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**Don't  
Be Fooled**



**by the  
Trophies**

By Greg Moran



**H**ow many times have you heard people gloat about how great their tennis instructors played the game?

“Bob played No. 1 for Florida State in 1977.”

“Rosa is Ranked No. 2 in her age division in New England.”

While such accomplishments are impressive, the fact that Bob or Rosa have a closet full of trophies, a large box of newspaper clippings or a serve that breaks the sound barrier has little to do with whether they're qualified to teach the game.

Certainly, teaching pros need to have technical skills to demonstrate various strokes, be able to feed the ball at different cadences and speeds, and hit at a high enough level to push students. Yet there are many other, much more important, qualities that make a teaching professional great.

## **Knowledge:**

Great teaching professionals know the advantages and disadvantages of the Eastern, Continental, Semi-western and Western grips as they relate to each shot in the game. They are able to offer different stroking options, explain various footwork patterns and advise players on the latest rackets, shoes, strings and grips. Believe it or not, many great tennis players really don't have a lot of knowledge in these areas or have been playing so long that the last time they thought about them was in 1969.

## **Communication Skills:**

Knowledge is important, but being able to communicate that knowledge is really the key to teaching. Since people learn in different ways, great teaching pros are able to figure out whether a student responds best to visual demonstrations or auditory instructions. This skill is learned through training and spending hundreds of hours on court with different types of people, not through playing.

## **Flexibility:**

There is no one tried and proven way to teach the game. Yes, there are certain fundamentals that all students need to learn, but students come in all shapes, sizes and abilities. Great teaching professionals realize that trying to fit everyone into one teaching method is like trying to stuff a basketball into a can made for tennis balls. Some great tennis players try to clone themselves through their students. However, great tennis teachers approach the instruction with a game plan of what usually works the best and then stay flexible in order to adjust to individual learning styles.

## **Patience:**

For a teacher, there is very little more challenging than watching students swing and miss or mishit balls for sixty minutes. For a student, this experience is even more frustrating. Great teaching pros understand how students feel as they struggle to succeed, and they exercise patience throughout the learning process.

## **Motivation:**

Students need to be encouraged and motivated to learn. Great teaching pros will not only keep up a student's spirit, they will also motivate him or her to work through difficulties and overcome challenges.

## **Enthusiasm:**

As in any career, employees need to be there for more than the paycheck. Great teaching pros love what they do and look forward to each lesson. They greet students with an infectious eagerness and enthusiasm about the game and about the lesson.

Tennis instruction is all about the student. A teaching pro's job is to help players learn tennis or improve their games—not to reminisce about former glory days or outhit students. The tennis industry includes many great teaching pros who have had very little, if any, success in tournament play as well as many great playing pros. If you are an elite player, you may do well to learn from a professional player who “has been there.” Brad Gilbert is an excellent example of a professional player with teaching skills. Because he played Grand Slam events, he understands what it takes to win at that level. He also has an incredible understanding of the game's strategies and the ability to analyze players' strengths and weaknesses.

Would I trust Brad Gilbert to teach tennis to a beginner with limited athletic ability who's not sure if he wants to play tennis? Not necessarily. The fact is: for the vast majority of people taking tennis lessons, their instructors' tournament record is irrelevant.

So, when you're looking for someone to teach you or your children, don't be blinded by the glint of an instructor's trophies. Do some research and make certain that your teaching pro has the knowledge, communication, flexibility, patience, motivation and enthusiasm to help you achieve your goals.

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