

Purpose of a Preseason

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J: Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast where we explore the psychology of performance, advanced coaching and sports science through the lens of professional tennis. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skill specialists, and coach Johnny Parkes with the USTA player development. Today, and this is a topic I think we're going to get into a lot of discussion about, uh, from across the whole board, from juniors to the pros and the importance of it. But we're going to discuss the purpose of a preseason. Purpose of a preseason. And, and really the concept centered around preseason is something that's becoming more at the forefront of, of pro player seasons. It's something that we stress a lot with the juniors, is to make sure that they have some sort of a preseason whenever that is throughout the year. But let's start off with a question here, Larry, it's a very open ended question. What is the purpose of a preseason?

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L: I was gonna ask you that question. Oh, do we still have a preseason anymore?

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J: It's tough, isn't it? I mean, you look at the pro schedules, it's very hard to carve out time where they can actually work on a preseason.

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L: It seems interesting that with these, these exhibitions and these events at the end of the year that the top players are getting invited to these things for a lot of money. Their preseason looks far different than maybe a preseason of past champions. Right? Players who were in the top 10 in the eighties even in the nineties. Early 2000s I think it's crazy. I mean it's like monetizing and professionalizing exhibition matches and, and you have to weigh up the, the fan experience, the money they're obviously being offered versus you know, how important they feel a preseason is for their overall development. You know? So for now they just finished the season pretty much, the men, right? I think there's Davis cup to go the Davis cup finals, but for the majority they're all getting ready for Australia, you know, so there's a good six, seven, eight week period here before maybe they all go down to Australia, play a couple of warm up tournaments and then Ozzy open's here. So how important is it, I mean from a mental perspective, from a physical perspective, from a skill development and their tennis game. I think if you ask a lot of people though, they'd probably give you a different answer on what they value in a preseason.

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L: Absolutely. And I, and again, a preseason's just part of a periodization and occurs throughout a year, right at it's a training block or we call it a preseason because you're gearing up the start of a new year, thus the idea of preseason. But if you look at other sports that routinely NHL, NFL, they've, they've talked about shortening the preseason, uh, want to save on the bodies. Right. And, and certainly even in, for example, in the NFL, they've cut back on a lot of the things that they used to do in terms of the time that they have their teams in the off season. But, uh, I, I do see that, uh, it's changing, um, this idea of a six week preseason that we think would be beneficial at player development. It seems to be hard to achieve. Um, but what is a preseason? It's a, it's a training block that

you commit to going into a new season, right? You're setting up your season and the idea of your, your preseason training would be to, um, really to regroup and come back to your base. You can work on fundamentals and all areas with, with, uh, your physicalness, your body, your, your strength, your speed. Uh, you, you get your, you give your body time to rest and heal. Um, but it as well as your mind, right? You get to be in one place, hopefully for most of that. Um, you, you get to be around the same people kind of create a stableness and where you're not on the road as much. Um, but you can also work on your mental game and, and address some things that were going on in the past year. So, for me, a pre season is an opportunity to go back to your base, to work on your fundamentals. It's a chance to review what happened in the last season or the last part of the season. And it's also an opportunity to plan and what are the most important goals and plans that we need to put in place for you to take the next step. Right? So the pre season is a great opportunity to really move your game along in a sport like tennis where there isn't that many times where you can get back to the base and the fundamentals in great detail and actually hone and focus on it. Um, because you're playing in five days because you're playing in three days and, and you're traveling. And so, um, a preseason to me also has to be at least a couple of weeks. You can't call a preseason one week, can you?

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J: No, cause that's a pre-tournament week.

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L: That's preparing for a tournament.

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J: Yeah. No, I mean I think preseasons are probably the most undervalued or underrated things, but they provide such a strong, uh, opportunity to get better in so many different areas. I mean, we know from a physiological standpoint, physical standpoint, it takes at least four to six weeks to see any true impact in the physical work that they put in. So, so knowing that you have to put in a four to six week preseason at some point so that you can see some physical benefits and how you move, how you last, you know, building up your strengths so that you can keep going in and out of corners at such high forces that your strength doesn't break down, your power output doesn't break down quicker. So, and obviously you need to work on speed because tennis is about speed, it's about power, it's about movement, right? We have to combine those elements and we have to carve out periods of time where we can actually strategically focus on getting better in those areas. Right? Who doesn't want to have their own Rocky montage. I mean, that was like my dream growing up. Right. Create your own Rocky montage. I mean, Rocky, I mean, when I think about preseason, you think about Rocky Balboa, right?

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L: Yeah. Well he's, he's moving logs and boulders and he's punching all these things.

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J: He's growing his beard out, getting ready for the Russian and he's climbing bloody mountains, you know,.

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L: Running on the beach.

- [06:17](#) J: You know, if you, if you're struggling to get fired up for a preseason, I strongly recommend watching Rocky four. And if you don't get motivated by that, you shouldn't be in sport. There's something wrong going, going on there. But anyways.
- [06:28](#) L: You're talking to a guy who lives in Philadelphia who considers himself a Philly.
- [06:33](#) J: Did you climb those stairs? Have you done those stairs?
- [06:35](#) L: I've been on those stairs.
- [06:36](#) J: You've been on them, but you haven't ran up them?
- [06:38](#) L: I didn't run up them at the time because I didn't think anybody else could keep up with me.
- [06:42](#) J: He didn't run up to the top and jump around like a lunatic punching in the air.
- [06:45](#) L: I did not at that time.
- [06:46](#) J: That's the first thing I'd do.
- [06:48](#) L: But look, I, I get what you're saying and I, I agree. And I think, um, you know, in, in terms of, of the preseason I, I think you have to talk to players about the year and a totality and say, look, if you're going to get better because your body is going to break down as you travel and you play. You can maintain, but it's pretty hard to enhance when you're on the road. That's what most strength coaches tell me anyway. I might be wrong, but it seems for the most part, you're not gonna make the gains that you want while you're playing every week.
- [07:24](#) J: It's tougher. You can definitely still make gains on the road if you have players that buy into doing it.
- [07:29](#) L: But not like a preseason.
- [07:30](#) J: No, not like a preseason. You just don't have the length of time to be able to put into your body the same way, you know? And it might not be appropriate leading into a tournament to be able to, you know, hold the type of loads or whatever. But you know, let's, let's switch it to the mental side though.
- [07:47](#) L: Okay. I know a lot more about that. Well, I say I do.
- [07:51](#) J: And and you just, you just mentioned right now that the, it's a good time to reset. It's a good time to recharge the batteries. The one thing that I think is great about the preseason too is, and then you mentioned it's good to reflect on the season too, but that resetting and that reflection, the reflection, which I

think again is, is I think I've mentioned in previous episodes about the ability to journal. Journaling is basically reflection and, and setting yourself up. That reflection is probably the most important piece because that's when you get to go deeper into your thoughts about who you are as a person, what the type of player that you want to be, the type of athlete you want to be before you know, the, the, the performances that you want to reach to. So that mental side, what is that process from finishing season, putting in some significant time, let's say for six, seven weeks. What is that transition from finishing season to going right up to preparing to competition?

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L: Sure. Well, yeah. It's all about creating understanding, right? So that if I have understanding, then I can actually make a change. If I don't understand it, I can't change it. So from a psychological or a mental perspective, I think the first step is this idea of reflection and understanding what has happened to me. What are the lessons that I've learned? How did I perform? What are the, what are my strengths, what are the things that maybe held me back, right? I need to have, I needed to have a deep dive, or as we say these days, or reflect deeply on my season, and at least the last part of my season, the last quarter, let's should, if we're just talking about pros right now, for example, we'll use that. I need to go into that deeply with my team too and be thinking about, okay, well what happened this season that we... Did we achieve our goals? Did we not achieve our goals and why? And then the resetting of goals, right? So because that should drive your preseason, it's really hard to get motivated in preseason if you don't have a direction. So giving yourself those goals, if you understand, okay, just for example, if 150 in the world and I want to be top 100 by the end of the year, I want to be top 80 let's say, playing tour events regularly, well then that's a great goal that can motivate people, but it's about the things you do every day that's going to get you there, right? So, but once you have that set and now you're taking a look at what actually is holding me back and what strengths I have that could allow me to achieve this goal, now you're getting far more fine grain and you can start to analyze the changes that will make a difference. I think I see too often, and I'm not talking about here, but we set goals, but are we really putting a lot of thought into how we're going to achieve the goals and what it's going to take. Yeah, I need to have a better serve, but what does that mean? Or, and in going deep into that. So I think that preseason gives you a chance to do a lot of this as you go through a year, just like from the physical training where you can make improvements, you can make improvements for sure in the mental game as well as you're going through your travel part of your year. But at the same times you're, you're always preparing for the next match. So you're in this routine, right? And there are certain things that we're not dealing with because we're preparing for the next match. There might be something we need to go deep into that we're not gonna address right now cause you're playing in two days because bringing it up can stoke up a lot of emotion and use a lot of energy. And honestly, right now's, now's not the time, right? Personal things, uh, things that in your, in your game, you know, mentally that you haven't been willing to work on, it's gonna take a lot of work to bring you through it, right? You just can't do those things. So I think the preseason offers a time to do that. And I certainly, that's what I try to do with each one of

the players that I work with or to addresses things that I can address during the year that are absolutely essential for them to take the steps to their goals. Right. That aligning it in that way and then so then you work towards those things during the preseason. And I like to think about early in the preseason where we're doing a lot of fundamentals work. Maybe we're working on our basic skills, but we're also attacking the things and discussing the things that we don't want to discuss during the year. Maybe it's again off the court stuff, maybe it's on the court stuff, but it's tough. Maybe that is a bit heavy that is going to have an emotional drain energy drain from you. Well now's the time to get after that stuff, not two days before the tournament. We don't have to. So that's how you progress. And then as you move through your pre season, you create your plans and you start moving into practice, match play, and now you're, you're greasing up, you're oiling up your routines and your match preparation. And the self you do between points and how you want to think during matches, right? So you float from a more basic sort of understanding and how am I dealing with this adversity of this heavy volume to now I need the play and how am I going to incorporate my plans and my routines? Let's get that going in a good place. And then you go off and play.

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J: Yeah, no, that's a good outlook on it. And you know, I'll ask you this, I mean there's a, there's a perception I think, and again, if we go back to a little bit of a Rocky example, right? There's a perception here from coaches that, okay, we got a period of time to work here. We're going to cover the mental side by really destroying them off court, get them fitter, getting them stronger. This is going to toughen them up. It's gonna make them more resilient, blah, blah, blah. Right? There's that perception that, that there's going to develop character. So I kind of propose this to our director of performance. Who, who, you know, who played college tennis, went to the NFL, was NFL and now he, and now he's working with helping develop our American players. And I asked him the same question as I, so how much did you use your training in the, in the, in the S&C world, in the performance world to help develop the mental toughness, the character, whatever. And he goes, well, you know what, this is not a character developer. This is a character revealer and that was a really interesting, uh, a great quote to me because I think it's true. I think you can't really stop a player from working hard if they want to work hard. There are times where you can motivate them and get them better. I think there is a certain element that we can develop certain toughness and areas like that because of the challenges we're going to and the stresses that we put them under. But I think ultimately it helps reveal what kind of choices that they make to those stresses. And when, when things start to get a little tougher, how do they respond? And so I like that quote of being a character revealer versus just solely a character developer, which is this perception I think that a lot of coaches can have out there that if we, if we destroy our players off court, you know, with the fitness and getting them to run and do all that, that that's going to ultimately directly translate to holding better character on court.

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L: Let me give you an example where that, not backfires, but it doesn't necessarily work is you do this where you, you really go after them hard in a

preseason and super physical and you're thinking that you've changed them, right? And then they go out and before they had their preseason, they're very anxious on court and when we get tight and not play their game right, not accelerate on their shots and they come back out in January and they do the same thing, it's like, well, what happened? Well, your, your goals and the way you do things have to align with what you're trying to achieve. Right? So I believe in hard physical training as a way to, uh, expose character. And even in some ways develop character because you gotta make those tough choices and hang in there, persevere, et cetera. But at the same time, what I've done is I've raised the importance. So if I get somebody to do this, I raised the importance, the stakes on the outcomes. So now they go into January, like, okay, I did everything that was asked to me and I feel great and I'm super fit. And that gives you confidence and that is important. But now my expectations are through the roof. And like, well now I should win. Like everything should be different and they go back out and they're tight again and a, and they don't accelerate. So it's, it's just a piece of a puzzle. It's a base piece of the puzzle. I always tell the coaches that I understand what I do in the role that I play as a mental coach, that if we're not fit, if we're not healthy, if we can't produce certain shots consistently or play tactically in a way that's gonna make, make us successful, than what I'm doing is merely bandaids. Right. Because there's some issue there that needs to be dealt with and on a mental side, what you're dealing with is a response to it, right? I can't hit a forehand down the line. I'm dealing with the response to that, but at the same time, if we have created a base with a really good preseason and we've gotten fit, we're healthy, we feel great, we're powerful, we're strong, we're ready to go, then have we train them mentally to be able to deal with how they feel because they're going to, they're going to expect more from themselves and do they have the mental skill to then be able to allow themselves to play to move because we see great movers in training and then we seem moving on the court during matches and they don't always add up. Right. That's because the mind's getting involved a lot and so being able to discipline the mind is huge. We can use the training to do that, but also you have to, and I'm, I'll mention this throughout a lot of our podcasts, you have to be skilled mentally. It's not just about, okay, getting tough because I went through all this hard training. Do I have the ability to focus in the present? Do I have the ability to stay focused on my plan? Do I have the ability... I should use the word skill, skill for all these? Do I have the skill to be able to allow myself to play, to play free, to play loose, to play aggressive, to be explosive, to be physical, to move my feet the way that I can in training or can I not? Because my mind is blocking that because I'm so focused on winning and losing. I am concerned about what others think of me. I'm worried about whatever. Right? So to me, the training, it really has to go hand in hand, but you have to know what you're training for. The preseason, yes, you can do this toughness training and working through adversity, but you also have to work on disciplining the mind, being able to focus, being able to relax and being mindful. All these things that are extremely important.

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J: I think ultimately we have to put players, athletes under stresses that get them to that point where they have to make those choices of how they're going

to respond. If we can't get them to that point, which often in the off court training, we can't necessarily get to when the in and out of tournament so frequently because you don't want to burn off so much energy that they're zapped for the tournament. So it's tough to get them to that point if we're not able to have a preseason where those buttons can be pushed a little bit further. So again, that character revealing point is, I'm going to get them to a point where yes, they are experiencing highest stress, now let's see if those skills, those mental skills, those characteristics skills come into play in their decision making and the choices they make when they're under those, more stress, uh, and, and physical demands. And I think that's where the year long training comes into play. The mental skills side enables you in a preseason to actually focus more on implementing those, those stresses or sorry, those choices under stress. And I think that's what we need to get to more regularly because how do you get comfortable making really tough choices under high stressful scenarios. You know, and I, and it will come back to asking tough questions, you know, the mirror tests. Can I look myself in the mirror and answer some really tough questions about the way that I'm approaching my game. If those things need to be addressed, the preseason's obviously a great time to approach that as a player and as may be as a team with your coaches, your main coach, maybe your S&C coach may be your mental skills coach. That is a great time to address those, is it not?

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L: Absolutely. Cause there may be whatever it is, technical, tactical, mental, emotional, physical, something that needs to be improved and dealt with that because of the timing during the season, you can't get to it cause you, you may need two, three, four, five, six weeks for it to change. Um, so therefore you choose your preseason to do that, right. And so may, you know, Johnny, when I, when I look at a situation, I look at a player, I, I try to look at the whole thing and say, okay, yes there's a change that has to happen. Would introducing it right now make it worse than if we were to just leave it be to when we can fully work on it. Right? And so you have to make that choice. But what the preseason offers, so or if players are taking a couple of times during the year to have three, four weeks plus probably three or four is more likely where they're not playing tournaments and they can address certain things, then you can come back to these things routinely and they don't have to get too far away from you. Right. You don't have to go 10 months without dealing with something. Right. But your preseason, your best opportunity to really address these things that you, you don't want to or you can't address because you're getting ready for the next tournament. Well, let me, let me focus on this because there might be parents or junior coaches out there listening to this and saying, well, okay, um, do we really have a preseason? I think you have to decide where you're going to put your training blocks so you can work on these things. And the idea that these kids are not pros, so they should be coming back to the home base often, resting and training and really working on these fundamentals. So if they're fortunate enough to play division one, to play college tennis or even the play pro that for them it's normal to step back from tournament play to actually work on their game.

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J: Yeah. And you know, this is messaging. We, we, we've been saying a lot this year with uh, scheduling periodization planning is, listen, in the juniors, it's like ordering from iHop, which is the biggest menu I've ever seen, right. There have so many things there. There are so many tournaments that you can choose to play. You've got your local events, you've got sectional, you have level threes, level twos. Then you have your super NATS. And then when they get to 13, 14, 15, they'll start looking at ITF's and, you know, you could play every week, one event or another. Like it is a menu that you are choosing what events to play based on where you're at. And I get that there's pressures of I need to get X amount of points so I can play in this tournament that tournament I, you know, I get it, but what we don't do, well, a good enough job here is saying look this is a menu. I can choose whatever events I want to, but what I don't do is separate out training blocks where we can actually get better. And when you're younger you have more things. I would say you have a lot more things from a foundational standpoint to take care of. With technique, with tactical awareness, with the physical development, especially when kids are through that growth and maturation stages, you have the emotional side, the social side. There is a lot. And so you, we need to start with that because ultimately, and this is what a lot of our coaches have said to us, you ultimately need to have the skill in all levels. You need to have the tennis skill, you need to have the athletic skill, you need to have the mental skill, you need to have it all. If you don't spend the time to work on those skills, it doesn't matter how many tournaments you play, how many matches you compete in. If you don't have the skill, you're not gonna reach the levels that you aspiring to reach. Whether that's playing at the top of college, whether that's moving onto pros, whatever you aspire to do, it's not going to happen if you don't have the skill. So if you don't carve out those blocks right now at the younger ages, and I'm even talking, going back to say 11 12 13 and what a training block might look like for those kids might often involve maybe sampling other sports. Right? It's, we have to start with that. Then we plug in the events. So we're making sure that their skill development doesn't get neglected because guess what, it doesn't all happen just playing matches. It doesn't.

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L: That that is a flawed theory that people have that I'll just keep playing matches and we'll figure it out. No, you've got to, you have to train. If you want to be great and you have to take that time to work on all parts of you so that you're prepared to go out again and you're fully prepared to play a match. Right. Much different than just playing, playing, playing, playing. Cause then you're not prepared for each match. And so then you start chasing points. You start chasing the rankings and you get into this inevitable rat on the wheel where I can't stop because I need those points. But if you're at the start of the year, you're putting in your blocks and you're saying no matter what happens, unless there's an injury that messes with the schedule, these are the blocks that we're using to get better.

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J: And if we keep, if we keep going along with this match after match, tournament after tournament, we are, we are drilling into this player or this person, from an early age, extrinsic motivation whereby the reason I get up in

the morning is to chase points or to try and win a title or to earn whatever. You know, when, when at that age we need to start, and science researchers suggested this, intrinsic motivation is the one that leads to greater things down the road or greater success down the road. Because that is the thing that keeps you going with the ability to wake up each and every day to get better as opposed to wake up every day to try and chase a result that, guess what, you might not have the skill to even get in the first place.

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L: And you may end up injuring yourself.

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J: And you may end up injuring yourself. So again, it's having that balance. You know, I, I get fired up on the junior side because I think this is a classic case where the perceptions are not realities and I think we do need to take a hard look here. The perception of playing a lot of tournaments and a lot of matches that does not lead to being a great tennis player down the road at whatever level that the player is aspiring to be. It's not the reality and I think we have to make sure that we educate ourselves in knowing the appropriate load that we all doing from a skill development standpoint and from a match count standpoint. There's a lot of examples of players that may have only played 30 matches a year, maybe 40 matches a year, which isn't a lot in a lot of standards and they might be at the top of the rankings because ultimately they have the skill so it doesn't matter when they step into competition, they can still reach the results they want to reach. Not saying that mash plays an important cause. Obviously it is part of the training platform, but only relying on playing matches as a way to improve is a dangerous territory to get into.

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L: Yeah. Those, those players that do, that are fully prepared for every time they go out. And I'm a big believer in practice, match, play and changing conditions, right? And we don't have to get into it this podcast episode, but now you can coach them through certain situations in the way that they want to thank the way they want to react to things, how they're problem solving, how they're committing to their game. Right. That's huge. So when they play at a tournament, well some people do coach, but there's not a whole lot of coaching that can happen until after the fact. So, a lot of what the coach can do is honestly muted by the fact that they're playing a lot of matches. So if I were, you know, in summary, we're coaching individual tennis players, I would really recommend, you know, having three or four times during the year where we step back. We work on fundamentals, we're getting better, we're always doing this anyway in our practices. But here is where we, we don't have the pressure to get results where we can work on things that maybe you need some time to do, uh, to work at. And then from a pro standpoint, um, that preseason, while there's gonna be other training blocks in your periodized schedule, that's the one time where you have a stretch four plus weeks where you don't have to worry about putting yourself on the line in terms of winning a tournament match. What you gotta do is put yourself on the line in the way you're going to work and get better. And that's a great thing because we can start addressing this, the things that are going to make them better and better prepared to deal with what's coming at them in Australia.

[29:23](#)

J: Okay. So Larry, as we finish up this episode of the purpose of the preseason and what are the, what are some tips that you can give to the listeners, whether it be on the professional side or the junior side.

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L: Let's talk professional side first, I think, I think first thing is, is planning three to four hopefully plus weeks once a year where you can actually take the time to work on your fundamentals. And if you're going to set that time, be really clear on what your goals are, spend time thinking about how you've been performing, how you've been preparing for, for practices and for matches, and then set some very clear goals for that time period with a very clear plan of how you're going to work on it. And then I would say don't be afraid to address things that you haven't been willing to address. The question I used to like to ask, um, men's tennis and I worked at Michigan state was, you know, what's the one thing that we can do over the next few weeks that would be a game changer. That would be a game changer for you personally for this team. And that's really for me in a preseason is what's something or a couple of things that you can do that would really change the course of your next year. You know, even even in a grander sense maybe your career. So thinking about it that way for pros, um, I think that gives you more of a direction, more of a motivation when you go into a preseason. I think with the juniors, it's finding time during the year to take a couple weeks here, three to four weeks there where you, you step back because they play so much, um, that you're taking a break. You're resting the body, you know, they're going through a lot of changes physically, mentally and emotionally. So let's, let's not tax them overly, uh, during these time periods. And then when you get into these time periods and make sure they have rest, but then also, let's, again, get at the fundamentals, same process, what's been going on, review, debrief, what are the goals? And typically for me and at the junior level, the goals, there's so many different things you can do as you're talking about the juniors have so many different things they can work on. So as a coach and as a player, you need to get pretty clear and specific on what are the couple things we're going to do. Don't try to do everything under the sun because you usually don't do anything very well at all. A couple things, again, that you feel to be game changers that are keys to moving forward. Not to win right now, but to win when you're 18, 20, 22. So that, that would be some of the tips that I have just off top of my head.

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J: That's great. That's great. And so, I mean, we have a lot free, a lot of great resources surrounding the planning and periodization development plans. So let's wrap it up here for this week's episode of compete like a champion. As we say, we've got resources online at www.playerdevelopment.usta.com. If you go to the coaching resources or parent resources page, you'll be able to find periodization plans. You'd be able to find developmental plans, um, and embedded with them here's some of that goal setting that they can do. Uh, and there's other, some other great resources up on that website also. So be sure to check that out for more info. And if you have any questions for us, you can reach us larry.lauer@usta.com or johnny.parkes@usta.com. Thanks for joining this week's episode of compete like a champion, and that's a wrap on today's episode of compete like a champion. For more information and great resources,

visit our website playerdevelopment.usta.com and you can email us teamusa@usta.com this is Dr. Larry Lauer and coach Johnny Parkes signing off until next time.