep the ball in play under control using the volley or half-volley pattern. Here again, your players can work on gaining more control of their racquets as well as really hone their skills using the continental grip.

### **Rainy Days in the Classroom**

While it is next to impossible to actually hit balls in a classroom without moving all the desks out, there is much you can do to teach kids about tennis in the classroom. I actually enjoyed being in the classroom when I had no other option. (Or, I would break up the rainy days in the gym or the halls by taking the kids in the classroom for part of the time.) Here is a short list of things that you can do with kids in the classroom.

1. Watch videos, DVD's, or if possible, show video clips from various tennis web-sites if you have a projector for your computer.
2. Discuss singles and doubles strategies using a chalk board/dry-erase board showing positions, strategies, movements, etc., and discuss what happens and why.
3. Have kids get in groups and use old tennis magazines to cut out pictures of tennis players and glue them into notebooks. Have the kids write out a description of the shot the picture is of and identify the grip, footwork and intent of the shot by the pro in the picture.



**Figure 10:** Taking notes on anything from stroke technique to strategies, from tennis tips to mental images, a player can improve themselves off the court as well as on.

4. Have kids work on Player Notebooks, (as described in **Chapter 4**). If you are a teacher at the school, it is not a bad idea to have your kids start this notebook at your first team meeting and keep them in a storage-box in your room so that they can write in it often, especially on these rainy days. You can discuss your team's Mission Statement or Goals you established in your pre-season meeting, or, you can have each player revisit their own personal goals. If you have a school computer lab, have each player do a short report on a favorite player from information they can find on the Internet.
5. Discuss rules, etiquette, team procedures, and various situations that could come up during a match. Use the USTA's "Friends at the Court" rules book and discuss rules that might not be clear in everyone's mind. There are a host of rules that many players either don't know or are not familiar with. A simple knowledge of the rules can be the difference in a set or match. Knowing various rules such as what happens if a player's foot or clothing touches the net or when it is legal to touch a ball on your opponent's side of the net, or where you can stand in doubles all can be the difference in a particular set or match!

As you can see there are many ways in which you can improve your team during times you can't be on the court. I'm sure there are many additional ways that you can come up with that will increase these options.

No matter what you do, by taking the time to improve during these opportunities gives each player on your team the feeling that they have, indeed, taken extra steps to improve. The old axiom, "The harder you work, the harder it is to fail" is certainly applicable in using your time effectively. To paraphrase a line from the movie Sound of Music: "When the Lord closes a door, somehow a good coach opens a window." If you want your team to be the best, finding those windows gets a whole lot easier!

In the next chapter, I will discuss ways to increase your ability as a team to train large numbers of players on a limited number of courts.

