The Myth of Playing Up!

Over the years I have been faced with many parents concerned about their son/daughter practicing with someone whose level is lower than their own. Parents and players are often under the false impression that to get better “you must play better players”. Nothing could be further from the truth.

During the 2004 US Open, Mary Carillo told the story of two opponents who were about to face each other in the round of 16. The two players were Andre Agassi and Sargis Sargsian. Carillo goes on to say that Agassi and Sargsian have been good friends and practice partners for years. In fact the two of them had been practicing the entire US Open summer series together in 2004. As most of us know, Agassi’s career high ranking has been number one; while Sargsian’s highest career ranking is 38 in the world. Over the years, as well as the ’04 summer season Agassi had never lost to Sargsian. These two players who are good friends have met seven times in tournaments between 1997 and 2004. Out of the seventeen sets they have played in tournaments, Agassi has only lost two sets to Sargsian and has never lost a match to him.

My point to all of this, Agassi is by far the better player and yet he is practicing with someone who is obviously not his equal. Realize that Agassi and Federer do not get together to practice. The best almost never practice with each other. Then the question has to be, how can Agassi maintain such a high level of play while practicing with someone who can not challenge him? Using most parents and players logic, “one must play up to get better”. Agassi clearly dispels this myth, but I have heard this myth repeated by parents, players and coaches too many times to count over the years. But let’s not stop there. Let’s talk about the fact that Sargsian was playing up and it did not help him become a “great player”. Granted, number 38 in the world is good, but you are not going down in the record books. I am sure that Sargsian was not striving to be the number 38 player in the world. As of today Sargsian’s career winning record is 155 wins and 209 losses. This comes out to a 43% winning record. Sargsian has only one title to his name where Agassi has 60 titles to his, eight of them Grand Slams. Agassi’s career winning record is 864 wins and 270 losses. Agassi has managed to have a 76% winning record practicing with much lesser players. In my opinion it has less to do with your practice partner(s) and everything to do with the player you are. In 20 years of teaching tennis I have never heard of a player losing a match and blaming it on their practice partner.

When Pete Sampras made his return to tennis this year in an exhibition match against Robby Ginepri, one of the big questions tennis fans wanted to know was about his preparation for his first match in over three years? In my opinion his answer is very revealing to the topic at hand. Sampras calls Billy Martin, the head coach of the UCLA men’s tennis team and invites college level players to his home to help him prepare. Justin Gimelstob had been a practice partner for Sampras over the years, as well as for Sampras’ return this past April. Gimelstob’s highest career ranking had been 63 in the world back in 1999, as it stands prior to the 2006 US Open Gimelstob is 73 in the world. Why does a legendary player like Pete Sampras invite college tennis players and Justin Gimelstob as his practice partner for his return to the game, if playing/practicing up is so important?

It is rare to see seeded players practicing with each other at tournaments. In 2003 the year Andy Roddick won the US Open, I watched Roddick practice with then coach Brad Gilbert. It is clear if Roddick were to play Gilbert who would win. Put your money on Roddick. The best players prove that it is ok to practice with lesser players before a match even at the US Open.

When it comes to practice partners, one must practice with players who are weaker, this way you can practice your weaknesses. I have had players concerned with the idea of beating a player who is weaker than themselves and risk demeaning said player. I am not suggesting a 4.0 player should ask a 2.5 or 3.0 player to play. Play down one NTRP level to practice your weaknesses and if you are true to the idea of practicing your weaknesses you will most likely find yourself in a very competitive match. Equal to you, now you have a dog fight on your hands, this is the truest test of them all. Better than you, this way you can see how your opponent exploits your weaknesses. Try to find someone who is one level above you. If needed offer to pay for their part of the court time. A second reason for playing different levels is simple; it solves
the problem of players playing up. If you want the opportunity to play up, then you must be willing to play down and give someone else a chance to play up. Fair is fair. If it were true that you had to play up to get better, no one would ever play another set of tennis. When parents come to me and insist that their child play up, one has to remember, for one player to play up another player has to play down. If you always play up you will rarely experience the joys of winning only the frustration of losing. Not much fun in that.

Thank you,

Jim Klein

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Buy Them Ice Cream

Why does it seem so important for parents to see their children win in sports? It is not just a matter of their children succeeding in some parent’s eyes. It is clearly a matter of winning. I have been teaching tennis for over twenty years and I have seen all types of parents. The dotting parent who wants to do everything for their child, from checking them in for a tournament, to carrying the child’s tennis bag or coaching/thinking for them during a match. Let your child check themselves in and for crying out loud let them carry their own tennis bag. Give your child more responsibility rather than less. When a junior steps on to the court, there is no coaching, hand signals, nods or winks…right.

Unlike golf, where you have a caddy giving you information both technically, mentally and strategically, a boxer has a trainer in his corner and in between bells receives advice. Tennis is one on one, no help from beginning to end, so the more independent you help make your child, that independence will be rewarded in a sport where independent thinkers dominate. You may think you are helping your child now but when the time comes and wins and loses are going to matter he/she won’t be able to think for themselves. Remember, independent thinkers rule the roost. Also, if you are coaching in any way, shape or form during a match…we call that cheating. It not only amazes me but concerns me how many parents are willing to cheat for their children for what ultimate outcome, winning a 14 under tournament.

Then you have the parent who is never satisfied with the performance of their child unless it results in a win and sometimes that is not enough. I can’t tell you how many times I have witnessed a parent watching their child play, only to show dissatisfaction at every lost point. If you think your child is unaware of your disappointment while they are playing you need to think again. Remember the old adage, actions speak louder than words. Many parents would be very wise to follow this advice…drop your child off and let them play the match without your disapproving eyes watching over them.

Pete Sampras’ parents did exactly that, not only in his junior playing days but his professional matches as well. How many of you know where Sampras’ parents were when he won the 1990 US Open at the age of 19, the first of his unprecedented 14 grand slam tournament victories? They where out shopping and saw on a television in a store they were in their son lifting up the champions trophy. Not only were they not at the match or even watching the match on television, they weren’t even in the same state. It was rare to see Pete’s parents at his matches even as a pro. Watching every move your child makes on a tennis court does not help them become a great player.

I understand that parents mean well, but in the over-all scheme of things, who cares if your child loses a 12 and under match on March 15, 2007 or any other age for that matter. No college tennis coach is going to ask how your child did in the twelve’s. It is pointless to get upset if your child loses a tennis match or hold it over them for the ride home. They already feel bad enough over the loss without your disappointment added in. If your child throws a temper tantrum or quits trying you need to talk to them. But remember, he/she is only a child. It always amazes me that parents forget what it was like to be a kid trying to win the praise of their parents. Oh yes, your child is not only trying to win the match but they are also trying to win your approval before, during, and after the match. For some children, when they lose the match, they not only lose once but they lose twice.
And it is far more painful for them to lose your approval than it is to lose the match. How some parents can treat their children according to their wins and loses is sad to say the least. The parent who can feel good about a loss hits a home run with their child and that child will learn to love the game. Take them out for ice cream whether they win or lose. What a great message this would send to them. Better yet, let your child decide if he or she deserves the reward. Teach them to analyze the match, not whether they won or lost but the effort, dedication, attitude and sportsmanship they put forth in the match. If they hit a homerun on all of these by all means “buy them ice cream”. If not, talk to them about the one(s) they could have done better on.

Answer this question, if your child loses a tennis match what have they actually lost? Did someone come out on the court at the end of the match and take their rackets and hand them to their opponent or the parent having to hand over the keys to the car to the other parent…no. Hopefully you get the point. They really don’t lose anything; they are just not allowed to advance to the next round. If a junior gives it his/her best and competes from beginning to end, they should be praised for their efforts. When two players go out to compete, it is guaranteed that one of them will lose. Does this mean half the time we are unhappy with our kids…I think not. In my opinion, many of the parents who read this could do no better than their children in tennis. Why do we expect more from them than we could do ourselves? There is a difference between wanting more for them and expecting more from them and in many cases our expectations are unrealistic. Also realize, if your son or daughter enters a thirty-two draw tournament, there will be thirty-one losers in that tournament and only one winner. So, 99% of the time your child will lose at some point in a tournament. Who wants to be unhappy 99% of the time? It would be much better to find positives in the match and be happy 100% of the time and enjoy the car ride home.

How many of you know who Jeff Tarango is? Tarango was a top junior who used to beat up on a girl you have heard about named Andre Agassi. Please do not think that great success as a junior is an indicator for success as a professional player. Jeff Tarango did go on to play professional tennis. Tarango turned pro in 1989 and earned just under four million dollars in 12 years but in comparison to Agassi’s spectacular career of thirty-one million dollars, it is Tarango who will need to get a real job some day, not Agassi. Agassi has met Tarango seven times in professional play and never lost a match to him let alone a set. No one will ever care that Agassi lost to Tarango in the juniors and with a 7-0 life time record against Tarango obviously Agassi doesn’t care either. In my opinion, if you asked Agassi how critical it is to your professional career to be a great junior player, he would tell you it is not. Remember the road to the pros is paved with junior players you have never heard of.

During the 2010 US Open Caroline Wozniacki in a commercial for American Express told how at the age of eleven she was so bad at tennis that no one would play with her and so she started hitting against a wall. So again we have a professional player who goes on to be great (No. 1) despite her junior carrier.

I believe it comes down to this, too many parents see a junior tennis player as having a “junior carrier” rather than playing a sport. Ninety-nine percent of all junior tennis players will not go on to play professional tennis. And the 1% percent that will play professional tennis, ninety-nine percent of them will not become a Sampras, Agassi or Federer. So please, teach them to have fun, work hard, try hard and be a great sportsman on and off the court and win or lose you will hit a home run with your child.

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