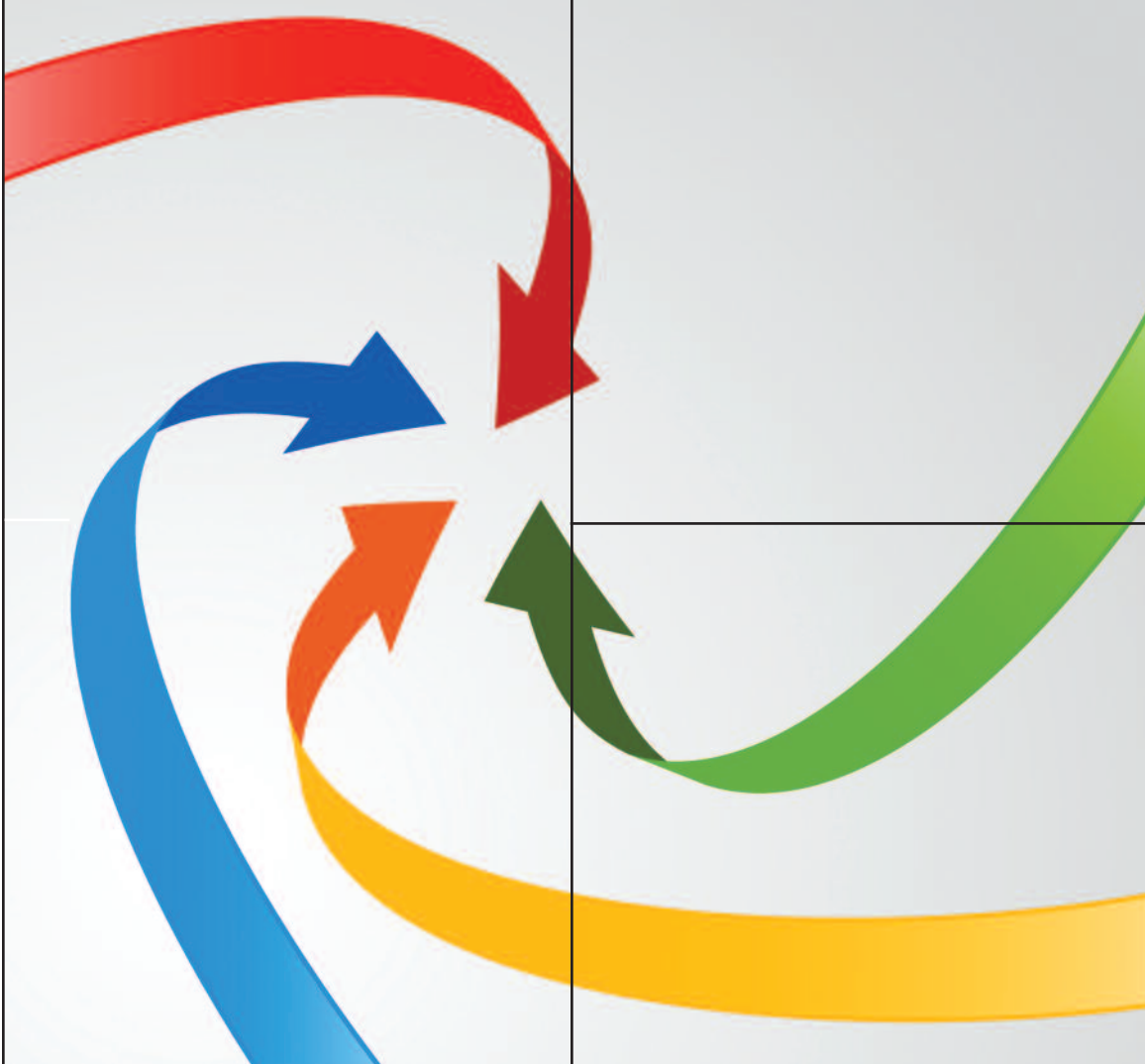


Learn from Your Customers



For a Better Lesson Experience

by Kirk Anderson

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When a customer speaks, it makes sense to listen, especially when they have some concerns or objections. Lesson takers are the lifeblood of the tennis teaching professional and some have very legitimate complaints about tennis pros and tennis lessons. Listed below are the Top 10 pet peeves from students who take lessons about what they don't like about their tennis pro, along with some recommendations to eliminate these concerns and make the lesson a truly outstanding experience.

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Learn from Your Customers for a Better Lesson Experience

10. The pro was late for my lesson

You may think that being on court at the scheduled lesson time is acceptable, but for many students, simply showing up on time is an indication of poor planning and preparation. It should be a standard practice to arrive 15 minutes early to every lesson. This will allow you to review your notes, gather your teaching aids, and prepare the court with balls, hoppers and targets. Reviewing your notes will enable you to recollect what was worked on previously and will prepare you to ask a few specific questions about the student's progress, hopefully from a match situation, since the last lesson. The best teachers have detailed notes so plans can be developed for improvements during each lesson, and they review these notes before the arrival time of their student.

9. I did not get a one hour lesson

Tennis lessons are costly and every student deserves 60 minutes of attention. Planning, preparation and set up should be done prior to the scheduled starting time. The pro should not allow interruptions from phone calls, text messages or emails. If the student needs a break for water or to catch their breath, the attention should be on the student and not on a mobile device. Every lesson is different and some students will enjoy small talk during a break, while others will want that time for analysis or feedback. Nobody enjoys picking up balls, so shortening the time for this task is necessary. Both student and pro should have access to hoppers, mowers or ball tubes, so the court can be cleared quickly and efficiently before the end of the allotted time.

8. The lesson balls were dead

Lesson balls get a lot of use and should be replaced on a regular schedule. Nobody can expect a cart of new balls every week, but balls should be replaced before they go dead or the felt becomes worn. Collecting good quality balls from tournaments, league matches and mixers is a good way to keep your teaching balls fresh and in good playing condition.

7. My pro talks too much

Students will improve if they have an opportunity to hit a lot of balls. Make it a point to ask a few direct questions, provide a quick review from the last lesson or on court observation, and begin hitting in the first two minutes. Instructions and feedback should be brief, clear and direct. The best teachers ask questions for understanding and base their teaching on the answers provided by the student.

During the lesson, be selective in your comments. Many people prefer a five to 10 word tip rather than a lecture. Students don't need, nor want, an analysis after each shot. Give them some time and reps to make some adjustments or corrections without interrupting the flow with constant instructions or suggestions. Keep your comments student centered so the player is the focus, and stay away from talk about personal problems or issues.

6. S/he tried to change my game

This one may puzzle you because isn't that why they signed up to take a lesson? You may think so, but some people just want to hit a lot of balls. Others want a good workout. Still others want the challenge of playing or drilling against someone with more power, control or intensity. Not everyone wants their game overhauled. Ask your students what they want to accomplish and be prepared to deliver what they want, and not what you think they need. This initial questioning is especially important when working with a new student.

5. I did not get a good workout

This is similar to #6. Every lesson should be active, but some students want more intensity and movement. This may be their one hour all week to get a good workout and hit a lot of balls. Find this out in advance, and you can give them the activity and intensity level they desire.

4. S/he did not teach me anything new

There are a few factors that come in play on this issue. First, do you have a written log for each student so you can see what has been covered in the past? If not, there is a great likelihood that you could fall into repeating the same topic or drill time and again. Second, are you clear about the goals of the student? Most lessons provide an opportunity for review, but there should be ample time to improve skills, positioning, tactics or play situations. Finally, the pro may be saying the same thing over and over. The master teacher can say the same thing 100 different ways so s/he is always fresh. S/he may use a different word or phrase that finally clicks so the student understands. Students want to take away something that shows improvement from their interaction with their coach from every lesson.

3. I did not get my share of balls

If a pro is teaching a group lesson, every person deserves equal time and number of contacts. Be careful not to fall into the trap of spending more time with the higher skilled players. Showing favorites by time spent, attention and number of balls will quickly result in dissatisfaction and drop outs. The slow learner or less skilled player in the group is the one who probably needs the most attention and guidance. Great teachers are experts at managing groups ensuring each person feels like they received their share of attention from the coach.

2. I learned that last week

This may be a case of poor or no record keeping. If someone is coming to you regularly for a lesson, the pro especially needs a plan, so the student has the opportunity to learn new things each week, and so they stay eager and motivated. It is not enough to provide a different or new drill, but also provide opportunities to learn a new skill or tactic on the road to becoming a more accomplished player. To make the learning focus clear during each lesson, it is beneficial to review with them what was accomplished during the lesson and what will be the emphasis for the next lesson. Be sure to record what was covered in the lesson and log in your notes what to work on next.

1. My pro is bored during my lesson

Teaching this great sport is immensely rewarding. There is so much to learn that nobody will ever master everything about the game of tennis. Identifying and guiding improvement and rewarding effort is paramount for every successful lesson. There are so many things that can be celebrated during the course of every lesson. Successful professionals are in tune with the little things that a student does to show understanding or improvement. The master teacher has a trained eye to see improvement and acknowledges small steps that lead to success.

Nobody can ever be bored if the focus is on the student and the challenge of motivating them through the activities on the court, including the sharing of knowledge and tips, expressing creativity, laughter and effort. If the coach loves what they do it is very easy to stay motivated.

Pros who teach boring students should remember the law of reciprocity. Students will give back what they receive from the coach. If a pro wants an energetic, motivated student, the pro should be an energetic and motivated teacher.

Conclusion

The best teachers love to share knowledge and have a curiosity for more. Those who stay fresh and avoid becoming stale are continually learning something new so they can pass this new information along to their students.

The players who take lessons are paying for a professional and specialized service. Successful teaching professionals set a high standard for each lesson and provide a unique service to everyone who pays for a lesson. Recognizing students' pet peeves and following these suggestions will raise the standard for the lessons and services you deliver and should be well received and valued by your students. Improving the lesson experience will enhance your status as an outstanding teaching professional and this will increase the demand for your expertise and service.



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Ask the Doc

Dr. Mark Kovacs



A Sliding Game

One question came in from several PTR coaches who were watching matches at the Miami Open.

The question - Should coaches be teaching junior players to slide on hard courts?

This is a great question and it should not be a simple yes or no answer. The immediate response for most people is that the risk of injury is high, and many coaches will shy away from teaching this movement. However, this notion that the risk of injury is high has not actually been shown in the literature. This does not mean that it is safer than regular tennis movements, but we do want to understand the different movements involved in sliding on hard court versus traditional tennis movements that do not involve sliding.

One important concept to understand is pressure per square inch (PSI). When an athlete slides, the pressure exerted onto the court and then back from the court up through the foot is shifted over a longer distance than if an athlete just takes one step to stop and then recover. The challenge is that many athletes do not have the flexibility, dynamic balance, stability or sliding technique of a Djokovic, Nadal or Williams.



Another big concern is that the pros play on perfect tennis courts without cracks, weeds, rocks, stones or leaves. Most players are not that fortunate and if you try to slide on a court with impediments and get your foot caught, you are in major problems and the risk of tearing ankle ligaments, breaking your ankle, rolling your ankle, pulling your groin, damaging your foot or knee, or even falling and landing on your wrist is real. Therefore, the answer is to be cautious if deciding to teach junior competitive players to slide on hard courts. Some big rewards may be achieved with this technique, but risks are involved.

Remember, that our first rule as a coach is to do no harm, and if an athlete has the appropriate balance, strength, stability, flexibility and coordination, then teaching an athlete first to slide on clay courts is very important.

Then, over time it may be appropriate to progress to working on the movement on a hard court. However, it is important to also understand the quality of the shoe (specifically the sole of the shoe). A slightly worn sole may be more conducive to sliding on hard court. A brand new shoe sole with extra grip will make it more challenging to slide on a hard court, and potentially more dangerous.

Also, the type of hard court is another factor that comes into the equation. The older the hard court, the more slick it is and it is more like hardwood floor, which makes it easier to slide. A brand new resurfaced court with more sand and grit will make it harder to slide. Hopefully this information will provide some food for thought when determining whether you should teach your players to slide on hard court.

Submit your questions to peggy@ptrtennis.org or to contact@itpa-tennis.org, but please put 'PTR Ask The Doc' in the subject line. Follow iTPA on facebook and twitter for daily tennis specific sport science and physical education info.

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