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Pearls of Wisdom from Rod Laver, AC, MBE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews Rod Laver's game and the role of his first coach from Rod's own perspective, as reported in his autobiography, Rod Laver: A Memoir. Several implications for coaches are proposed.

Key words: biography, coaching, mentoring, methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

"Few sports have a longer or richer history than tennis and no player occupies a bigger part of that history than Rod Laver. From my earliest tennis memories, Rod 'the Rocket' Laver stood above all others as the greatest champion our sport has known" (Roger Federer, 2013).

Much has been written about Rod Laver with many, including Roger Federer, recognising him as *"the world's greatest tennis player"* (Laver & Writer, 2013, p. xii). Growing up in Australia with Rod as my hero, I never dreamed our paths would cross on the court. Yet they did when Rod was Player/Coach of the San Diego Friars in World Team Tennis, a US-based team competition. Whilst Rod was retired from the professional circuit at the time, he was still an amazing champion who regularly produced incredible shots in his matches. *"You should have seen the shots Rod Laver hit"* was so often audible by the captivated audience. My special memories of Rod include playing mixed doubles with him in these team matches and being spell-bound by the sincerity, clarity and positivity of his advice as team coach. It was therefore very special when Rod gave me a signed copy of this autobiography, Rod Laver: A Memoir. On the front page he had written, *"Janet. It's always great being with you"*.

It is now several years since I first read Rod's autobiography. The recent COVID-19 lockdown gave me time to revisit the book, and again, marvel at Rod's incredible journey from humble beginnings growing up in a Queensland country town. I was particularly intrigued by Rod's own accounts of

his game, strengths and glowing attributes to his first coach, Charlie Hollis. Before sharing these with you, I will briefly summarise Rod's key tennis achievements.

TENNIS ACHIEVEMENTS

In an amazing list of achievements, Rod won 11 Grand Slam singles titles - three Australian, two French, four Wimbledon and two US Opens - and is the only player to twice achieve the calendar-year Grand Slam - in 1962 and 1969. In addition, he won eight 'Pro Slam' titles and played in five victorious Davis Cup titles. Rod's overall tally of 200 singles titles is unmatched in tennis history. He held the world's top singles ranking from 1964 to 1970.

The naming of the main arena at Melbourne Park, home of the Australian Open, as Rod Laver Arena in 2000 is a fitting testament to Rod's contribution to the game. In a recent initiative driven by Roger Federer to honour his own legend, the Laver Cup was started in 2017.

DISSECTING GREATNESS

Throughout his autobiography Rod offers snippets into the composition of his greatness. One particularly revealing passage is his reflection on his game,

"I could adapt my style to all surfaces and conditions ... and my fitness and unflustered mindset enabled me to prevail ... I was unflappable on the court in my mind and my body language. I did not dwell on it if I played a bad shot; it was

instantly in the past ... I rarely made eye contact with or reacted in any way to my opponent. I kept it impersonal and unemotional on the court" (p.93).

In another revealing passage Rod describes his love of tennis. This love appears to be 'the glue' that effortlessly bound his energies, motivations and dreams.

"I loved tennis. It seemed the natural game for me to play. I played in the rain and the wind and under the blazing Queensland sun... What I loved was the satisfaction of hitting the ball sweetly, the running to ram home a point or save one, the one-on-one combative nature of the game, facing up to an opponent and testing yourself against him" (p.9-10).

Further clues to explain Rod's greatness point to a range of possible explanatory factors. These include Rod's natural competitiveness and unshakeable self-belief; a commitment to be fitter than his opponents; and a mindset to never give up, change a losing game, respect opponents and keep things in perspective. For Rod, *"tennis was a game, not a war"* (p.104); there were valuable lessons to be learned in defeat and the *"sun would still rise tomorrow"* (p.111).

There are many interesting illustrations of these contributing factors in the book. For example, the strengthening of Rod's left forearm and wrist by relentlessly squeezing squash balls, and endless push-ups and double-knee jumps to be super-fit, are gleefully described. The reader can almost see Rod smile as he recounts his dedication to fitness in light of his nickname, the Rockhampton Rocket. This nickname was given to him by the legendary coach, Harry Hopman because he believed Rod (a junior at the time) was slow in his movements around the court. Whilst Rod threw aside the shackles of being slow around the court, his nickname lives on to this day!

SIGNIFICANCE OF ROD'S FIRST COACH

Throughout Rod's book there are many references to his first coach Charlie Hollis who coached him from age 10 to 14 years. Unquestionably Rod had enormous admiration and respect for Hollis acknowledging,

"If Charlie's and my paths hadn't met I may never have become an elite tennis player ... Without Charlie I don't know how my career would have turned out ... my career might not have happened at all" (p.12-13).

One well may ask, what was the secret to Hollis's influence? How did he shape Rod to have, as described by Roger Federer, an all-round game, incomparable court coverage, steely determination, incredibly strong under pressure, outstanding sportsmanship and an ability to bring his best game to the big stage (a Grand Slam or Davis Cup final)?

Rod provides the reader with examples of Hollis's approach and techniques that may help unravel the secret of Hollis's influence. These include:

- *'Stickler for correct form'* – Hollis wanted Rod to be able to play every shot and put him through endless drills. Rod was required to hit every shot as perfectly as possible. To further consolidate good technique, Hollis had Rod 'shadow' play, pretending to hit imaginary balls (again as perfectly as possible).
- *Embraced target hitting* – Hollis placed tin cans just inside the baseline for Rod to aim his forehands and backhands. In a ritual to develop Rod's top-spin on his ground shots, Hollis would only conclude a session after Rod successfully hit 200 shots with top-spin. Adopting a similar technique to the tin cans, Hollis also marked areas around the court for Rod to aim his repertoire of shots. A more unusual technique adopted by Hollis, designed to improve Rod's serve, and save time collecting balls, was serving practice into a fence just two metres away from the player.
- *Instilled the importance of 'heart, brains and a never-say-die fighting spirit'* – Hollis believed these were the traits of good tennis players. He would share stories of great players with Rod to illustrate the significance of these traits. At every opportunity Hollis re-enforced the rewards to be gained by chasing down every ball, remaining positive, relishing the challenge of working hard, never giving up and learning from defeats. Hollis instilled in Rod, when things did not go his way, he had to knuckle down and play even more intensely. Importantly, it was not necessarily about winning; it was also about learning. Aided by his coach's holistic approach to teaching the game, Rod gained an understanding that *"tennis is as much a mental game as a physical one"* (p.104).
- *Created opportunities to develop strategic powers* – Hollis ensured Rod trained and played matches on clay, concrete and grass courts. This helped develop Rod's ability to adapt his game to changing circumstances, as did Hollis's advice to 'expect the unexpected' in a match, and indeed, for Rod to 'do the unexpected' to throw opponents off balance (e.g. get your opponent thinking you are going to do 'X' and then you do 'Y').
- *Attended to physical fitness* – Hollis stressed to Rod the importance of being fitter than opponents. Drawing on his own physical training in the military, Hollis would say, *"Just think Rodney, if*

you're tired, the other bloke will be exhausted" (p.16). According to Hollis, physical fitness was essential if Rod was to chase down every ball and execute well. To this end, Hollis encouraged Rod to undertake rigorously extensive strength and conditioning work.

- *Set standards* – Drawing on the exemplary conduct of Jack Crawford (Australian champion of the 1930's), Hollis emphasised good sportsmanship, manners and general demeanour both on- and off-the court. *"You have to know how to act the part"* (p.19). In many ways this was easy for Hollis to impart, given he was an outstanding role model for the qualities he intended Rod to embrace.
- *Unwavering belief in Rod* – Hollis had a keen eye for talent, conveying this to Rod's father shortly after seeing 10 year old Rod hit on a court barefoot in his pyjamas. Such was Hollis's belief he coached Rod without charging any fees and briefed the legendary coach Harry Hopman, who went on to work with Rod. Hollis's belief in his player did not go unnoticed with Rod later acknowledging, *"Charlie Hollis made me believe that if I continued to apply myself I could be a champion tennis player"* (p.19).

'TAKE-HOME' MESSAGES FOR COACHES

Coaches will see different 'take-home' messages from Rod's accounts of his own game and the role of his first coach, Charlie Hollis. Unquestionably Rod's stature in the game was largely shaped by Hollis. Although Hollis only 'officially' coached Rod for four years, his teachings about the game and life were enduring. Accordingly, 'take-home' messages might be that successful coaching requires a coach to have many attributes and capabilities. Greatest in tennis is not a chance event. Rather, coaches can create and develop opportunities for players, leading by example at all times and equipping players with belief, skills and support to be the best they can. Not only is Rod Laver a legend, so too is Charlie Hollis.

REFERENCE

Laver, R. & Writer, L. (2013). *Rod Laver: A memoir*. Macmillan.

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