



# COACH to COACH

Created by **Wayne Elderton**, a Tennis Canada National Level 4 Coach, Head of Coaching Development and Certification in BC and Tennis Director of the Grant Connell Tennis Centre in North Vancouver.  
© 2006 Wayne Elderton, acecoach.com

## "Learner-Centred" Coaching

This article first appeared in the ITF publication, Coaches Review, issue 38, 2006.

To unlock the full potential of a player, a coach should be "learner-centred". This means the coach works in partnership with the player to identify and achieve the *player's* goals (not the coach's goals, or the goals they assume, or think, the player should have).

Learner-centred doesn't mean learner-driven since, they don't have the experience or expertise of what the process should look like. The process is still driven by the coach, but focused on the needs of the player. A learner-centred process includes:

- Giving the player a clear picture of where they are at currently (awareness)
- Shaping a strategy for the player to progress towards achieving their goals at an accelerated rate (goal-setting)
- Determining what the player is willing to do to get to their goals (commitment)

Learner-centred coaching gives players better tools to produce results and a greater confidence in their ability to do so. Thanks to the expertise of Head coach, Louis Cayer, the Canadian Certification System ensures learner-centred coaching in all its levels.

Learner-centred coaching is not 'teaching' (although it may include teaching at some points). The key is in unlocking a player's ability to *learn*. Nobel prize-winning writer, Patrick White once said, "*I forget what I was taught. I only remember what I learned*".

Before asking the question, what should I teach? Coaches must ask the question, how do people *learn*? Asking that question leads down a radically different path. It sets the tone for everything a coach does.

Every individual is unique when it comes to learning. We all take in, order, and remember information in our own way. There are three 'Learning Laws' that every coach should know:

- #1: PLAYERS REQUIRE A DESIRE TO LEARN**
- #2: PLAYERS LEARN IN DIFFERENT WAYS**
- #3: PLAYERS LEARN AT DIFFERENT SPEEDS**

To be "Learner Centred" a coach must keep these laws in mind. A, same for everyone, "*This is how I like it*" or, "*Do it because I say so and I'm the coach*", approach will not be the best for the player.

Knowing about learning allows a coach to communicate better and speed up improvement.

Most importantly, knowing about learning will allow coaches to coach *people* (build a relationship that empowers them to achieve their goals), rather than just teaching skills.

Many coaches would say they do coach in a learner-centred way. If you were asked what the difference is between teacher-centred or learner-centred lessons, would you know the answer? What are the main considerations? What would change in your coaching process? How does learner-centred coaching apply to the way you coach now?

To remember all the main factors for learner-centred coaching, we can organize them to form the acronym, **S.E.T.S.**

### SKILLS in LEARNING:

Learning tennis is a more sophisticated process than just having a coach tell how to do certain movements. There are many skills in tennis, and many ways they can be taught. How a coach views and handles the skills they teach can either shortcut the learning process or make it longer and unnatural. When the words "tennis skills" are said to most coaches, they think 'strokes'. However, tennis skills encompass much more and include three key considerations:

**Holistic Skills:** Tennis coaches tend to get fixated on technique. However, tennis includes psychological skills (mental and emotional), physical skills, tactical skills and technical skills. To develop a complete player, a coach must help learning in all of these areas. Including all these skill areas is called, "holistic" development.

**Tennis is an "Open Skill":** An open skill means the technique must change for the situation. What is the use of teaching a specific series of movements (Like the traditional forehand stroke model), when the technique must adapt for where the player is, the type of ball they receive, and if they are attacking, rallying, etc. Players must learn to read the situation (called "Perception"), decide the best response (called "decision-making"), execute the appropriate technique, and then see if it worked or not (called "Feedback").

Players who learn this way develop faster than with traditional methods. This is radically different than the traditional view of tennis teaching in which tennis was seen primarily as a technical sport that used 'one size fits all' stroke models (the forehand, the volley, etc.)

**Using a Game-based Approach:** Tennis is a *game* that one must learn to *play*. For beginners, the fun of tennis play can be maintained by scaling the game down to a level appropriate for the player. For all levels, if tennis is taught in realistic situations, the skills learned will transfer into match play easier. Game-based means the tactics to play the game successfully must drive the development of the techniques learned.

### **ENVIRONMENT for LEARNING:**

A coach can help a player pass through the learning process smoothly by creating a fun and effective learning environment. An environment that motivates players to learn includes the elements of:

**Organized:** Learning increases when it is systematic. Well-planned training clearly shows the path to improvement. Good organization allows for good activity, variety, and a safe environment. Boring, or unsafe training decreases motivation to learn.

**An Enthusiastic Coach:** A coach's passion for tennis and learning can be 'caught' by students. They will often respond better to the role modeling a coach does over the words the coach says.

This type of setting will help players enjoy the process (have fun), be stimulated, develop internal motivation, and ultimately commitment.

### **TOOLS for LEARNING:**

There are some important 'power tools' a coach can use to speed up learning.

**Cooperative Coaching Style:** Players change more readily if the change comes from within them (rather than imposed from the outside). A coach can use a 'cooperative' communication style to work with the player to affect change. By using questions and encouragements the coach communicates *with* the player (rather than *at* the player). The result is an experience of 'guided discovery'. The contrast to a cooperative style is one where the coach is 'autocratic' or 'directive'. In this approach, the coach is the all-knowing dictator and the player is the 'dumb' student.

**Feedback:** This is the most important tool a coach has to affect learning. Feedback is reflecting a player's performance back to them. Effective feedback speeds up learning and helps build skills. If the feedback is positive, that will enhance learning even more. Positive feedback reinforces good performance and encourages it to be repeated.

**Learning Modes:** By understanding the three basic ways players take in information, feedback can be tailored to individual players. The three modes of learning are:

- Visual: Processing information through the eyes
- Auditory: Processing information through the ears
- Kinesthetic: Processing information through body feelings

Everyone uses all three however, they will prefer one or two and respond best if information is given in those modes.

**Goal Setting:** If done correctly, goals propel learning by laying down a systematic process for development. They give a direction to focus energies and effort. Players respond better when a specific direction is laid out, the appropriate level of challenge is given, and there are measurements to gauge progress.

### **STAGES of LEARNING:**

Every player will pass through three stages of learning before they can use new skills in match play:

- **Stage #1: Understanding:**  
Getting an initial intellectual and kinesthetic comprehension of performance. Moving a player from "Unconscious incompetence" (player is unaware of what they are performing poorly), to "Conscious incompetence" (player is aware of how to perform successfully but is unable to do it consistently).
- **Stage #2: Repetition:**  
Practicing the skill over and over to 'groove' it. Moving a player from "Conscious incompetence" to "Conscious Competence" (player can only perform successfully if they focus on the performance).
- **Stage #3: Automatic Decision Making:**  
Moving a player from "Conscious competence" to "unconscious competence" (player selects the correct time to use the skill in competition and performs successfully automatically).

Each stage has its own unique goals, pitfalls, and procedures. A coach must be able to recognize which stage a student is in to lead them in the most effective type of training. If a coach skips, or poorly develops a stage, the result is incomplete skill development.

Being learner-centred dramatically increases a coach's professionalism and promotes constantly looking for new and creative ways to help students. Tennis players deserve nothing less.