

Youth Athletic Development with Craig Acker

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Hi, I'm Gordon Smith, CEO of the United States tennis association. And you're listening to compete like a champion.

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J: Welcome to compete like a champion. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skill specialist and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA Player Development. Today we're diving into youth athletic development with coach Craig Acker strength and conditioning coach with USTA Player Development. Welcome to the podcast.

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C: Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm excited to be here.

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J: Yeah, this is awesome. So, so Craig, you're fairly new to the team, a year and a half, two years in.

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L: A little over two years. Don't feel new anymore, do you?

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C: Correct.

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L: Broken in. Broken.

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J: Yeah. So Craig, you, you a, you have many responsibilities that you've given and uh, but one in particular, which, which obviously I'm excited about because of the role that I play and is with the, with the youth side. So give us a little insight into some of the responsibilities you're given with the juniors and how we sort of interact and connect with, with implementing that. Right. Well, I've been really excited to kind of be tasked with coordinating those type of training programs because since I've been here, I've noticed just a real lack of training in that age group. And even though there are very high level tennis players. So to see that is exciting because we know that once we can bring the physical capacities, those physical qualities up to speed along with their tennis skills, you're really going to help them out. And that's the key is that, you know, we're here to help so we want to help them perform better but first prevent injury. And that's the biggest key with the youth playing a lot. And it's an imbalanced sport by nature and those can cause some physical problems. So again, I've really been excited to see the impact we've had just in the short time structuring something that's a little bit more consistent and stable for these kids. And to see him come and go from campus throughout the year, you know, to impact him with those habits. I like to use the phrase, you know, we're just creating the habit for health. The lack of training, you gotta first teach them why you're doing what you're doing, but get them to, to perform it, right. So you're creating a habit and if you're creating that habit and the consistency's there and you have a good balance program, you know you're going to impact health and that's the injury prevention piece. So yeah.

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J: No, that's also in that, that's definitely I think taken what we do with the juniors in the athletic development space to the next level. But obviously you are tasked for this for a reason. I mean give us a little insight into what you did before you joined player development and, and some experiences that you went through.

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C: Yeah, I've been in a lot of different settings. I've been in the field for 23 years and in the private setting, uh, you know, in a gym setting, running my own performance training company, been able to train, you know, eight, nine year old kids up through professional level athletes too, adults, recreational adults, just regular everyday people. So it's just been an exciting journey to be in all those different settings. You learn so much in each one. Each one has its pros and cons as well in terms of being in this profession. So, gosh, yeah, I mean just trained thousands of youth athletes and to impact them positively. I mean, training is such a conduit for creating relationships and you know, really at the end of the day, those are going to be the things that really can help you impact the person and to the, to the highest degree, you know, in coaching in any way. I like to kind of, you know, use a lot of acronyms to help remember things. And you know, the three C's are a great way to go about this job. You know, number one, you've got to care. And I think people can tell when you do or you don't. Cause there's a lot of people in our field for different reasons or they get into it for different reasons. And Oh, I'm so and so and I did this and you know, well, when you work with so many, they don't really care. They want to know how you can help them, you know? So if you care, you care about the person you're working with, the people you're working with, the person you're training, care about the objectives and getting something done, you know, that's important. And then the next thing you've got to find a way to connect with people. All right? So with kids, you know, I'm not going to say how old am, but I'm far removed from these teenage years. You know, that the people we work with, you know, sometimes just to remind yourself what they respond to and how you have to, you know, fun and gamey and jokey. But you know, now the technology piece, it's usually, you know, they respond by seeing stuff in that interaction. So, um, you got to find ways to connect with people and once you can do that and opens the door to coach. And that's really the kind of, the premise I like to use again with this age group. That's again, the training is a little foreign to them. But I think if we can follow that plan, you know, we get a way to impact them the best.

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L: So care, connect, coach, right?

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C: Correct.

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L: I love that Craig.

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C: Another C, oops, sorry.

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L: And it's Craig. So, easy to remember. I don't know, it sounds a lot like self determination theory. This idea that people are most motivated when they feel

determined of their own actions, right? That they're doing it for their reasons. And so if you're showing that you care, you're, you're creating connection with them. So there's a relationship, a coach-athlete relationship, and then you're able to coach them, you're helping them to get better and they have some involvement in a process where they have some ownership or autonomy as they'll say in psychology. Um, you really, you're really relying on the fundamentals of the strongest theory of motivation that we have.

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C: I think that, uh, that's the other key part that I've learned in the training field is it's going to still start and end with the client. All right. The person you're, you're working with. And until it registers for them at the level it needs to, to commit to the process. You know, you, you can be challenged and limited in some ways, but everybody goes through their own process to, you know, some people might boom, you know, light bulb goes on pretty quick. They're, you know, engaged and ready to commit. And some it just takes time, takes time. Like maybe some results, some consistent results that they're not happy with, kind of over and over and over and then they kind of wake up. But that's a big piece or a real big piece. They have to internally say they want it and want to commit to the process and put in the, put in the effort and see the value.

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L: And that's what I wanted to ask you. You mentioned routines or habits. You mentioned, you mentioned habits. What are some of the challenges you faced and how do you overcome with them? Overcome those challenges with the young person who, I mean, habits aren't necessarily a young teenager's strength, right? Uh, so how do you see that? What are some of the challenges and how do you overcome those challenges to get them to commit an irregular way to create a habit?

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C: It's a great question. Um, another premise I like to use in, in coaching and working with anybody is meet them where they're at. Okay. That means you got to know their history and kinda know the type of person, but what they've been doing. So we were just talking about training sessions. If you know, they've done nothing for the most part structured, you know, you're not going to start off with, you know, hour or two hours a day of some physical work. You know, we're going to start simple. And actually what's been successful with these groups here is we're going to just teach them on a warm up, Oh my gosh, you know, like that's a huge injury prevention tool, let alone, uh, preparing them for practice. So the drills start, they're ready. So just starting there and it can be 15 minutes, it can be 20. And just to show them as they go through that process, it's not a huge burden. It's there to help them. And then what we've found too, which is great, is they're feeling better at practice. They're more turned on, their awake. Coaches are realizing they're more turned on and awake and they can get into some things. They don't need half the practice kinda quote unquote warm up. Um, so I think that's a big piece is just meet people where they're at and it's a slow progression. I mean, you know, training is really just the accumulation of marginal gains and you, you can't outrun that. All right. So you just committing to the process and, and that's, that's a big.

[07:07](#)

J: It could be hard for players to, to really understand that. Right. The marginal gains. Sure. You know, there's a lot of patients, a lot of, uh, a lot of direction needed. But what would you say then that the different ages that you've seen here with the, with the juniors, we bring in the 12 to 13 year olds and you have the, you know, the 13 to 14 to 15 and onwards. What would you say some of the differences between those different age groups that you see and how does your training adapt to the, maybe the different stages of growth and development kids are at? What are the, some of the key things at different ages you would rely on?

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C: Uh, well I, I think depending on somebody's training background, and I mean genetics, how people are built is a big, big piece of this. Um, you can actually see similar things across all the ages, even the youngest ones to the oldest ones. Um, so that's a big thing, but I think what we look at again at a nice acronym is in training. You look at the three P's, okay. If you working on these things, you're really gonna impact, uh, again, performance. But really first and foremost is injury prevention. First is posture. Okay. So what does the spine look like? You know, and, and, you know, what are the shoulders look like? Are they in a upright, vertical position? You know, with, with young kids, you know, nowadays, especially with them not as active as we were when we grew up. And looking at a piece of technology, uh, computers, laptops, phones, I mean they're, they're literally, their spine is, his shoulders are rolled forward a lot. So that's a, a poor position for athletics. Um, so that's the first thing. You see that a lot more with the younger group. And if you can train it, it does get better. The next thing would be, uh, the position of the body. Okay. So that, that talks more about like where the hips are. Okay. If you're able to be in an athletic stance, which means what it's like the hips are going to be slightly behind the shoulders. The posture is going to be what? Good, which means the spine is straight. Are you able to be in that position? Okay. Is that, that's a a ready position. That's a position you can produce force out of or be stable in. Right. And then the next P would be pattern. Okay. And just to clarify, I know with tennis, because the word position, you know, I'm not talking about position on the court. Okay. I'm talking about the body's position. The last P would be pattern of movement. So a, you have good posture, you have a good position, well what's the pattern of movement? Are you extending the body in an efficient way where it's coming from the hips first? And those are the things that a little technical, uh, to, to describe it, but looking at again how things are going to be coming from the hips. I'm not having the knees move first. There's things like that, but, uh, those three P's really, really help, really guide the training program. And I think it's, uh, it's a nice quote from one of our philosophers, a if I can pronounce it right. Uh, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Uh, it's a, I think it's a great quote. When you look at training programs, it says as two methods, there are a million, but principles are few. Those that grasp principles can successfully select methods. Those that ignore principles are sure to have trouble. And, uh, I think the three P's are a great guiding principle, training any athlete, but particular the youth. I mean, you really got to get to them, uh, early. Um, that's the other challenge we've had here is just this common misconception about when training can start or the nature of the training, you know, uh, pre or post puberty. So, uh, if you can

start training earlier and effecting those three P's, you're just setting them up to really realize their potential perform at a higher, higher level, uh, as well as be healthier longer.

[10:29](#)

J: You talk there about perceptions. What are some of the common myths with training use that, that you see a lot just in general with other sports, but maybe specifically with tennis too. And how do you, what messages would you have to, to combat those myths?

[10:41](#)

C: Well, the big one than the classic one is just the resistance training or strength training for youth and not, not doing it until after puberty. You know, that's a huge misconception and I always tell people it's all about you know, what you do and how you do it. Okay. So to take a youth athlete, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, right? 13. So resistance training to them is their own body weight. You know, I'm not, you know, a lot of people with the misconception there in their head, they have this mindset of putting a barbell on people's backs with hundreds of pounds and you know, and jumping with it or doing, you know, thousands of reps and, and just doing things to exhaustion. And then some, you know, that that's just, you know, really ignorant, right, training methods. So it's just really what you're doing. So if I'm working on just creating better posture with kids using their own body weight, working on different leg exercises with their own body weight, that's strength training at a young age. Okay. And then you know, you'll, you'll get a, well, you know, you're going to bulk them up, you know, they're going to get this. Again, if you have a balance training program that works on mobility, works on speed and movement, you know, the building of strength, the times where people get so one sided and see those things happen is there's somebody who's neglecting another part of, and plus, you know, in tennis particular the phenotypes, the body types are not inclined to hypertrophy or bulk up the terms. So you know, they're usually thinner frame and they're playing enough. Yeah. Not like Dr. Larry Lauer.

[12:06](#)

L: He's rocked.

[12:07](#)

J: Guns. Yeah.

[12:10](#)

L: No one knows that. But yeah, just wait til the sun comes up.

[12:14](#)

C: I think that's a big one. And, and, and again, remember strength is, you know, about creating stability, right? So in doing strength training, you're, you're improving the strength, integrity of joints and tendons and ligaments. And actually, and building some strength before and during these growth spurts is always gonna help them come out of their growth spurt in a better situation. One, it's essentially a form of injury prevention as well. It's always strengthening those joints. Priority number one, anybody in the performance training, uh, athletic development field in business, their first priority is injury prevention. And that's the nature of sports. And again, in American culture of, of how much kids are playing at young ages and specializing and not playing multi-sport. Your first goal is to keep them as healthy as long as possible.

[13:01](#)

L: So what would you ask about a coach who's working with a group of kids somewhere in the, in the US and hasn't, you know, they, maybe they do some dynamic warm-up, they do something, but what would you say in terms of athletic development with these kids? You know, even if they're not that, not an expert in this area, what, what could they be doing? What should they be doing even with a few minutes? What would help?

[13:24](#)

C: Uh, well I think the first thing, going back to the proper warmup would be the biggest start. And just working on just mobility of, you know, the, the muscles that they're gonna use in the, in the practice, you know, the, the hips, the knees, the muscles around the hips and the knees, ankle, shoulder, spine, things like that. But just a good general warmup is a great place to start. But again, now it's different from when we grew up and when we played other sports and we played on playgrounds and get together with kids in their neighborhood and played like our motor skill development was diverse and global. All right. We weren't in such a narrow, narrow runway of athletic skills, athletic development. Well times have changed. So these kids are not playing in the neighborhoods or whatever. They're not playing more sports. So I mean to be honest it's nice even on the tennis court is to kick the soccer ball around with the kids. Right? Create little games. Okay. Cause again, you're just going to try to broaden those, those motor patterns that again, help prevent injury so they're not so one sided and imbalance and narrow in there. It really fundamental physical qualities.

[14:24](#)

L: Do you think, Craig, you know, and this is for Johnny too, but do you think that we've over-focused on on technique in this country at a young age, at the decrement of athletic development? That's a, I think one of the biggest challenges in sport in trying to find that balance because most sports require high levels of skill. And actually what I've appreciated more than ever now being in this tennis-only environment from training all different kinds of athletes and all different kinds of sports is how technical and how high of a skill playing tennis is. It's, it's remarkable when you look at all the variables you're taking in to hit one shot, let alone be, you know, two shots ahead and try and have tactics of it, but you're moving and the ball is moving at high speed. You have to create high speed with your racket. Oh my gosh. I mean, but so we know with motor skills is what predicts success or efficiency is what? Repetitions. So now you know, then people have that information and then they look at, you know, the expertise model of 10 years or 10,000 hours. And the research behind that, which actually comes from, you know, things that are more like piano and music, I think very correct. So we gotta be careful with that. But you know, that's really what's kind of pushed to most of these kids starting at high volumes of playing a particular sport, age 8, 8, 9, 10 cause their parents are thinking and people saying, Hey, I got a C. so there is credence to that because you do need to skill development. I think the key in this is what's come up a lot in, in our field is the longterm athletic development model. And there's a lot of research out there about that. And the challenge again is just matching up our culture balances up with these messages of no, it's not about the now. And it's not, it's, it's about if we do this now and we're not doing as much as you may want and might not be getting the results you want. But we're doing it in a way that, okay,

now the next step is this and these are, these are years in the making and it's a long process. But again, to think long term, what's gonna get you where you want to go, but also what's going to help you stay there longer. All right? Versus, you know, I'm really good, they're young age, I'm doing all this. I'm so good. And we see it all the time physically is the kids that just aren't there. There's they're genetic, either generic freaks or they're just, you know, very skilled and you know, certain body types and certain makeups lend themselves to being better at certain sports than others. And they get real good real fast and they're really just playing the sport. But then you see other kids mature and grow up or maybe train and they catch up. And that's a wake up call that a lot of people have gone through. And it's tough. So we have to think in the longterm and the big picture perspective, what are things that we want in place to, again, endure the sport, right? Stay healthy, be on the court, be on the field, whatever, but then ultimately progress and perform better.

[17:11](#)

C: You realize you're swimming upstream buddy in this social environment because everything's immediate gratification, but.

[17:16](#)

J: Well, as well, I mean one of the big areas is the professionalization of youth sports, which, which is pretty prominent in this country and that's, that's accelerated at a pretty alarming rate. Um, I think what that has done is provide, uh, so many sports specific messages and models at too early of an age. And so when we have, you know, in that, that, you know, at the end of the day, parents are out there to try and do the best for their kid. If that kid loves him, plays tennis, is a 9, 10, 11 year old, then they're going to go out and try and seek the best type of training for that child. Unfortunately, it comes with, okay, I'm going to get them the best type of tennis training, which means everything's gotta be tennis specific. So every movement they do has to be exactly like it's done in tennis, which I'm not saying it's a bad thing, it's you have to do that later on. But at those younger ages we have to develop more of a diversity and what they can do with their movement, what they can do with their bodies, you know, can they move in multi directions, you know, can they jump, can they do all these basic skills that are, that could be considered over all athletic characteristics. And once they've got, once they've grasped that, and that's what you were talking about playing the other sports is the most natural way of developing all those different types of athletic skills. But then yeah, you, as you get older and you go down that path, you're in 14,15 you're post puberty. Yeah. You get a, you get more targeted. You do get a little bit more specific. You're trying to train the body to meet the demands of the sport. But again, but because of that professionalization of youth sports, that's drummed that sport specific model way down, which is also kind of a hindrance to the overall development of that athlete player.

[18:55](#)

C: Right, right, right. In every sport is like you said this the business side of it, and I'm pushing kids to be playing tournaments just because everybody else is, or it's a certain level of tournament. You've got gotta play this level to be either seen by somebody or earn points or this or that. And you know, at some point you're, Oh, what are you really getting from these competitive environments?

Some competing is very important. We got to learn how to compete, right? But tournament after tournament in these frequencies of these kids are out, you know, 30 40 weeks a year, you know, competing, you know, what are you really gaining there? Okay. I think sometimes people's time can be better spent and that's what we've created here with the, the campus is having more of training blocks for the kids. So they're not just running around going from tournament to tournament. Again, I'm not, you know, belittling, competing. That isn't, that is important because that environment does, again, expose everything about the athlete, you know, mentally and physically. So that's important. But you know, we really got to spend time and committing to, to really what you can do again that's going to help you last longer and you know, and, and be a better performer. But what you talked about too is in terms of what are we doing on a regular basis with the youth and as they get older. So we're looking at physical qualities, right? Or physical capacities in your, in your, uh, PD. We, we work on six things. Okay. And every program is going to have these six things. Now how old somebody is or their training background or particular goals or needs are going to impact how much of each one we're doing. Okay. And when we're doing it, so we look at coordination. We have mobility. So coordination is at, that's like balance work, you know, it's almost hand-eye work, um. We have mobility, which is flexibility. Range of motion. Okay. We have strength, how to produce force or absorb force or hold positions. We have power. Okay. It's an element of speed, but you know, exerting force in a short amount of time. We have conditioning. Okay. So what's that? That's going to be endurance. Okay. So we look at different modalities there and then we have movement. And this is the one I've really gained an appreciation for in tennis is, is just the movement, the movement patterns. Uh, again, the variables you have to take in to move, well, the forces you need to again create the force is in angles you need to create an absorb and produce force in is incredible. And uh, so those are the six things that we're working on at different levels with our kids.

[21:20](#)

J: So talk us through walk, take more of a priority at different ages with those six characteristics. So at the youngest age, you know, their pre-puberty, you know, around campus. How far are we going down here? What age specifically? I was going to say most of the kids we get here are 12. The youngest one's 12,13.

[21:40](#)

J: Yeah. But we see them at all the earlier cameras, maybe at 10, 11.

[21:44](#)

C: Right. So you're going to be, you're going to really want to be focused in just the simple coordination skills. You know, the balance coordination hand-eye work, the mobility piece is huge. All right. Just getting, you know, it's a really, it's like teaching body awareness and gross motor skills. Okay. What, what it means to, to hop and skip and roll, and climb and jump and crawl and, and things like that.

[22:08](#)

L: Now when you look at like the windows of opportunity to longterm athlete development model, shouldn't that happen a little bit earlier? But these kids, shouldn't that be happening around four to seven, five to seven when you look at that? Yeah, and that's the, that's the thing about how in the past, again, when

we were growing up, some of that was happening naturally, but it's not happening anymore. Right? So our natural gameplay when we were younger was taken care of that kind of, that coordination and mobility, body awareness. So it's not happening as much anymore. So we have to make a little bit more of a concerted, technical effort to create those situations. It can be as a parent to, Hey, let's go grab some neighbors or we're, you know, hopefully if you live with other around other families, get those kids out there and just playing. But what you just said was another key thing that really dictates how much of each of these physical qualities are being worked on and when are these windows of opportunity and growth and maturation. All right? There are certain ages where, again, it's not that you're not going to train mobility or strength or power speed or coordination or movement or conditioning. It's not that you're not going to train them at certain ages. It's how much you're doing at certain ages. You never take out one of those physical qualities. And I think that's the key is training programs again, are maybe not as diverse as they should be and they get narrow minded and they train all one way. All right? If you're in a balanced program, you want to train all six of those, at all times. It's just you. You emphasize certain ones more than others. Okay, so prepuberty is that mobility range of motion. You can do strength though. Okay. But your priority for strength is going to be probably on the other side of that, you know, post puberty. Okay. But again, you still got to look at individual needs and goals in those situations. Injury, not just injury prevention, but injury is probably going to occur. I mean if you play long enough in certain sports and then you have to remind yourself and coaches and parents that that doesn't mean training stops either. There's always ways to work around, you know, preexisting issues or something that comes up against that as they get healthier there. You were right here by the airport. Uh, so the take off the runway to uh, getting back to compete is much smoother. Right? You're not trying to take off like a rock and say, Oh, I'm great. I'm healthy now. Okay. And then you really haven't done anything other than maybe rest to get quote unquote healthy. And then you go, go back to where you were at competing at a high volume and intensity. That doesn't match up either.

[24:22](#)

L: And that's where it intersects with the psychological too in terms of a player being able to accept where they're at or accept the training that has to occur with where they're at. Right. And and dealing with that in a good way or their, their family dealing with that in a good way. Cause I think about these windows of opportunity, you know, I think that when we get them in camps, you're hitting that very sports specific skill development time period. And during these times they need tons of reps. Right. And you were mentioning that earlier, Craig, about you know, this technical development and they need lots of reps, which can be quite boring to be honest for players and monotonous. So how do you see, even as as you're doing this athletic development in this work, are there ways that you can make it fun that you can vary it? Like what do you try to do? Because doing the same thing over and over again for a 13 year old is just not that fun usually.

[25:10](#)

C: Right. That's a great point. And again, it goes back to meeting people where they're at and connecting with them. I like to say, I feel like in the field it's not what you do, but it's how you do it and it's not what you say, but how you say it. And I think it's okay to be fun and have some good times in training. I think you need to make it fun for kids particularly, and you almost kind of train them in a way that's, they don't think it's training, but you are training them. But I think those are big pieces.

[25:34](#)

L: That might be like your, your soccer ball example ball and kicking it around as part of, so you might purposely do that to get the kids moving, but they're having, they're playing a game, but for you they're getting in what you wanted.

[25:46](#)

C: And the nature of repetitions to training as much like the sport. All right. You're not going to not go out and hit hands or serves or back. You're not going to not do that. Well. There's a certain selection of exercises in a training program, in our training program that they're not going to go away, all right? You're just going to do them better. All right? You're either going to do them faster, you're going to do them with more resistance, you're going to do them in conditions of fatigue a little bit better for endurance purposes. So, and I think that's important because you, you gotta do the things in your training program that are gonna impact them at the highest level, you know, kind of biggest bang for your buck, you might say. So we can't be like so diverse in exercise selection sometimes, and you want to reinforce to the athlete that the good thing about that is you can show them progress there. Oh, you were doing this before with this exercise, now you're doing this, okay? But you also have to create other things around what, again, to them might just be real boring. And it is hard. You know, when it's hard, it's, it's tougher to commit to all the time while we're doing this again. But you know, showing that you know, this is gonna help you the most and you were here before and now you're here. But again it goes back to just how you deliver it I think is important.

[26:51](#)

L: So it sounds like you monitor and track that and you show them their performance analytically or what they're able to do even through moving or.

[26:59](#)

C: And it's reinforcing to the athletes because they can see it too. Like Oh I was doing this in this time before. No I'm doing it. You know, cause every camp we also bring the kids in, we test them. Right. And we, we have these data points that show.

[27:12](#)

J: The baselines of where they are at, you know, it's interesting as you talking there, I mean really what we're talking about here is the art of coaching or art of teaching rather teaching. And the, a lot of the times when you see that junior players come in for the first time and then they're really learning. I mean they are, they're genuinely learning these things. Cause they may not have done them. You know, they've obviously hit thousands of balls. They train a lot of the time, two to four hours, right, on court. Which you would argue is the sports specific training, right? Doing a lot of the reps on court. But when they come to you in the gym often often is the case. You're seeing them for the first time. So

it comes back to that point when they are in the gym with you generally. Sometimes after practices, although a lot of the time we do actually do their session before they go on court as a way of mixing it up. But their capacity to learn under fatigue when they're in the pure learning phase, that pure kind of cognitive phase, right? Learning that skill, learning that movement, you know, it really hits on what you just said on keeping it simple. And if you have too much variation, you know, then it kinda hits into, do they really have the capacity to learn if there's too much variation. Um, and you know, seeing how you operate with the kids in the gym. And I think that's something you do phenomenally well. Craig is a is being able to keep it simple and and it, but it comes back to your main point at the start was care and connect with the relationship. Because if you have that, your words carry a little bit of a deeper meaning. Right? So that's basically kind of a starting point for you, right?

[28:36](#)

C: We've seen in the tennis community, in terms of the actual time of day, the training takes place in, it's usually going to be after practice or after a whole day. Just again, the theory, you know the, the misconception that it's going to hurt their practice and in fact it actually helps them because like I mentioned before, it just, they're turned on, they're engaged, they're ready to go. But physically too, you want to create both scenarios. I want to see them be highly skilled while they're under fatigue. Meaning I want to see him perform well at practice after a training session. All right. Vice versa. I want them to come into our sessions and be as strong, be as fast as they were before, after a practice. Because you have both. And then in terms of the learning, that's another thing about working with the kids and sometimes it's not real hard. I mean, why? Because teaching takes time. If I'm showing a group of kids how to do something for the first time ever, that takes time, you know? So it's not about coming in, we're going to go from this, this, this and this. Or trying to like just exhaust them. I mean, there's a lot of different ways to do that. That's easy. I could give, we have so many one exercise and just kill them. That's not the point, right? We're trying to teach them these things. So you know, that's a big part of it as well.

[29:45](#)

L: You know? Craig, do you think that at some point that, you know, it sounds like you're saying there is a role for bringing in more of that fatiguing, exhausting them to see how they're going to handle it and how they're going to compete in those conditions. And when, when would you say that that comes into the equation when you're developing a high performance player, you're probably not doing this with rec players, but a high performance player. When might that more come into the equation?

[30:07](#)

C: Well I think we want to see a good recent history of training first. All right. Just to expose him in that setting is valuable, but we just have to be safe about it and smart about it. So I think that would be your first, your first guide.

[30:19](#)

L: Would you say? Cause we've, we've done camps where we bring them in and we do two strength and conditioning sessions and we push them hard. But we've strategically and purposefully not gone as hard with the young ones

because we don't, we don't feel they're prepared to take on that volume or that load. Right. So what would you say, you know, if you have, if they've been doing the work, a group of let's say 16 and 17 year old players, that you could put them in that position where you fatigue them more if they have the base of, of doing the training over time and they're healthy. And I mean, is that a time period where you can, you can apply more stress to them and fatigue them and then see how they perform?

[30:59](#)

C: Yeah, that's exactly right. And then we're looking at bringing out in them things that aren't always as visual as you'd expect, which is their competitive nature and their mental fortitude, right? Their grit, that's a, you know, buzzword like their grit, their mental toughness. And that's again, safely done at a good time. It can be productive. All right. And actually one thing we've noticed here as we, it's not happening as much lately because I think we're starting to impact the culture and people are doing more things on their own after they leave here and being more ready when they come in. But you know, for awhile there we are noticing what we were putting together was you know, fundamental program. But yet, you know, within a few days of the camp we were noticing the fatigue levels and the energies of the kids was, you know, really being impacted and you know, starting to do research with what they were doing leading up to the camps it was far less than what we were putting together as you know, we feel like still very conservative approach. I mean, I think that's been eye opening for us to start new, more research on when the kids are invited here, what they're doing right before they come in from tournaments. Are they already in their own little training blocks? Do they even have private strength and conditioning coaches? You know, those have been things that we've learned along the way too because we do want them, you know, learning and having a great experience here and leaving better than they came in. But sometimes when they're kind of biting off more than they can chew physically, that didn't, didn't always happen. So.

[32:22](#)

L: And we often put them in those positions. You know, when they're younger, they're playing a lot of matches and their bodies aren't necessarily ready for that, you know, so we're already putting him in that position. And if they're not doing what Craig's talking about at a young age, their bodies aren't going to be ready for that.

[32:36](#)

J: Well, yeah, we fall behind, you know, we fall behind because at the end of the day that we, we want their bodies to be able to cope with the demands. We want the playing skill level to be able to be able to keep up because physically they are able to keep up. So how do we best prepare that body? You know, and we, again, I mean, we grew up in a different era of personally I, you know, playing sport every day or PE every day and now it's shifted. So how do we best prepare our tennis players athletically? So they don't really have holes in their athleticism that actually give them a bit of a ceiling. Right? We want to take away that ceiling so that athletically, the reason they lose matches isn't due to their athleticism. All due to the, you know, lack of conditioning level, you know, so. Absolutely right. I mean we've got a, we've got to figure out how to prepare,

prepare our junior players to, to prepare for the demands of adulthood. Basically.

[33:27](#)

C: The other thing we've learned too is just these game styles or that that is a factor as well. Like what, what's the nature of their game? You know, are they going to be one that's, it's going to be, you know, two or three balls and it's going to be done or they're going to grind it out. You know, how you train the athlete, you need to match up their, or help strengthen a weakness, you might say. But I think the other overall theme in, in what we do here is the training program. Addressing those six qualities in a balanced way, in an age appropriate way will always be a two for one deal, it means we're going to help prevent injury and we're gonna help them perform better. Right. When done that way you get both. And I think that's, that's real important.

[34:04](#)

L: That's excellent. So last thing, so Craig, this has been awesome. So if I'm, again, I'm, I'm a coach out there, I'm a parent working with my child. Are there five things or you know, if I don't have a lot of time and a lot of expertise, but are there are a couple things that I should be doing if I have an 11 year old that plays tennis and I want to begin on this and, and, and where can they get more, I guess top tips. Yeah. Just so they know where to get started and maybe at least where to get this information to help them. Well, I think I'm obviously reaching out to us. I'm assuming there's my contact information will be available or, or anything like that.

[34:41](#)

I'm sure you want that. Wait a minute, hold on. But yeah, I think again, general, you know, motor skills, mobility in general, like teaching kids, you know, and again, in the field, you know, you're talking about a hinging or squatting. Well hinging is, you know, bending about your hip but keeping good posture, just keeping your spine straight. And again, these things can be done with, with no resistance at all, just their own body weight, you know, teaching them how to squat and lunge, you know, general core strengthening exercises. But areas of the body that helped move the body or produce power but also help prevent injury are all on the backside of the body. All right? So between the shoulder blades to behind the knees, it's really the area of the body. So you look at preventing shoulder injuries for the tennis player, well we got to work on scapular strength and stability, right? You got to work on low back, mid back strength. I work on hip strength. I don't know if that's too technical for people to understand, but you know, just some global total body strength work. Again, exposing them to different things, playing different games for those motor skills that'll be important. Getting them through proper warmups. All right. I think those would be the, a good starting point to any kind of a training program.

[35:47](#)

L: Do We have some of those things on the web?

[35:50](#)

J: Yeah. Yeah. We have lots of resources on the, uh, on the website and we're, we're currently updating a little bit to, uh, you know, that's our website there.

[35:59](#)

C: Cause when they come on campus too, everybody's in a different situation. They're coming maybe to either refine things or, or really just start starting from scratch learning this stuff. And then, you know, we're, we do try to meet with, whether it's the parent or their coach or their fitness coach to, to say, Hey, you know, we're a resource and you can contact us and start the communication process so that we can, we can help them or just guide them, you know, Hey, you're doing great. This is a great start. Could you maybe add in a little this or take out a little that, and you know, that's, that's a big part of actually how we operate here at the campus.

[36:31](#)

J: Awesome.

[36:31](#)

L: Thank you Craig.

[36:32](#)

J: Well, I think we're running out of time here, but Craig, coach Craig with the three C's the three P's, we uh.

[36:39](#)

L: And the six things. This is a three, three, six.

[36:42](#)

C: We'll have a quiz at the next podcast. Multiple choice.

[36:47](#)

L: Don't quiz us.

[36:48](#)

J: Yeah, no, this has been absolutely fantastic and it's always great just getting there and talking about some of these things and some of the mess. We covered that and you know, just appreciate all the work that you're doing. I really do think you've taken what we're doing with the juniors to another level and continue to evolve and get better and adapt. So keep up the great work and thank you for everything that you're doing.

[37:06](#)

C: Thank you. I really appreciate the opportunity. It's been fun.

[37:10](#)

J: Awesome. Well, that wraps it up for today's episode of compete like a champion. We just dived into youth athletic development. If you have any questions for us, you can reach out to me, johnny.parkes@usta.com and if you have questions for coach Craig or Dr. Larry Lauer, I'll be sure to forward those on and we'll get some answers or address them in the next episode. Until next time, that's compete like a champion.