

The Collective Conscious of Our American Juniors

By USTA NorCal Manager of Player Development, Dan McCain

Nearly every education major in colleges across the nation will run into a quote before they become teachers. The famous UCLA Basketball Coach John Wooden repeated it in a number of his speeches: "No written word, nor spoken plea can teach our youths what they should be, nor all the books in all the shelves, it's what the teachers are themselves."

To say that parents and coaches have significant influence over junior players both in the home and on the court would be stating the obvious. Coach Wooden, who, through the use of his Pyramid of Success among other things, guided his UCLA Basketball teams to a dynasty of ten National Championships that the sports world has to this day only seen since his time spent at the helm of that program. He embodied what he preached, and defined success as "peace of mind that is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best that you are capable of becoming."

Winning, as you can see, is not addressed in this definition. And Coach Wooden was famous for never mentioning the word in his practices, and disallowed the usage of it among his players. **Becoming the best player one could be at all times, being responsible for his own actions, giving the best effort both in training and in competition, and genuinely learning the craft were all qualities he demanded of his players,** but more importantly it was qualities he embodied himself.

What is vital to our American tennis culture, among adults, parents, kids and coaches, is that this approach, this attitude becomes embraced on a mass scale. Rather than assuming talent is the main predictor of success, that mindsets are uncontrollable, that work ethic is innate, and that success is only up to the player – we as a culture can evolve toward having the resources and ability to create the environments that breed successful players. **While nature is a factor, nurture is the predictor in the tennis world,** which includes parenting, coaching, and training.

The Science of Success: Coach and Parent Roles

Anders Ericsson, Michael J. Prietula, and Edward T. Cokely, in an article entitled *The Making of An Expert* for the Harvard Business Review wrote, "**Experts are always made, not born.**" They went on to say that the countless experts across a range of fields they examined had practiced intensively and deliberately, studied with devoted teachers and mentors, and had been supported enthusiastically by their families throughout their developing years.

The headline in their article reads "**New research shows that outstanding performance is the product of years of deliberate practice and coaching, not of any innate talent or skill.**" When describing the deliberate practicing and coaching aspect of it, the authors wrote how mentors of experts taught them to coach themselves, encouraged and often forced their pupils to practice not only things they were good at, but also things "beyond their current level of competence and comfort."

Coaching, in an ideal sense, is a two-way street, where students receive messages, but also offer opinions and questions. More specifically, **a good coach not only teaches their kids the fundamentals, but also shows their kids how to think for themselves,** to problem-solve, and to understand the game and make their own decisions with awareness.

The same could be said for parenting. "Setting limits helps your child develop a sense of self-control. Encouraging independence helps her develop a sense of self-direction. To be successful in life, she's going to need both," wrote Laurence Steinberg, PHD, in his book *The Ten Basic Principles of Good Parenting*.

And of course everyone thinks they are a good tennis parent, just as every coach thinks they do a brilliant job. But to maximize one's capacity for striking a forehand, for example, certain elements of technique need to take place in the stroke – regardless of personal style and idiosyncrasy – as seen by the technical common denominators of the best pros on tour. And while being a smart player can mean different things for different people, pros also have, en masse, displayed **a small range of shot selection choices in various situations** that seem to work far better than others. As Ericsson puts it, "deliberate practice involves two kinds of learning: improving the skills you already have and extending the reach and range of your skills." Either the coach has taught the most vital parameters of technique and tactics to the student or not, and students will inevitably become a reflection of their coaches ability or inability to think and communicate the nuances of the game clearly. What our American juniors and their parents need to constantly consider is whether or not this is happening during the time they have with their coaches – in addition to being more curious of said coach's track record and experience – partially as a player – and mostly as a coach. **Players need not to judge themselves next to other players, but rather next to their own potential**, and coaches are just as responsible for bringing out that potential as the players themselves.

Coaches must display an insatiable desire to absorb more information about how to teach the game if they expect their students to show a similar desire to constantly evolve as players. Parents must be the example within their own careers and occupations for their kids if they expect their offspring to develop a genuine need to see beyond limitations, to reach beyond the achievements of the average, and to plan every day toward becoming great at their craft. It's all relative, as a good student does not always make a good teacher, just as a good player does not always make a good coach, unless said leader immerses him or herself into the profession and learns how to coach. While virtually everyone has been taught how to play the game, in the US **it is rare to find a coach that has been taught by masters how to teach the game**.

The qualities of successful people can be observed and measured, and identifying them can be helpful in creating the proverbial roadmap to raising a successful person and player. **Simple things like carrying your child's tennis bag, filling their water jug for them, making calls on their behalf to set up practices or lessons, signing them up for tournaments, talking to them or picking up the balls during their lessons, and waiting on their beckon call in a variety of ways can actually be harmful to the child's growth, particularly to the qualities of self-reliance, responsibility, and independence**. Done as a favor once in a while is one thing, but... While they are all acts of love, the child, when served like this, has virtually no responsibility for his own tennis career, and often develops a sense of entitlement. Players begin to expect things to be done for them, and develop little ability to do things on their own. Allowing, for example, kids to skip the pre-match jump rope and warm up routine to play video games on their iPods is hardly a way foster a focused mindset and a well-prepared strategy before walking out on court.

Deliberate Practice

Malcom Gladwell, in his bestselling book *Outliers*, made an effort similar to Ericsson and company in defining what it takes to become successful. Gladwell cites a range of studies that show that talent alone, or ability based on genetics, is a poor predictor of success. Culture,

environment, personality, work ethic, parental support systems, and mentoring are far more accurate factors that predict ultimate success.

Specifically, [he discusses the 10,000 Hour Rule](#), which says that it takes 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to become great at something. He cites Mozart (who was also cited by Ericsson and friends in the Harvard Business Review article), the Beatles, Michael Phelps, and many others that all [spent over 10 years honing their skills under skilled mentors and practicing before producing truly great results](#).

Gladwell also discusses how greatness seems to require a certain minimum baseline amount of talent, which he calls "entrance criteria", but after that, the rest is explainable by the following factors.

Cultural and economic issues aside, many of the most successful tennis players have similar characteristics and upbringing. [They all have had at least 10,000 hours of deliberate practice, most or all of which was with good coaching](#). And most of them had the following six elements either available or instilled in them growing up:

1. Mentoring and good on-court coaching
2. Personality and work ethic
3. Parental guidance and support
4. Self-reliance, confidence and belief
5. Consistent goal setting (short term and long term)
6. Competition and practice pathway that promotes both playing under pressure and exposure to new and different levels of play.

What the 10,000 Hour Rule exemplifies is a "How To" guide of *immersion*. Dictionary.com defines immersion as "a state of being deeply engaged or involved; absorption." Having 10,000 hours of deliberate practice can mean different things to different people, but essentially it comes down to a simple idea: [you will get out of your tennis career what you put into it](#). By creating the environment that contains the checklist of aspects listed above, you can create a roadmap for yourself that can help you further immerse yourself in the game.

What Gladwell does not say - and any good coach would concur - is that 10,000 hours of practice will make you great at something. What he does say is that 10,000 hours of *deliberate* practice can make you great at something. For us in the tennis world, that means surrounding yourself with the right people, the right coaches, having a plan for each practice, and constantly looking to develop your own character on the court, your own tactical and strategic abilities, and certainly your own technique for each stroke.

The idea that knowledge is power is what Gladwell implies in his description of deliberate practice. Practice alone on the court for hours and hours will only take you so far. [Greatness, however, is spawned from playing and practicing with the intention of learning more](#) about how exactly you wish to hit the ball, where you want to hit in a range of point scenarios, and why. And there are plenty of examples of this, like knowing where your elbow should be when you make contact, the positioning of your wrist during your backswing, defining when to

use an open stance, what it means to play good defense, how exactly to brush across the ball on a kick serve, how to generate positive energy in between points, and so on.

These are just a few examples of short-term assignments that can be focused on each day or each week - that exemplify deliberate practice. **Greatness comes from focusing on small tasks every day that build toward a larger goal.** A good practice is not one where a student hits a million balls, but rather one where the student walks away from the experience of practicing and knows more about how he wants to do things.

A truly immersed player discusses with his coach regularly how to swell his strengths, identify and find solutions for his weaknesses, and constantly looks to evolve as a player, as a person, and looks to get better every day. The capacity for self-reliance and knowledge of how and why their strokes work, is one major contributing component to confidence on court.

The pride produced by daily reinforcement of process-oriented thinking versus result-oriented thinking can easily be seen through the body language of players particularly in between points during matches. Players that are obsessed more with their level of play and the details that cause the ebbs and flows of their own execution – instead of the end result – are the players that ultimately find more joy in the sport and as a consequence more success.

Talent and Success: “Greatness isn’t born, it’s grown”

Greatness seems to require a certain amount of ability, or "entrance criteria", as Gladwell and others have mentioned, but studies have shown that talent - however defined - is a poor predictor. Of course, a certain baseline amount of talent is required of all great athletes, but the Geoff Colvin book entitled *Talent is Overrated* discusses **why culture, environment, work ethic, personality, and mentorship are all far better predictors of success than talent** in a similar way that *Outliers* tackles the issue. Daniel Coyle’s book *The Talent Code* gives a “How To” for its headline “Greatness isn’t born, it’s grown,” and the list of these recent studies goes on and on.

Becoming a great player does require some talent – which perhaps could mean physical agility and the intellectual capacity to understand how and why hitting the ball can work. The idea here though is that once you reach a certain point, talent will only take you so far. For example, experienced players and coaches have witnessed a number of players with all the physical gifts that a player could ever want – and beautiful strokes as well – and that same person could rarely win a match that really mattered.

A top nationally ranked player would consider someone like this common, and certainly one who never was able to become a smart player that possessed genuine toughness and resolve for whatever reason.

What nearly all success stories, particularly in the game of tennis, have in common – is that they have found a way to create an environment for themselves that contains the list of factors mentioned in this article. **Ambition, resources, guidance, and wisdom are the characteristics that most often separate the most successful players from everyone else.**

Process versus Result Oriented Thinking

"You can outscore people and lose at times, and you can be outscored on court and still be a winner at times, and I feel that doing all the things that allow you to give your best effort makes you successful in my book," said Coach Wooden.

Jerry Lynch, former National Championship winning Men's Tennis Coach at University of California at Santa Cruz, takes Wooden's sentiments a step further. "We are a society obsessed with winning. When stressed about the outcomes, your body is unable to move with the fluidity or flow that so necessary for a winning performance. Your greatest triumphs are always the byproducts of your ability to demonstrate the level you have attained in anything you do... You do this by focusing on the moment, the experience itself, rather than by trying to control the outcome or results... With such awareness, you are in position for sustained success in athletics and in life."

To say that that this attitude is widespread among athletes today in the tennis world would be a gross exaggeration. To say even that this attitude permeates the draws of the most elite tournaments in the continental US would be equally drastic, but establishing such a collective conscious of our American juniors is certainly a possibility. As the game has evolved to new equipment – new racquet and string technology – it fostered refined techniques for hitting every shot imaginable, it enhanced fitness directives, and so on – the game can also evolve in the realm of emotional fitness, psychological strength, a better definition of success, and an exponentially increased priority on development instead of results.

Parents, often without realizing it, always contribute to this – one way or another. By showing frustration when a child misses a shot or loses a match, by constantly looking online to discover ranking information, by displaying disappointment over results instead of considering the overall performance, parents contribute to a result-oriented thinking player. This player is so **distracted by winning and the fear of losing** (or fear of disappointing mom or dad) that he or she cannot fully be in the present moment and focus on executing technique and making sound decisions on court with purpose and on purpose.

An ideal parent is supportive of good behavior, good effort, and makes **NO effort to coach the child.** As pattern detectors, kids see the desire parents have to win and therefore internalize pressure on themselves as a result. On the flip side, kids also see parents primarily interested in good behavior, good effort and focus, and using each experience on court to grow as a person and as a player. Either way, kids will behave accordingly so as to please the parent. It would be ridiculous to think that a carpenter would be able to do the job of an astronomer, just as it would be ridiculous to expect an accountant to do the work of an architect. **An ideal world has the coaches coaching and the parents parenting.** Parents, in this ideal world, offer consistent, unconditional love and support, without criticizing technique or shot selection.

What it Takes

The following was taken from the AP news posting in August of 2010, and highlights a quote from WTA touring pro Maria Kirilenko, who has had relative quality resources and coaching throughout her career:

In an all-Russian quarterfinal, Maria Kirilenko beat Dinara Safina 6-3, 6-3. Kirilenko said she's not surprised so many Russians are doing so well on the Tour. "We work a lot," she said. "That's why I think we have good results, you know. Because to have a talent, is not enough. You have to be patient. You have to work a lot. You have to fight. All these together. So I think that's why we have so many Russians."

It is this commitment and attitude that our American juniors can easily possess. **By focusing on the development instead of rankings,** and the constant concentration on becoming the best player possible rather than the so-called need to win certain tournaments or achieve

certain rankings, we as a nation can begin to produce a much larger pool of players that are reaching their potential and enjoying the journey of their playing careers. It is this commitment, however, that will remain forever out of reach for our American juniors that grow into adults without a clear message coming from within the home and from their mentors and coaches.