Lessons in Leadership with Kathy Rinaldi

00:05  J: Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist and coach Johnny Parks with USTA player development. Today we have part two of lessons in leadership with the phenomenal captain coach Kathy Rinaldi. Welcome to the podcast. Thank you. Thank you for having me. Well we're so appreciative to that. You gave us some time to, to be able to go through this. We, we did this with the head of men's tennis, Kent Kinear and you know, as the current fed cup captain and now the fearless leader of the women's side. This will be exciting to dive into some of your, your lessons in leadership, the people that inspired you and, and hear about some of your philosophy. So, so without further ado, Larry, kick it to you.

00:46  L: Sure. Thanks.

00:48  K: I'm in trouble now.

00:49  L: You are, cause I ask the tough questions. He's just a voice, I'm the mind. Yeah. Well not really. But anyway, Kathy, I guess I a good place to start. Maybe just to talk about sorta how you see your role at player development now and as the head of a women's and, and how maybe your, your playing days or even coaching days prepared you for such a role leadership role.

01:10  K: Well, I think, you know, my role over the last 11 years has evolved at the USTA. I started out as a national coach and working with the very young juniors and kind of just worked my way up. You know, tennis has always been such a passion of mine. And, and so now I find myself at the head of women's tennis and the US fed cup captain, which is a huge honor for me and a huge responsibility for me. And I think most importantly, my role as head of women's tennis is really to set our coaches up for success and to keep building relationships. And that's so important to me and always has been. And we have such a great team. And I think that that's, that's just really important to, to continue the team comradery, uh, within us and working with the private sector in the sections. And most importantly our players.

01:58  L: If I were to guess like what kind of leadership style, and we spent almost six years together now if I had to guess that leadership style, big part of that is relationship building. Like I think when I look at the way you interact with the players and the other coaches, they can feel your connection like you, you've connected with a number of players and coaches. How do you think that started? I mean, did that, was that a part of who you were as a player as well? Were you someone who really valued those relationships with your coaches and their leadership? Like maybe, how did you get to this point where I would say you're a very much relationship-based coach and leader,

02:30  K: Right. Absolutely. I think, you know, I was always the one in the locker room talking a lot and you know, with everybody and I just really loved what I was
doing and I loved being around people and you know, learning from everyone and, and just having that camaraderie and that, those relationships. I think in tennis it's an individual sport and each week you're traveling and you're on your own. And I was such a young player when I started on the pro tour and so many of the older players really took me under their wing and I was just so appreciative to make feel like part of the WTA family at a young age, having my parents, you know, I was 14 so having a parent travel with me or a sibling or a coach. So to have that support, I remember vividly that that was really important and crucial to my success and into feeling like I belonged.

J: So the, the Fed Cup one Davis Cup it's an interesting dynamic because it's X amount of matches, you know, three, four weekends throughout the year. So you don't get to see those players apart from maybe where you bump into them at the tournament's on the tour so, how do you, what are some of your philosophies when you bring the team together and how do you create that great team environment that helps them go out on the court and feel like they really want to play for each other and obviously their country?

K: Right. Well, I don't think I have to do much of that. I think the players already have takes so much pride in playing for their country and no, what an honor and what a responsibility that is. I mean, you can see the emotions always run. So high fed cup weeks and especially during the ties on the weekend. But I think the, you know, I've known the players for a long time, being a national coach and being with the USTA for 11 years, I've known a lot of them obviously since they were very young and we have tried to support them in their teams, whether, you know, I've worked with them on a personal basis or whether just supporting their teams and their private coaches and supporting them at matches. So they've seen me at the events. And I think the big thing with Fed Cup is that I allow the private coaches to come if they, if they choose and the players choose to do so. Cause I know it's another week on the calendar and I certainly don't want to interrupt, you know, their preparation, most of them are playing a tournament after Fed Cup and work together. And I think that's quite powerful and it's always tough, you know, for a coach who doesn't work with someone and they come in for a few days to find that not so much the chemistry off the court but on the court you want to make sure that you're speaking the same language and not changing anything and working with the private coach. So even if the private coach isn't there in person, I always reach out to hear the common language or certain things that they like, certain things they don't like. And I asked the players as well. I think it's important. Some players like a lot of cheering, some players don't like at all. And so I really try to individualize as much as I can. And then the other special thing about Fed Cup, you know, you do try to bring teams together because a lot of times maybe players, you know, some players are better friends than others. And so I tried to do a team building activity. You know, we do dinners together this last time we did an escape the room, you know, we do fun social media, you know, little tidbits and you know, I have a lot of laughs. I pulled a prank on the girls here and there and um, and then the girls, you know what you really wanted the girls to come together and on this last team they all did and it was really fun.
J: It seemed like the year that you won it, 2017 that I know social media made, you know, likes doing things like promoting a lot of the fun aspects of it. But it seemed like you guys had lots of really cool team building things that you all got engaged with. And you know, the thing that strikes me is everyone’s always having a lot of fun. And I think sometimes looking from the outside in, you think all, you know there's not much fun and games being played, it's all straight serious and it should be professional. But you guys have a lot of fun that set the tone that in a sense could, you know, relax a play at a to go out there and play for that team, that you're always having a ton of fun out there to see. Yeah.

K: Yeah. I mean, I am so blessed to have a good friend and tremendous coach in Lisa Raymond and I think we laugh and have more fun than any of the players. But yes, I mean, why did we all start the sport right? Because it was fun and I think we all have to remember that at times it's, you know, obviously tougher than than others. But I think a fed cup hopefully are special weeks when these ladies, young ladies look back on their career, I hope that they can say, Oh, that week stood out. That was really a lot of fun. I got to know so and so a little bit better. And you know, that's my main goal.

J: One more dynamic that I love to see with what you do with Fed Cup is you bring in the junior girls. I mean that's amazing. And then the experience for them like, you know, what, what are some of the things that you like to do with the junior girls and why’d you like to have them around the environment?

K: Right. Well, you know, as a national coach I also took some of the juniors to the Fed Cup ties and so it's so important to me to continue that and not only just to continue that, but to have them up close and personal eating with the players, you know, coming to the practices, the draw ceremony, really seeing what fed cup's all about. Sitting on the bench with our USTA coaches, national coaches who, you know, is another thrill for me to be able to share that with our team. I think it's just a way to bring everybody together. And I think it's priceless for these young players and their development, of course, not only to see fed cup and to see what it's about and have that experience and hoping that they'll be called one day to represent their country and they'll say yes and understand what it's about. But also it gives them a sense of belonging. You know, a lot of these girls will go onto a professional path and some will go to collegiate and maybe others will go another path. But you know, to have that sense of belonging and to empower young women.

L: You know, Kathy, when I was listening to you, you said a very important word earlier and I was responsibility. I think sometimes people take leadership positions, they, they like the idea of the power and being able to make decisions for others. But you said this very important word of responsibility and, and when you were a national coach and then moved into fed cup captain, did things change for you? Did you look at leadership differently or did you keep it the same? Like, how did you prepare even for that first time to now be leading your nation and competition?
K: That's a good question. I think, you know, everything that I've done and my entire career, you know, my work at the USTA, the relationships that I've built, you know, the people that I've been so fortunate to be surrounded with family. I think that's prepared me for the Fed Cup captain being Fed Cup captain. It was a really big deal for me and a huge responsibility and one that I, my dad always taught me if you're going to do something, do it right or don't do it at all. And so I really tried to do that to heart and for me it's really all about the players and you know, doing the best that I can for them and give them the best experience and support them in any way that I can, whether it's in a small way or whether it's in a bigger way, it's still so rewarding to me. So I think, you know, it's just a culmination of everything that I've been through in my life has, you know, kind of prepared me. I never really thought I was going to be a coach if I, you know, I'm going to be perfectly honest, but you know, I started teaching tennis and taught at a resort, um, which I was very fortunate. I met so many great people, but I also learned so much from that. And then when I got the opportunity to work for the USTA, it was just, it felt so natural to me that I, I just loved it. I mean, and I still do to this day. I mean, I'm so passionate about tennis, but I'm so passionate about the players and about giving back and I feel so blessed that tennis has given me so much. Um, it's really,

L: Yeah, I mean, I think that we all feel that passion that you have Kathy and how, you know, the players feel that from you and that's part of your leadership style is that they will compete not just for you, but because of you. Right? Because of that passion that you bring. And I think a big part of that is that you can empathize with the players cause you've been there and you understand what they're going through. Right. And I think that's also, would you say maybe a part of what's helped you connect so well with the players and the coaches that you really live these lives and understand what they're going through?

K: Uh, yes. You know, it's very kind of you to say that they compete for me and you know, but I think, you know, they can pee for themselves and they're remarkable, all these young ladies. But yeah, I think I have been through quite a bit throughout my career, obviously playing for 16, 17 years on tour and starting at a young age where some of these young ladies, you know now are starting. So I've kind of gone through all these different phases of my career. And you know, I always try to put myself in their shoes and maybe what they're feeling and everybody's different of course, but definitely have compassion for everything that they're doing. I mean it's difficult to achieve what they're doing and it takes a lot of hard work. You go through a lot of adversity, go through a lot of life lessons. I think tennis mirrors life in almost every aspect. That's why, another reason why I love our sports so much. So I think these young ladies are always learning more about themselves and we just have so many great people involved in our sport. And I think that's really special.

L: When I think about this, JP, in so many times, leaders go into position and then they forget about what it was like to, to be in that competitive situation in order to be the one that has to take the shot. Or you know what I'm saying? How sometimes we get removed from it and we forget maybe the emotions
that the players are going through or so I think part of Kathy, your success as a leader is that you haven't forgotten. You've stayed connected to what it is to be a player and what those experiences were like. And you know, the players feel that from you and, and you can empathize with them. Uh, so, well, I mean I, I truly feel that in your, in your coaching leadership style. So I am, I think that's valuable for our listeners to remember if you're a coach or you have the opportunity to be ahead of coaching and ahead of, of, uh, like ahead of your club or you know, you're in charge of other coaches is to remember what it was like to be in their shoes. Right?

12:04

J: Oh yeah. Cause you're not, you're not training robots, you're training people. Right. And when you're training people, you have to understand, I think all the emotions and the different situations, the stresses that all come with that. And I think for a player, the, if they can connect the dots with the things that you're saying because they, they, they know a shared experience, they know that it's something that you would have gone through and you can help them connect the dots. I mean, we always talk about as coaches connecting to helping connect dots for players. But I think being in those environments and, and I think the players having a strong understanding that, Oh my gosh, well they've been in similar situations to me and maybe there's a few things I could learn from that. You know, I think there's some comfort in that, you know, and, and obviously like playing for 16 years at a very, very high level on the tour. I think that could provide a lot of comfort for some players knowing that okay, there's some experiences here that right.

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K: Yeah. I think you also have to take into consideration, you know, I really try to make a point to get to know the player outside of tennis and understand the situation, get to know their families and because there's life. Right. And there's always things happening on the outside of the tennis court too. And I think we can't forget that because some of these girls are young and you know, we don't know ourselves at 14 I mean those are tough teenage years and you know, everybody's going through different phases and different things in their life. And I really think that's where the compassion comes into play. That when you look back there, there are certain people in your life that get that and that see that and that understand that. And that maybe can be that sounding board or just be simply just that support. And so, you know, I really try to get to know everything I can about a player.

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L: And I think it's so easy as a leader to forget those things. And when you're making a decision for someone else or giving them constructive criticism, feedback to not remember how you might've taken that at that stage and that age. Right. And I think that part of leadership is really important that you have a responsibility, as you mentioned, Kathy, to support these players. And to do that you have to empathize and understand where they're coming from. And at the same time, I'm sure, you know, we'd all agree on this. You got to make some tough decisions too as a leader. Right? Sometimes you're the one that has to decide when there's other good options or when you're looking at a player or where you're looking at a schedule or even in a fed cup tie and who's going to
play, who's not going to play. And I mean, but for you, Cathy, what would you say are some of the biggest challenges that you face as a leader? What are some of the things that you find hardest to do as a leader?

K: I think, you know, obviously you want to make, try and make everybody happy, but you know, you can't always do that. But I think there are many challenges. I mean, as you just said, you're enlisted, you know, there are big decisions to make and you know, I always try to do, do the right thing and do what's best. And you know, having difficult conversations with players and with parents or whomever it may be. And you know, I think as long as that person knows that it's, that you mean and that it's coming from a good place and that, you know, I think, I think that gives me comfort. But you know, again, I just feel so fortunate to be, to have so many great people around me, so I have so many resources that I can go to. I don't feel alone. I always feel that I like to ask questions I like, I like to get people's opinions. And so that, that really does help me.

J: So if we move into some of the mentors that you've had in your life, whether as a player with, with you had certain coaches or even in your coaching career, there were other mentors you had who were, who would you say were had a strong influence in shaping not only the person you are, but the leadership style that you take?

K: I will say my mother and father were incredible mentors for me. My mom driving me to school would give me a little life lessons and we'd just talk about life. And so she always taught me that, just never judge other people. You never know what they're going through. So I think that that really had a strong impact and always be positive. And anyway, as I was saying, I have so many great mentors. My mother and father were outstanding, um, in my life skills and, uh, as a competitor. And then I had wonderful coaches. I mean, I was blessed to work and take a few lessons from Arthur Ashe who was, every time I'd see him at a tournament, you know, just a true gentleman to every sense of the word, kind, and then of course a fierce competitor. And then I had wonderful coaches and I certainly don't want to leave anyone out because so many people have touched my life in such a positive way, but I will mention Andy Brandy and was with him quite a bit and still in touch with him. He's like a second dad to me. And you know, I worked with Brian Godfrey for a little bit, you know, such a positive impact and such a wonderful person. And then, you know, I've had a, some school teachers and when I started at the USTA, coach, uh, Richard Ashby, um, was a tremendous mentor to me. One that I'd lean on today was so happy that he could come and share the fed cup experience with some of the juniors and honor him because he is, he is spectacular. And so, you know, I can go on. Martin Blackman is amazing. You know, I have a lot of strong women in my life as well that are tremendous mentors. That has been very important. I mentioned my mom and Katrina Adams was always extremely supportive.

J: And she's such a positive person too.
K: And I played with Katrina and you know, just, there's a lot of people and if I get into naming them I feel bad because I don't want to leave anyone out. But I think when you go through such a long career, you do just, you know, you build those relationships and, and some of those, you know, my coaching relationship with Andy and you know, my dad coached me and those relationships are strong. I mean they're, You go through everything together and you know, they see you at your best, but they see you at your worst and they see everything that it takes to get to that finished product. So, and they stand by your side, you know the ones that are always in your corner.

L: Hmm. All right, so I'm gonna, I'm gonna flip the script here then Kathy. What, what's something you've learned not to do as a leader? What's one of the lessons maybe from watching someone else and we're going to name names, but right. Something you learned like, Oh, that's a, no, no, that doesn't work.

K: I think the biggest thing that I've learned is that you don't always have to be the one speaking. Listen, you know, listening more. I think that's been really instrumental for me and very helpful.

L: That's awesome. Like people should listen to this podcast. Listen, uh, I was just, I just came back from a camp and all the kids were pumped because they say, Hey, coach Johnny, I listened to your podcast with CiCi Bellis. I was like, Oh, awesome. I was like, do you listen to any others? Like the ones where myself and Dr. Lauer talk and they're like, no.

K: Maybe that has something to do with CiCi Bellis.

J: I think it has everything to their CiCi.

L: We know how to draw the fans. It's not about us. It's not about us. Yeah. Well I, I think, you know, again, just to sort of to think about this and summarize it. I think you're successful as a leader, Kathy, partially because everybody knows that you care and your emotions are on your sleeve and you, they know that you're with them, right? And you make that known to the player in the way you communicate. And one of the things you mentioned earlier that I think that's extremely valuable when you're a coach who is caring and what I would call even like transformational, that you, you want the best for people versus as transactional, I need you to win, so therefore I'm good at my job, but more so I want you to be successful because I want you to be happy and be successful. Right. How, how do you then go in and tell them the hard things, the things that they don't want to hear? How do you push them when even though you have that relationship, how do you do that? Cause I know you mentioned that earlier, but what are some tips you can give our listeners who are coaches who are parents to have that difficult conversation and yet still maintain that that relationship?
K: Yeah, I think you know, that happens all the time and I again, it goes back to really knowing the athlete and really knowing that player, how, what makes them tick, you know, how can you get the best out of each player and knowing the whole person I think helps with that. How to deliver that tough message. And again, it's coming from a good place. And I think always letting them know, Hey, this isn't easy for me either. You know, but I want what's best for you. I see you maybe going down this path or, or whatever it may be. If they know it's coming from a good place and you have that relationship built and you have that trust and respect, it's a lot easier to deliver and then you just get on with it. You know, you just let them know, you know, you really want what's best for them.

L: And you do communicate that. Cause I've been in that situation with you multiple times and you make it very clear that you want the best for them and you care about them. But because of that, you need to tell them this, this is going, this is only for your good. Right? And that's why we're telling you this because it's, it's needed or it's necessary for you to reach your goals. And I think that's a challenge for a lot of people because it's so uncomfortable many times, right? To confront someone or to have to tell them something they don't want to hear. So a lot of times as leaders, I think we have to almost confront our own fears, our own doubts before we can really truly lead in a way that, you know, I don't know, I guess in our most effective, best way. Right.

K: And you know, and that goes both ways. I mean, I don't want someone to sugarcoat to me, I'm very open to feedback and you know, we go through that as, as leadership. You know, just recently we were getting feedback on areas of opportunity to improve upon. And I appreciate that it was said and I think it's so true that honest feedback is a gift. And at the end of the day, you know, we have to look ourselves in the mirror and have we done everything we possibly can do to help this player help this person you know, this young person and, and that's what it's all about.

J: Excellent. Excellent. Awesome. Well, I know we're running out of time here, but I think, you know, we're very fortunate that you gave us some of your time. You know how extremely busy you are, but you know, a couple of things from me. I mean, uh, first one is I think Laurie, you'd agree with this, but anytime Kathy's in the office, the seems, seems to that the place seems to take a bit more of a brighter light in the office. There's always, absolutely banter flying around.

K: Brighter or louder.

J: A little bit of both.

L: I also really like that you gotta look out for the pranks. She is known for being a prankster. So you gotta have your guard up. But fortunately she hasn't come after the mental performance that you got.
J: Well that's all hidden, hidden away now.

K: Yeah, you're in trouble now.

L: I like to hide behind the walls.

J: Uh, and the second thing is, I remember my, I must've been about one week into the job and we had our internal player development meetings and we'd walk into the thing that the multipurpose room that was in the, the new, you know, on new center here. And I didn't know anyone really. And you really kind of took me, took my shoulder and put your arm around me and just said, you know, anything you need, please let me know. But you made me really feel part of the team. And we had, we had a lot of fun that the, those few days and, and some good banter. So I appreciate that as something I'll never forget. So.

K: Well, I appreciate both of you. I feel fortunate to work with you and love both your energy. I mean, yeah, you guys are awesome.

L: We like to have fun, Kathy. Yes, we do. And get better at the same time.

J: Awesome. Awesome. Well that's been a, that's it for today's episode of compete like a champion podcast. Once again, we thank you captain Kathy, and we look forward and wish you good luck for, for fed cup for, for the rest of this year and, and well for next year being in the world group and, and continued success there. So from Dr. Larry Lauer and myself, we are checking out for this week.