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Salute to a Legend's First Coach

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ABSTRACT

Australia boasts an enviable record of Grand Slam champions. Of these, two are further enshrined in sporting history as having won all four Grand Slam singles titles in a calendar year. Of course, we are referring to Margaret Court and Rod Laver. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, both have written books about their journey to legendary status (Court, 2016; Laver & Writer, 2013). A reading of their stories reveals a number of similarities in relation to their introduction to, and early years in, tennis. In this context, both legends give considerable praise and recognition to their first coach. This paper reviews the recognition Margaret gives to her first coach, Wally Rutter. How important was he and how did he shape her career? Before doing so, let's briefly review Laver's acknowledgment of his first coach, Charlie Hollis, and specifically the approach adopted by this influential coach and mentor.

Key words: biography, coaching, mentoring, methodology.

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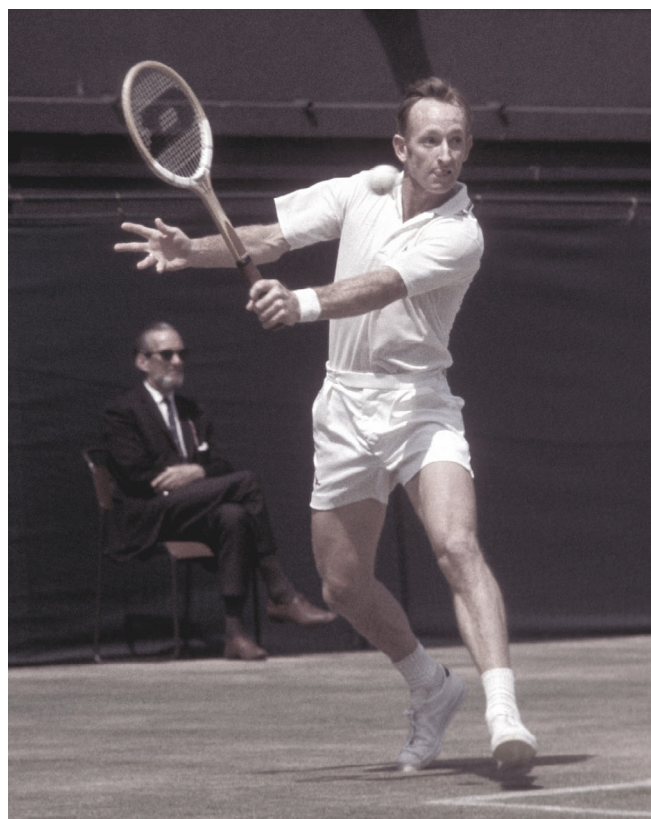
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INTRODUCTION

As Laver's coach from age 10 to 14 years, Hollis was credited with laying strong foundations for his pupil's later successes. According to Laver, Hollis stressed the importance of: solid technique and exceptional physical fitness; the ability to hit every shot as perfectly and accurately as possible; and a 'never give up' mentality. For Hollis, it was not necessarily about winning but rather about learning and good sportsmanship, manners and general demeanour both on-and off-the court.

To these ends, Hollis adopted a variety of fun on-court games, together with endless drills, and also led by his own example as a role model for the personal qualities he wanted Laver to embrace (Young, 2020). Such was Hollis's influence on Laver that the latter acknowledged in his memoir: "*Without Charlie I don't know how my career would have turned out ... my career might not have happened at all*" (Laver & Writer, 2013, pp. 12-13).



Beginnings to tennis and first coach

Margaret provides a wonderful description of her introduction to tennis and, very shortly after, to her first coach, Wally Rutter (she refers to him as Wal in her book [Court, 2016]. We will adopt this approach and refer to Wal versus Wally or Mr Rutter). She recalls that, as a youngster living in the country town of Albury (Australia), she “*discovered tennis on my own when I was eight*” (p. 11). She had found an old fence paling and tennis ball and would hit against the family’s garage wall often wondering what it would be like to play on a real court, with a real racquet. Luck would soon intervene and a friend of her mother gave Margaret her first racquet. It was chipped, cracked, weather beaten without a leather (or any) grip and heavy given it was an adult’s racquet.

Living across from the Albury and Border Tennis Club with its 25 grass courts, Margaret and her other ‘gang’ members (three male friends) at the time would sneak through a hole in the fence to a court that was largely hidden from view from the clubhouse. This is where Margaret learnt her natural and extraordinary volleying skills. She would put herself at the net, hitting to the boys, and trying not to let any balls pass that would have alerted others to their mischievous endeavours.

It was inevitably only a matter of time before the ‘laser vision’ of the club’s curator and coaching professional caught the gang out. This was how Margaret first met Wal, in circumstances somewhat tense at the time! The gang continued to test fate, returning to play on the club’s secluded court after being given a stern warning from Wal. Margaret was later to question Wal’s seemingly fearsome presence, suggesting that “*his gruff exterior concealed a kind heart: why else would he have never repaired the hole in the fence?*” (p. 13).

With an eye for talent and determination, Wal proceeded to invite Margaret to his weekly coaching clinics for local juniors. Margaret jumped at this opportunity but was unsure how her parents would manage the two shillings per session cost. Again, fate soon intervened when Margaret found she herself could ‘do a contra’ by working in the ice-cream and drink kiosk at the club and also by helping Wal with some of the squads. These were the humble beginnings for what was to become an enduring association between player and coach. As described by Margaret, it all started “*as the kid he (Wal) used to hunt from his courts*” (p. 14).

So, how did Wal sow the seeds for Margaret’s incredible journey? Margaret’s descriptions of Wal, himself a competent A-grade player, give us several clues as to his values, principles and approach to his coaching.

Early questioning and respective inclusion

Shortly after inviting Margaret to his junior coaching clinics, Wal posed three questions to her. Did she like tennis? Did she want to be a tennis player? Was she prepared to work really hard? We are certainly left with the impression that the coaching arrangement would not have proceeded any further had Wal not been satisfied with Margaret’s responses. It was obviously also a pivotal moment for Margaret who recalls, “*I didn’t want to let down Wal ... never wanting to disappoint a man who gave me so much*” (pp. 24-25) and “*When Wal spoke, I listened*” (p. 28).

Not only did Margaret listen to Wal, she cites the valued times when she sat on the kitchen bench in Wal and his wife’s home and simply chatted. This apparently had not been the norm



for Margaret who recalls, “*The Rutters encouraged me to have conversations with them, to ask questions, something that was never allowed at home*” (p. 15). Being inclusive and respectful of others (irrespective of their age or gender) were important values to Wal. He led by his own example.

Encouraged Margaret to dream big

Wal would “*speak of tennis’s Holy Grail, Wimbledon*” (p. 20) and encouraged Margaret to visualise playing there. It was an achievable destination but only if Margaret gave away her other dream to be a champion runner. Margaret credits Wal with guiding her to concentrate on tennis and the pursuit of Wimbledon success. According to Wal, it would require hard work and focused dedication to one, not two, sports. That Margaret did, dedicating herself to being the best she could be. As she describes,

“I took Wal’s every word to heart and when he said, ‘If you want to be Wimbledon champion, you must be prepared to work hard and make sacrifices. I bought into his take-no-prisoners philosophy’” (pp. 26-27).

Holistic coaching approach

As described by Margaret, Wal adopted a holistic approach to developing her talents. Importantly, Wal’s coaching approach centred around his belief that “*it was all about striving to be better*” (p. 26).

Wal sought to perfect Margaret’s technique, improve her footwork and develop a serve-and-volley style of play. In addition, there was an emphasis on sportsmanship and a ‘never-give’ mentality. With respect to sportsmanship, Margaret recalls being told to find herself a new coach if she hurled her racquet in frustration. Equally important to Wal was “*a bloody-minded refusal to give up*” (p. 26). Margaret credits Wal with giving her ‘a killer instinct’; if she could win 6-0 6-0 or win in straight (versus three sets) that should be her plan. Opponents had to win any game they won from Margaret because of their good play, rather than Margaret letting up on them!

CONCLUSIONS

In her book, Margaret concludes that “*Wal Rutter was the first of a number of guardian angels ... (he) nurtured me and without whom I could never have achieved what I have*” (p. 17). There is no greater accolade possible for this remarkable person.

He facilitated Margaret's journey to the highest echelons of tennis greatness and has been respectfully acknowledged by his legendary player for doing so.

The stories told by Margaret Court and Rod Laver about their first coach show remarkable similarities in the approach, philosophy and strategies adopted by Wal Rutter and Charlie Hollis. Taken collectively, the stories remind us that, as coaches, we may well have opportunities to shape the destiny for our players. There are no guarantees that our players will end up as Wimbledon champions but it can, and does, happen.

Both accounts of Margaret and Rod of the significance of their first coach are inspirational and heartening. Let's continue to love our coaching and maintain the passion for our players to achieve happiness and fulfilment in playing the game. Dreams can come true with the right coach and players who are committed to give it their absolute all to be a better player each day going forward. Salutes to Wal Rutter and Charlie Hollis, but not forgetting Margaret Court and Rod Laver!

DECLARED INTEREST

The first author is a friend of Margaret Court having first met Margaret when she came to Melbourne from Albury as a teenager to progress her tennis. Margaret lived with the first author's family for several years and would hit with her and correspond when travelling. The friendship extends through to today.

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