

Unforced Errors of Tennis Parents with Coach Lori Riffice

- [00:00](#) Okay. So our guest today is coach Lori Riffice, who is national, a women's national coach. Uh, specifically in, for 12 and under girls, uh, does a lot of work with the player ID and development department. And, uh, today we're going to be talking about unforced errors for tennis parents. Coach Lori, welcome.
- [00:22](#) LR: Thanks Johnny. Thanks Larry. Really, really happy to be here today. And, uh, going over some of our unforced errors that we see our tennis parents do. Me included. So, uh, really happy to start the dialogue.
- [00:36](#) L: So if the, the audience doesn't know your son played, plays at a very high level.
- [00:43](#) LR: Yeah. Uh, thank you. I don't think he's considered a junior even anymore, although he's 19. I consider him a junior, but, uh,.
- [00:51](#) L: And always will even when he's 45.
- [00:51](#) LR: That's right. Uh, but been through the junior circuit and now he's a freshman in college. He's at the, he's at the university of Florida. So just getting started in his college and his ATP career. I think he's ranked mid five hundreds right now. So, uh, but have been through the, the junior circuit with him nationally. So,
- [01:12](#) J: And I think we're very fortunate. I mean Lori, whenever you see, see Sam training or he's out there, he's probably the most respectful kid out there. You see him in the gym or on the court. He's one of the hardest workers out there. And obviously that's a huge testament to you and your husband, how you've raised Sam, but seeing that and that trend. And now we've got you helping us with the parent information, uh, with our cam structure. So it's great to build your experience and bring it to, to the whole country with, with how we can help parents, um, navigate this junior pathway. Um, you know, so I mean, if we get into this then, so it's all about unforced errors or sort of parenting, you know, parenting behavior. I mean, what comes to mind? The, what some things have you seen out there that maybe we can help parents with as they go through this journey. The, the, like you went through with, with your son.
- [01:58](#) L: Great. Well thank you. Um, I wanna start with a quote that Nick Bollettieri has pretty much made famous, but the quote is "parents can have a more negative effect on a young person's tennis career than a positive influence." So, yeah.
- [02:13](#) L: That's dark, Nick.
- [02:13](#) LR: Yeah, I know. And I also just want to start with, um, although we're talking about unforced errors at that tennis parents do. Um, there's a lot of positive things that tennis parents do and uh, honor on our website, which is playerdevelopment.usta.com. We, we have a, a list of negative things that

parents do and positive things that parents do. So, uh, although we're only talking about some unforced errors that parents sometimes do, and I fully admit I've been guilty of a few of these. There's still, you know, we don't, we don't want this to just be a negative, uh, focus. So that, I just wanted to start with that. But kind of the first thing I want to bring up is a lot of parents these days have a fear of kids failing. So they do not want their kids to fail. I guess we're in the generation called the snowplow parent. We are officially not in the helicopter parent phase. We're in the snowplow parent phase. So let's remove all obstacles from our kids' future.

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L: So coach Lori, why do you think that phenomenon exists these days? Where's that coming from?

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LR: Well I think it comes from the fact that the generation of kids that we have right now are post 9/11. Really. And we have as parents and I'm included, we're, we're looking at raising our kids in a different way and we want to protect them. I know it's easier to protect them in to watch them go through some tough times. That's what I think. But please correct me.

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L: I mean I don't have all the answers but I, I mean from what I understand that's, that's pretty accurate and know from your experience, and we don't have to make this about your son and you as a mother, but I mean how challenging is it for a parent to let their kid fail? Cause, I mean a lot of times we've been through it ourselves so we can tell them the answer but maybe they don't want to hear it or maybe it won't sink in. Right. But how challenging is it to watch your child fail sometimes and to just sit back and let it happen?

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LR: Yeah, it's super challenging and I think it's so competitive now with not only the level of tennis being at a really high level but also the level of academics. And so we see parents maybe helping their kids in their homework assignment so that they get better grades. We see kids' parents really helping their, their kids win matches by cheating, you know, either by coaching from the sidelines or you know, encouraging their parents. I, I actually saw a video tape of a, of a match at winter nationals. I'm not telling you which age group, which, which gender, which location and player actually looked to the sideline and then changed their call and actually saw some cheating and, and it was on videotape. So I don't have the answer. I know that it's just super important for kids to learn from their, their failures, otherwise they're not going to learn. So.

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L: I think there's a prevailing idea now, like you look at some of the positive psychology movement and in even we study resilience that if kids don't have adversity or negative experiences. When they have the big ones, they're not equipped to deal with it, right? So they struggle to kind of deal with those things when they haven't had the opportunity to, right? And then you look at all the, maybe champions are great performers. You can go back and I think almost to a man or a woman, they all had some form of adversity in their lives, whether it was, you know, a family member tragically died or a coach or there was an illness or a major injury that kept them out for a while. Right? So, uh, you know,

a lot of maybe family issues. So a lot of these players that do make it, it's not like they, everybody's snow plowed everything out of the way for them. They dealt with major adversity, right. And were able to get through it. What are your thoughts on that? Absolutely. I definitely, uh, see a benefit in, you know, I, I have three sons and I know as a parent I got better at parenting with the third versus the first two. You know, you kind of learn, but allowing, allowing the adversity to be there has, has made definitely seeing the benefit of that. Johnny, do you have any, I know Johnny's a new parent. He's an excellent new parent/

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J: Oh my gosh. That means I have to have a second, third and fourth kid until I get parenting right.

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LR: Yeah, it's like pancakes. Your first one is never as good. Your second and third is always better.

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J: And if you flip them they end up on the floor.

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L: And I heard Johnny bought a new truck and there was a plow on the front and we live in Florida and we live in Florida so I'm not quite sure what that's about.

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J: Yeah, I bought a... Yeah, no. Uh, the, you know, it's really interesting. I actually read an article a over break and it talked about some of these issues like the snowplow parent and it's talking about how now parents really want to try and keep up with each other and what they can bring for their, what they provide for their children and with more families. Now having both parents working and making a living, making an income provides that less opportunity to actually go out there and do stuff with their kids. So the way they're trying to counteract that is obviously the only thing, the only opportunities that kids get is to pay for something. And then the minute a parent... They asically said the minute a parents starts paying for something, they're also not obviously financially invested, but they're also emotionally invested because it's their hard earnings that they're putting into their child. So that's creating this feeling that they have to be really involved to the point where they're overly involved. Not that being involved is a problem if it's healthy, but being overly involved to the point where it's now like keeping up with the Jones' where this person's spending this much and doing this much, you know, this many tennis lessons or this many soccer sessions or whatever. So we've got to try and keep up and, and what it basically said was is those that obviously make bigger incomes are doing way more for their kids than they used to, but the, the families of lower incomes are trying to keep up with that somewhat. So they're actually stretching themselves even thinner by providing those opportunities. But it's essentially creating this bubble of emotional investment in having to... We, first of all, know that now things, there's not much of that free play out there times where parents go out with their kids and just go and do stuff on the playground and go out and play a bit of tennis with them for fun and things like that. That's kind of diminishing, you know, across the country. Not just tennis and all sports, but like now we're in this environment where we have a lot more emotional investment than we had

before. And so that's maybe what's contributing as well to, to the snowplow sides.

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L: Think about what you said there too, Johnny, I mean you're talking about the stress that a parent feels to provide for their child. Right? And find that great experience opportunity that if they are passionate about something, that they have everything need to be successful and now they're both working, both parents are working. So I think overall in our society, parents feel a lot more stress potentially than they used to to provide to, to create a good experience with their child, to give them accessibility, to give them what they need to be successful. And what do we do? We try to buy it, we try to, then we try to get that return on investments. So I mean I know Lori, you spent a lot of time with the parents. I mean how much do you see the parents under stress? Do you feel that they mean that they're struggling with some of the, some of the trends that Johnny was just mentioning?

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LR: Yeah, that's a great way to put it. Johnny. You know, one of the, one of the things that we talk about is that we're raising tennis players and kinda their environment and their travel schedule where it's an abnormal youth, but we're trying to raise them normally. So, so the trick is raising, raising them in an abnormal environment but not being abnormal ourselves, as parents. And it's very challenging. One of, one of the takeaways that we try and do with our, with our junior parents or junior tennis players' parents is focus on just a few things. And one of the things is that the kids need to have fun. And if the focus is always on winning and losing, or if there is too much focus on winning, then not only do the kids not have fun, but they don't get to have any development in their game. And Larry, I think I might've gone off a road that maybe you weren't leading me to, but one of the takeaways that we want our junior parents to walk away with is not only do the kids have to have fun, they need to develop tennis the right way. So that means they're, they're not just looking to win this one match and that allows them to lose and fail and, and be resilient and be tough. But also to accept when the kids lose. So we've seen instances where parents yell at kids for losing. We've seen, um, and this, this is going back to our unforced errors of, you know, tennis parents. Not only do we not let kids fail or want them to fail, but when they do lose, we get mad at them as parents. I've literally seen kids left at tournaments because the parents drive away. I've seen tennis rackets broken by parents, so...

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J: The parent smashing the kids racket?

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LR: Yes.

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J: Wow.

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L: I paid for it, so I'm going with it.

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LR: That's right. Um, so you know, as far as an unforced error, I mean, one, one of the things that, that we can cut down on is just accepting how they play. You know, whether, whether it's win or lose, whether it's good or bad.

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L: Do you think, because I, I've, I think I've talked about this in a previous podcast, that as a parent we attach our self worth or our ability to parent with our child's success. So do you think that it's not just that the child lost, it's actually a loss for the parent too? Like I lost to that other parent or to that other player as well?

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LR: I think so Larry. And that's probably been w you know, one of the toughest things that I've had to deal with, you know, watching my son develop is dealing with the losses and knowing like, Oh my God, we practiced that. Why is he doing that right now? You know, we, we went over that, we talked about that, I spent money on it. Uh, you can do better with that and then feeling a little frustrated. But, uh, I think what's really helped me is, is stepping back and not being responsible for that outcome. Um, whether, you know, whether it was a win or a loss, but, but not being responsible for how he played because basically that has nothing to do with me. And so the more I've been detached with that, then the, the, the easier it's been to, to watch those losses and really look at it as an opportunity to get better. Wow. I was really glad we traveled across the country for you to lose to that person cause now you know and you're upset, you lost and now you know that this was something really important that the coaches wanted me to do and now I'm going to do it.

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L: Yeah, that's a good point. It's all about how you look at things, right? And if you can look at it as, as an opportunity to learn to grow in terms of losing, I know you had some other unforced errors that you wanted to mention, so why don't you want to go through those some more, coach Lori?

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LR: Yeah, sure. The first one that we talked about is, is the fear of kids failing. The second one is when kids do lose, the parents get angry at them. So that's tied into maybe the third one. Another unforced error is not allowing enough independence. You know, we still see parents carrying tennis bags. We still see parents coaching from the sidelines. What we want our junior players to do is to accept accountability, accept responsibility, and to really kind of take ownership of how they play tennis and how they prepare for their tennis matches. And we just don't see enough of that.

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J: It would seem like to me, I mean Laurie and Larry that this is a little bit counter-culture because if we do have a parents at the side of the court getting angry, that's creating a dependence on them to make them happy, you know, that the child wants to make the parent happy. Um, and, and some of the other aspects we've already talked about, it almost seems like that independence is, is really tough to develop because of the environment that we're creating sometimes as parents always being at the practice court, always being by the match court, creating those emotions. It almost sounds like it's, it's gonna be very tough to develop as it's counter culture.

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LR: Johnny, you, you bring up a really good point because you know, as Larry was saying, more people are investing more money. I know people invest time. It takes a big part of the day to plan the trainings. And, and I know as parents we, we know what it takes to be successful. And so when we tell our kids what to do on the tennis court, we're just helping them because we know it's going to help them. But Johnny, you bring up a really good point because it's not really helping them and it's going to take the players longer to, to learn how to think on their own. And, and, and that's one of the things we're doing with our 12 and under girls is we're titling it under our compete like a champion quality of professionalism. But we really want the girls to think on their own while they're on the court because when they play a match, they're on their own. If they get the opportunity to travel to a tournament without their parents, I mean they have to think on their own.

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L: And that's obviously a great way to persuade parents to give more independence. But what about those players that aren't playing at the high performance level and they're not traveling long distances? We still believe that giving them independence, it's part developing healthy young adults, right. Developing healthy teenagers and then adults. How do we convince the parents that maybe the recreational players or those in the community that Hey, it's, you need to develop the independence of your child still even if they're not going to play in nationals or ITF's or even pro events.

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LR: Yeah. I don't know that that's a good question because you know, we have people that want to parent different ways and, and, and we don't want to say that one way to parent is better than another way to parent. Um, I definitely don't want to be the one saying that. However, if the child has aspirations or inspirations to actually get to a higher level, then this is definitely a deal breaker. Whether they can get to that higher level. So I wouldn't want to limit one's potential, not knowing how far they could go. So I would hope that the parents and the players would be open to this idea.

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L: Hmm. So I'm a parent, not actually, but let's say I'm a parent of a 13 year old player who is a girl who is starting to play, you know, or playing some bigger events. Now, how much independence should I give her? Can you tell us practically what are the kinds of things you think that a 13 year old girl can do for herself?

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LR: Yeah, I know I've taken 13 year old girls on trips internationally and what we have tried to do is give them some say in how their day is planned. So for instance, if they know they have a match at 10 o'clock I would always ask the the player, what time do you want to warm up by? All right. And then you go back in time. So then what, who are you hitting with? Um, and then what time do you want to get to the facility by, because if you're going to hit at, let's say 9:00 AM or 8:30 AM then what time do you need to get to the facility by? So kind of go back in, in time in the day and let them choose all their steps. So if they know they need to leave the hotel by 8:00 AM then what time are you gonna eat breakfast? Oh, what time are you going to get up? Have you got your

bag packed? You know, so I would definitely let them choose who they're hitting with and how much hitting they need. Then after the match, did you, did you do your cooldown, have you journaled, uh, what's next on your schedule? So kind of give them the independence to pick it and then also teach them. Well, did you consider that maybe you have doubles that maybe you would need to bring a change of clothes, you know, and, and let them kind of make mistakes in a safe environment, but then also use it as an opportunity for them to learn. So I don't know if that answered your question, Larry, but I would, I would let them choose their day, their schedule, their, their warm up, their cool-down. And then also have the last say as a coach or a parent to make sure that it's appropriate.

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L: Don't you think that.. I'm a parent so I know I do this sometimes too. My children are a little younger than that, but that we're, because of the stress that we feel for things to go right, to be on schedule, that we're constantly pushing the kids do this, do that, make sure you have this, make sure you have that. Cause we don't want it to go wrong. Right. Whereas if we put it back on them, my thought is that, I dunno what you all think, but if we put it back on on the children, we prepare them for this and say when they, when they lose or something goes wrong, hey don't look at me. This is your responsibility. Like I'm here, I'll drive you here and the things that I need to take care of, I will. But these are the things you need to take care of. So when when you lose, I'm not upset. But also let's not start putting the blame on other things that you know aren't reality here. You know, you lost a match. It's okay, let's go and get better versus well, you know, you didn't tell me I needed my clay court shoes or you didn't string my rackets the right tension or something.

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J: That would drive me nuts. I had super OCD and independence and if my mom tried to like take my water bottle, I'd be like going into overdrive.

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L: So you see why some of these kids are pulling their hair out on the sidelines in the practices, right? Like, and you see the reaction is like, please leave me alone.

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LR: Yeah. And you know, we had some great instances just this past junior US open where we had parents interacting with the players, competing at the junior US open and doing some things that made the, the junior player lose focus. You know, and when a player has to think about competing at that level and then they're still having to decipher what their parents want them to do, you can just see how that's a distraction. And so, you know, I know that probably every tennis parents' dream is to have their child compete at the, uh, you know, US open. And maybe it's a long way from happening. Maybe it's a short way from happening. But if a, if a parent can think long term like that and think, okay, is this something I still want to do when they're going to be competing on court 17, and it's going to be playing on tennis channel, you know, or is this, is this a training period for me to step back and let them do this? So,

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L: So coach Lori, I thought you said something extremely important earlier on and because I know you well, and I know Sam and I know his coach and

everything I was around, you kind of stepped out of the way, right? And you let coach Sylvain kind of take over and be in charge and you played your role very well. I thought. And that, that's something that I'm hearing from what you're saying is parents, let's, let's manage our own role and our ourselves, our own needs, their own stressors and not put them on to children and let them do their tennis, get them with some good coaches. Right. I mean, and let them have that experience. We don't have to try and control every aspect of it. It's okay if something goes wrong. It's okay if they lose, like we're going to be okay in the end.

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LR: Yeah. Thanks Larry. Yeah, that was actually kind of hard stepping away. But even as a national coach, I know there's a whole heck of a lot more I need to learn. I know that someone else's, uh, you know, knowing more about the men's game than me. And so for me it was pretty much a no brainer, although it wasn't a day to day easy thing for me to do.

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L: Sure. Especially when maybe there was times where there were struggles, like you said before, and you want to kind of get in.

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LR: Yeah. I wanted to be a mom. Yeah. I wanted to a mom and fix it. Yeah, for sure. But there's more to tennis than, for a junior tennis player to learn, then you know, when a mom can teach. So.

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J: Wow. I feel like I've got a lot to learn to put in place first before I even can think about...

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L: You got two years. Couple of years.

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J: That's been amazing. But so, so Lori, I mean we've talked about some of these unforced errors. Um, we do like to come at it from, you know, the, the kind of problem solution side of things. So what are maybe, you know, as we're kind of wrapping up here, what are some tips and some advice that you could give to parents out there to really help them overcome, maybe committing some of the unforced errors that can really help their kids move along in the direction that's can be very productive for both, both sides.

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L: Yeah. Okay. Well, I personally think that, uh, the most important thing that parents should do is, is provide an opportunity for the kids to have fun, to learn the right skills for tennis. That means develop all the strokes This game is just not about forehand and backhand. It's about all the strokes. And then also our, our role I believe as parents is just provide opportunities. I've looked at every tournament or every event that I've traveled with my son with is an opportunity to spend time with them. So I think when a parent provides a positive experience for their child, then they in turn are going to have fun. They're going to be open to learning and they're going to want to do it again, win, win or lose. So I've just, I think those three things have helped kind of guide my decision making as a parent. And I encourage others to try it. I'm also open to other

ideas. If someone has other ideas out there to help our journey as tennis parents become a success one for our kids.

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J: That's great. Larry, you got anything to add?

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L: No, I think it just brings to mind. Thank you coach Lori for being on and providing great advice and recommendations and even some of your personal stories that the goals drive everything. Right? So as a parent, if I'm coming in and if it's about getting the win, winning the tournament, proving what kind of talent, skill your child has to get a scholarship to get noticed, that changes the whole tone of the trip, right? In the way that you're addressing things with your child versus you're going, like you said, is Hey, I can spend time with my child. We get to be together or as an opportunity. That's where it begins. Don't you think? Because if we go with appropriate goals, I think we've got a good shot to do this in a good way.

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LR: Absolutely.

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J: Yeah. Well Lori, thank you very much. I know we covered quite a bit there and I know we talked about your experience as a parent, but you know the, the daily impact that you have with not only the players and how you inspire them, but you know that the time that you take, not just at practices where, where parents are around, but you go up to parents at tournaments and you make that special effort to sit down and chat with them. I think that is huge and it goes a long way and just speaks volumes to you and, and your dedication to really helping others get, get through this process. And so, um, you know, thank you for sharing your, your wisdom and your expertise and, uh, you know, we're all very lucky to have you around inspiring these, these kind of, these young and also the parents.

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LR: Thank you, Johnny. Thank you very much.

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L: I feel the same way coach Lori.

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L: Thank you. I appreciate that. Yeah, thanks.

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J: Well that wraps it up for today's episode of compete like a champion. As Lori just mentioned earlier, we have a very good parent resource page. Lori's worked very hard to put up a lot of resources on the website. You can find that our playerdevelopment.usta.com and it's under the coach resource page and you'll find that under parent resources. So be sure to please check that out. And um, and we will catch you on the next one.