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Plus One: Developing High Performing On Court Assistants by Anne Mache

Anne is a PTR Professional in 10 & Under, 11 to 17 and Adult Development, as well as a PPR Certified Coach. She has been a teaching professional at several clubs in suburban Chicago, including roles as Head Tennis Pro at River Forest Country Club; QuickStart Director for 14 and Unders at the Tennis & Fitness Centre of Oak Park; Staff Pro at Wheaton Sport Center and Pickleball Pro at Courts Plus in Elmhurst. She also coached high school and college tennis, and holds Masters Degrees in both Teaching and Business Administration. A consistent thread of her tennis career has been to train teenage players to become assistant pros. Under her tutelage, more than 45 students learned how to be helpful teaching assistants. They learned in real time on the court along side her. This requires simultaneous multi-level teaching to both students in the class and to the aspiring assistant pro. Many of her assistants chose a career in tennis and are now coaches themselves.

Uh oh, there it is, the hand raising. You know what that means, never mind you just got all the equipment and players set on court. Not one, but several other kids in the class will now decide they too need to go to the bathroom. Right? Have you ever been in the middle of teaching a class of a ten 10 year olds and your assistant pro clings to the ball cart instead of helping to keep players engaged in the lesson? Ever wish you could spend more one-on-one time with a student who needs a little more guidance than their classmates? Having an assistant pro on the court can help the lead pro achieve more in each lesson, while providing the opportunity to conquer the above scenarios with ease. Assistant pros allow more personal connections with each player in the class, class expansion, lesson efficiency, class and program quality. Personal connections are a key to player retention. The more a player feels progress and personal connections, the more likely s/he is to return to the next session. Assistant pros helping lead pros with group classes allow for more connections with each player on the court and each parent who is waiting in the wings. To meet a greater demand or financial goals, classes can be expanded from a 6:1 student-to-pro ratio to 8:1+1 or even 10:1+1 ratio with the help of a higher performing assistant pro. Court movement, equipment and player set-ups can be more efficient. Who doesn't need an extra set of eyes or hands from time to time while teaching youth tennis lessons? Every new teaching pro, whether a high school junior player at your club, a returning college player, or a new hire fresh in the coaching business, can improve their teaching skills by assisting a lead pro live on court. This does require simultaneous multi-level teaching to both students in the class and to the assistant pro, so keep in mind that the lead teacher should be one with experience. Without a doubt, a higher performing assistant pro can help produce better, more productive tennis lessons for both the lead pro and students. When hiring an assistant pro, look for juniors who could grow to be potential staff members; those who demonstrate the following: leadership skills or the potential for leadership (there



are many types of leaders), a passion for the sport, the desire to learn, and the desire to work. Some players are natural helpers out of the gate, while others take longer to learn, and some may be better utilized in other parts of your tennis program. Once on court for several weeks, begin to identify the qualities of your helpers and assistant pros into one of these three categories: Naturals, Learners, Transitionals.

Naturals enjoy working with kids and take instruction well. They have a good understanding of their role and to some extent possess some or all of the following innate qualities.

- Initiative (take action independently)
- Intuition (understand children and their tendencies) and
- Instinct (react appropriately to situations).

They are also dependable. They are more a partner on court; they see court and player needs as you do, and act on them.

Learners often enjoy working with kids and take instruction well. They can be very responsible and follow through with specific tasks. They are passionate about tennis and working with kids. They are less sure of their role and the needs of a teacher. They may or may not ask questions on how to help. Some can be quick to learn and others take longer. Some have energy on court and others are slower. They want to get better at their assistant pro job.

Transitionals like working with kids on court less than they expected. They often can do what is asked of them only in very specific terms, "Please bring 12 tall pointy cones on court with you" or "Can you help keep score for Jason?" They tend to be less people oriented and more task oriented. Transitionals do not necessarily fit into the tennis pro role, however, keep in mind that they do have a different set of talents! These types of assistants might be better used for a Play Day, Youth Tournament, equipment organization, Service Desk, etc. Modify their job role to better fit them. Clubs need all sorts of work in order to run smoothly. These employees can still be an asset to the club as a whole, just not on the court with kids.

A rubric is a valuable tool to assess employee performance, set goals, show progress, enlighten and motivate. With the help of the rubric on the next page, lead pros can help guide assistants to reach their potential. Seasoned pros with many years experience can add a new dimension to their teaching skills by training assistants on court during live lessons. It's a win-win, the assistant pro becomes an asset to your tennis program thereby allowing the lead pro to run smoother, more dynamic, progressive lessons.



Utilizing the Rubric

Begin by sharing the rubric with your assistant pros. Have them do self assessments while the lead pro assesses their on court performance thus far. Get together and agree on existing performance levels. This is your baseline or starting point for their development as an assistant pro. Keep this baseline, because it will show progress. Help them set achievable goals for improving and gaining new skills. Set a deadline for the new goals, e.g., three months, six months, etc., to perform better at Court Set Up/Clean Up, etc. As an assistant progresses along the rubric, s/he is gaining more qualities that lead to a higher performing assistant pro. A Natural can become a Top Performer, a Learner can progress to a Top Performer, and a dependable Transitional can be a Top Performer in another role at the club where s/he will be happier and more successful.

In order to have a vibrant growing club, begin by elevating your tennis programs and improving player retention through the use of assistant pros on the court. Better quality lessons, more personal connections, and increased player development progress are all possible to achieve.

Begin by identifying potential assistant pros, seasoned lead pros to accept the training role, and then utilizing the rubric.

Incentives, whether pay or perks, can also be tied to progress made along the rubric. The extra work required by the lead pro diminishes as the assistant pro becomes more of an asset in managing the class. These benefits for the lead pro, players, class and tennis programs, also provide great benefits to the assistants themselves.

Just being identified by a pro or club manager to be an assistant pro can build confidence. The job teaches leadership skills, responsibility, time management, improves observation skills, teaches self reflection, goal setting, growth/progress, independence and self sufficiency.

You are introducing your assistant pro to a new, exciting, dynamic future career about which all tennis pros are passionate. Besides, when that request comes around to write a letter of recommendation for your achieving assistant pro, the rubric will help you articulate exactly why this person is a great candidate!

It's Spring, a great time to find your Plus One!