

### An Exploration of Coach Education and Development in British Tennis

Simon Jones, Head of Performance Coach Education at the Lawn Tennis Association, runs us through the Organisation's provisions for aspiring coaches.



*The Leaders Performance Institute sat down with Simon Jones, Head of Performance Coach Education at the Lawn Tennis Association [LTA] to discuss coach education and development at the organisation. There is one of the most highly regarded pathways in elite tennis, with a focus on developing the person beyond their basic coaching assets. We throw in the word 'holistic' and Jones is quick to agree.*

*By John Portch*

"I talk all the time about how it is not only what you know and how you do it, but who you are," he replies. "Without those three elements working together you will always come up short as a high-performance coach. We are living in a total knowledge world and you can get information about everything by just sitting in front of a screen for a few hours."

Jones then poses a question that one can imagine reverberating around the coaching spaces of elite sport: "So if knowledge was the answer then why is everyone not great?" Far from being a roundabout attempt at self-praise, he goes on to discuss the LTA's coaching initiatives; the areas where they believe they are getting it right, and where improvements are needed. His and the LTA's approach is guided by a vision. "It is about how you apply that knowledge. Do you coach for just giving knowledge? Do you coach for performance? Do you coach for true learning? However, none of that works unless you truly

have character; unless you take responsibility and have strong values; you are able to sell that vision – that is who you are.”

The LTA takes control of performance tennis coach development in the UK, when an accredited plus coach meets the requirements for its Level 4 Senior Performance Coach Qualification. Several years down the line, the coach may then progress to the Level 5 Master Performance Coach Qualification, although progress is not necessarily linear. “That all comes under the framework of coach education and I would like to make the distinction between coach education and development,” says Jones. It sets us up nicely for an exploration of both disciplines at the LTA.

**You recently restructured your Level 4 Qualification. What were some of your considerations in doing so?**

Jones: We started with the player development philosophy and then we built a curriculum for educating the coaches around it. Alignment is crucial. We have a programme of national camps for our best junior players and after every camp the player gets a report with their strengths and weaknesses, normal fare. We scanned through all of the reports, over 140, to see where the coaches were reporting weaker areas in the athletes’ games. Discover the trends. We aligned our findings to the curriculum of the coaching course. We are providing practical information for the coaches in areas in which we know they need improvement. We really delved into what was happened in the player development world, to drive the curriculum and not simply around tennis content either. We are focused on seeing the person first; on learner-centred skill acquisition and pedagogy, whilst also being focused on personal and professional leadership of the coach. It is not just the technical content, but also those other three areas as well. We dive into the world of the player development philosophy and add it to the curriculum for coach education courses.

**Is it more about maximising the coaching strengths of those on your courses or minimising weaknesses?**

Jones: The answer is both and always has to be. Our philosophy is around frameworks not prescription, so the way in which we educate coaches is that we are not saying ‘this is the way to do it’. We are saying is ‘this is the way we recommend you do it’ through our frameworks. Part of the reason is because every coach is different and they come into the education pathway at different stages with different strengths and different weaknesses. They are also shaped by their own experience as well. We must respect them all. Part of the coach education course is to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a coach and try to improve them in areas where they have less knowledge or less competency and to build on the strengths that they have, so it is not all about bridging gaps.

**What do the Level 4 and 5 Qualifications look like at performance level?**

Jones: Level 4 is a nine-module course over a period of a year, with each module being three days long. One of the modules is an awareness of standards event at an international junior tournament. After Level 4, they are required to complete a couple of years before they move on to Level 5.

Level 5 is an 18-month programme with 12 three-day modules with field visits. It is quite immersive and coaches apply because they want to coach at high level as well as to get their coach qualification. To become fully qualified in tennis, if you progress very quickly, it will take you four and a half to five years.

### **Can you describe the initiatives you have in place to ensure ongoing coach development?**

Jones: The core for us is that we have an Accreditation Programme. This requires coaches to maintain 15 CPD [Continual Professional Development] credits per year. This is a very useful tool, because it has enabled us to make the coach development experience relevant to the coaches, so that they can enjoy and feel the benefit of earning CPD credits, rather than participating in something just for the sake of it. It is not simply about tennis content; we are focused on seeing the person first, on learner-centred skill acquisition and pedagogy. We are, however, also focused on the personal and professional leadership of the coach. We operate a 'Depth Chart', which is a database of all the coaches on the player performance pathway coaching programme across the country. We are, therefore, able to filter and sort coaches in readiness for when we offer specific workshops.

### **Are you tracking if they're moving in the right direction?**

Jones: People development is one of the hardest areas to measure. In order to say that the development of a coach is directly proportional to the development of their player is also difficult as there are so many variables. However, we rigorously collect feedback after all of our courses. In terms of CPD, we had 78 workshops last year and we received 82% feedback from 600+ coaches, recording information such as the impact our courses have had. We ask questions such as 'how will it change your practice?' or 'how will you cascade this information to other coaches?' Another element is getting feedback from coaches a year after they have taken the course; recording how that course impacted on them as a person and how they changed their practice. We also give them tools to help self-reflection and we talk to them about the value of asking their own questions about their practice. I am conscious that there are many different ways to learn, and that we often neglect the self-reflection aspect.

### **How much of a consideration is a coach's exposure to other performance practitioners?**

Jones: One of the key elements we talk about is the coach's ability to access and activate support systems. Around a tennis player there is always a support system and depending on what age and what level, there is variation in those support systems. For example, a 10-year-old tennis player, who is national level, has his/her parents as the main person in their support structure. The coach, therefore, needs to be adept at how to activate this specific support system. In contrast, when you are looking at an apprentice professional player, at 18 or 19 years old, they will have a support system to include a nutritionist, psychologist and many other aspects. It is important that the coach learns how to work with these people and takes responsibility for the programme. I believe they are similar to the CEO of a mini business.

### **In what ways do you try to reflect this in your programme?**

Jones: One of the units we present is how to manage an interdisciplinary team. We provide scenarios where the coach has to communicate with different people, set priorities for the player and make sure all of the information is linked up. For example, if a player is injured, the medical team will need to know that the tennis coach has changed the player's racket; the nutritionist will need to know that the player is playing in India in a couple of weeks' time; the strength & conditioning coach will need to know which exercises the physio is giving etc. The coach has to take responsibility for and case manage the whole process so that all of the information is shared and priorities are set. However, if a coach takes too many risks and/or upsets the player, he is at risk of losing his job! There are many strands to being a coach on

tour and coaches at the top level become very adept at working with players: building relationships, but at the same time, ensuring they make an impact on their game.

### **How do you encourage former players to try coaching?**

Jones: We have just introduced an initiative called the 'Fast-Track Player Pathway Coach Initiative'. If you played in the top 1,000 in the world with an ATP or WTA ranking, and are now looking to become a coach, we will fast-track you through to Level 4 as we are keen to engage ex-players who have had a good playing experience. We will direct them onto the coaching education pathway as we know that the information and the curriculum that we offer will help them to coach more effectively.

### **Are there initiatives to promote greater female participation?**

Jones: Of the 600 coaches on our Depth Chart Database, 18% are female. We have looked at the reasons and one of the biggest barriers is family. A female coach who has started a family may lose her player base upon her return (as the player has continued, in her absence, with another coach), despite having worked with the player as a junior. We continue to survey our coaches and collate the findings but, in the meantime we are also considering female-only courses and female mentor workforce. That is what would help matters and is what is wanted.

### **What do you consider to be some of your biggest successes?**

Jones: It is vitally important that we engage players who were in the top 1000 and introduce them onto the Education Pathway. Aligning the coach education and development content with the playing philosophy has been vital. The feedback from our coaches (600 coaches attending 78 workshops last year), scored 6.47 out of 7 for satisfaction – which is an impressive score and that tells us that we are providing content that the coaches think is relevant to them, and in a way that is engaging. Overall I hope we are showing coaches that we value them and we respect their ideas. The feedback hints at this.

### **And what have been some of the lessons you've learned?**

Jones: I am continuously learning lessons about the tutor workforce. The skills to be a tutor are very specific, and with international playing experience being very important; and we have learnt to blend those together. I have also found the lack of technology in coach education and development inhibiting. We are, therefore, looking at online management systems using technology in the educational sector. We need to more flexible in the way we develop coaches to suit their learning preferences and lifestyles.

Found on: <https://leadersinsport.com/performance/simon-jones-lta-1/>