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On-Court Coaching: Fair or Not-So-Fair?

By Paula Vergara

Updated: October 25, 2010

There always seems to be a few hotly debated issues that bubble up now and again in tennis: Who's the GOAT? Is the season too long? Should on-court coaching or from-the-stands coaching be allowed? To pick just one issue to debate is not so easy.

The GOAT debate usually turns into a circular discussion, with no right answer. And when a tennis debate reaches an apparently irresolvable status, I can't even go there. I will say this: Can we all at least wait until players have retired before they are included in the GOAT conversation? Thank you.

The length of the WTA Tour's tennis season has long been blamed as the reason for too many injuries, and the WTA's 2009 Roadmap didn't seem to resolve that problem. With so many people having a vested interest in the Tour's schedule, there's no simple solution or quick fix to make it all better. For now, I'll leave this debate to the experts.

If I were to choose one tennis debate to dive into head first, it would have to be on-court coaching. It is a relatively new debate, with rules that, from a distance, don't exactly seem fair to the players or coaches. Starting in 2009, on-court coaching was permanently implemented after a two-year trial. It has become an optional "benefit" for players on the WTA Tour, but with limits—just one coaching request per set allowed, either at the end of a changeover, or at the end of a set.



Players can also request their coach's presence on-court if their opponent has taken a medical timeout, a toilet break, or change of attire break. Surprisingly, on-court coaching is not allowed at Grand Slams, where the stakes are the highest.

On-court coaching is also a source of amusement for TV viewers, with coaches being required to wear microphones during their conversations with a player, only if the match is televised. To be honest, it really isn't all that amusing if the coach and player are speaking Russian or Polish, or some other language that most viewers don't understand.

The real point of contention is not whether on-court coaching should be allowed, but rather, should coaching-from-the-stands be allowed. Justine Henin is one player who has been chastised for taking cues from her coach Carlos Rodriguez, via hand signals, as he sits and watches from the stands. As if they're committing a crime, or the player is cheating on a test.

What exactly is wrong with coaching-from-the-stands? Is it really cheating? Is it giving a player an advantage over their opponent, even though their opponent has the option to do the same? Does it alter the integrity of the sport? Should players not be allowed to look into the stands during a match? I'm all in favor of following rules, but I don't believe that rules are always fair (or are even sensible) in every instance.

If you look at other professional sports—baseball, football, basketball, or hockey—coaches are situated on the side of the field, on the court, or standing next to the players' bench. Some even wear headsets so they can talk to other coaches off the field. Coaches are free to talk to, yell at, or point fingers in the direction of any player at any time during the game.

Tennis coaches aren't allowed anywhere near players during a match unless they are called onto the court. Even then, they typically have just two minutes at the end of a set, or 90 seconds during a

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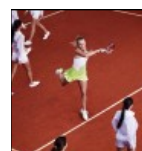
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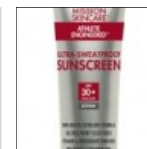
I understand. Tennis is different. It's an individual sport. It's a quiet sport (grunting aside). Players are out there, alone, and have to rely on themselves for support. Which is why tennis is such an interesting sport to watch. It's a mentally challenging game.

Which brings us back to the issue of fairness. If the WTA Tour is going to allow on-court coaching, why should the rules limit the amount of coaching? Why not just give players the option to call their coach on-court during any changeover, at the end of each set, and during the occasional medical time out?

Here's a head-scratcher that also feeds the fairness debate: The person that a player chooses for on-court coaching doesn't necessarily have to be their actual coach. It is completely within the rules for a player to choose a parent, friend, boyfriend, sister, brother, or even a fellow player as an on-court coach for their match. Baffling.

I'm not sure what the answers are to the on-court coaching issues, but I am sure the debate will continue. As far as the GOAT debate is concerned, I'll go there once I can figure out the right answer.

Paula Vergara is a freelance tennis journalist, covering the WTA and ATP tours. Paula's publishing credits include On the Baseline Tennis News, Tennis.com, USTA New England Magazine, and Bob Larson's Tennis News. Paula is also a member of the United States Tennis Writers' Association. To view her work, visit www.paula-vergara.blogspot.com.



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8 LEGACY COMMENTS

 **francescozorro**
 October 25, 2010 at 1:22 pm

tennis is too much conservative, but it must change 3 thinks are important to change 1) to abolish net on the serve 2) coach can speak with player more often 3) refere cannot give the approval at the collaborators. There is the problem when the matches are on the hard there are many mistakes (ball out) from refere. Then tennis live too much on the important players. Money and points for ranking are divided no in right way. For exmpl Who win changer has euro 6100 and finalist only 3500.....

 **the fan child**
 October 25, 2010 at 1:28 pm

Definitely agree on retirement as the beginning of any and all GOAT discussions. As far as on-court coaching, I tend to like it because it facilitates better tennis. At least that is the intentions. I know some players would prefer that they could have it at the Slams, and I think that some players definitely appreciate the fact that not only can they get some coaching, but they can also get a brief respite from the isolation of a tennis match. They can just sit and discuss something with someone and not be so alone.

As far as coaching from the box — I say go for it. But pretend you're not. It's fun that way. Everybody wants to make things so difficult for the player, and we chastise them for any shred of help or support they get for their boxes, but really what kind of message does that send about our sport?

It's hard enough as it is, and the talent pool is limited enough as well — especially in America — so why make it harder on the athletes? I know we all have this romantic vision of tennis and how much mental toughness it takes to play, but if coaching can help to raise the level of play and comfort for the athletes is it really such an evil thing?

**the fan child**

October 25, 2010 at 1:30 pm

sorry for my typos!

**David the lefty**

October 25, 2010 at 2:31 pm

The argument that players and/or their coaches break the rule anyway, so the rule is bad, is nonsensical. Using that logic we should be for doing away with the rules forbidding betting and performance enhancing drugs.

The argument that things are tough enough on the players as it is, so why make it tougher, escapes me as well. Using that logic we should do away with the net, because sometimes balls get hit into it.

Tennis is a sport that combines huge doses of self reliance and self management. It is a solitary sport. In this it is unique. A player must be able to manage him or herself, deal with problems on his or her own, solve his or her own dilemmas. And the rules say no help. I don't see anything wrong with that.

Now lets' flip it. Lets' say that a lower ranked and poorer player is playing the number 1 player, or the one managed by IMG or Adidas. And because of the relationship between that second competitor and the agent or sponsor, that player has access to a brain trust the first competitor does not. If we assume that on court coaching makes a positive difference for the second player, how is that fair?

The on court coaching idea is a bad one. Coaches caught violating violating the rule, and it should be easy enough to police, should be removed from the stands. Period.

**Tony Osborne**

October 25, 2010 at 4:37 pm

In my opinion, On Court coaching should be completely banned. Coaching from the stands? Keep it banned, if a few hand signals get through well, live with it.

Its a professional sport, played by professionals. If a player, doesn't matter whether he/she is #1 or #501 in the rankings, cannot work out how to change their game plan in order to change the way a match is going, can't work out that they should, for example, be more aggressive, come to the net more, play to opponents backhand more etc. then they shouldn't be playing professionally.

And calling coaches on when your 5-0 up in the final set? What the ****?

**Paula Vergara**

October 25, 2010 at 5:11 pm

Chris (the fan child) – I agree that coaches should be allowed to use hand-signals from the box, but I don't think they should have to hide it, as they do now. I think on-court coaching takes away from the appearance of mental toughness, but may, in fact, help a player to win a match.

David the Lefty – I'm not so sure that coaching from the stands is easy to police (i.e., not easy to prove). Something as subtle as a blink of an eye, or a hand gesture can be interpreted as anything. Plus, the rules don't say 'no help'. They say 'here's a little bit of help' but with rules.

I'm also not sure if you can say definitively that a coach for a No. 1 player would have much more influence in 2 minutes or 90 minutes than a coach for a player who is lower ranked. The influence of on-court coaching on any player can vary greatly depending on the mindset of the player.

Also, comparing the rules for on-court coaching to betting/drug testing is really comparing apples to oranges.

**Andrew Broad**

October 25, 2010 at 6:02 pm

I believe that on-court coaching should be allowed, as it may improve the quality of the tennis. It's not fair on those players who can't afford a coach, or don't know anyone suitable, but that's life.

Coaching from the stands should be allowed, simply because it is too difficult to police, with many players having secret systems of signals with their coaches. As long as it's not disrupting the match, I'd be happy to allow it.

It's quite right that a WTA player should be allowed to nominate anyone she likes as her coach for a particular match. Some players don't have professional coaches, or their coaches may be absent from the tournament, or may be adidas-coaches, who are contractually prohibited from coaching their players against other adidas-players.

On-court coaching is currently allowed at all the WTA tournaments, but not at the Majors, which are beyond the WTA's jurisdiction.



TennisAce

October 30, 2010 at 10:29 am

I am against on court coaching. I think it takes away from the competitiveness of the sport. Tennis is an individual sport. For me one of the beauties of watching and playing the game is to watch players figure it out for themselves during the course of a match.

As for the person up top who spoke about players who have high profile coaches etc. It makes not one bit of difference. A good example. This year in Miami during a match between Venus and Hantuchova, uber coach, Cahill came out numerous times and Hantuchova still lost the match.

Venus not only beat Hantuchova, she defeated the uber coach as well.

I play league tennis and whenever I have a match I speak to my coach, who will give me tips on how to play my opponent. I make notes and then I go out there and try not only to play my game but also take the opponent out of their game as well.

2 of the best players on the women's tour, do not use on court coaching. Next time there is a debate on whether this is good or not, just watch Venus and Serena figure an opponent out at a major.