

## **Working Together to Raise the Bar with Kent Kinear**

[00:05](#)

J: Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skill specialist and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA player development. Today we've got a special guest coach, Kent Kinear, head of men's tennis for USTA player development and we're going to be going into effective leadership working together to raise the bar. Welcome to the podcast coach Kent.

[00:28](#)

K: Thank you Johnny. Thank you Larry.

[00:29](#)

L: Thanks coach Kent. This is exciting, huh?

[00:32](#)

K: Love it. This is a great set up and you know, I've listened to a bunch of the podcasts and really, really enjoyed it. You guys do a great job, so congrats and thanks for having me on today.

[00:40](#)

L: I appreciate that.

[00:41](#)

J: Yeah, I appreciate it. And it's a, you know, it's really cool that obviously in this environment we get to pull people in and literally about an hour ago we dragged you aside and said, Kent, come do a podcast. So absolutely.

[00:51](#)

L: We're more prepared than that audience. Don't worry. You just gave away our secret, Johnny.

[00:55](#)

J: Bluff. So yeah, so today I think, I thought it'd be great. I mean head of men's tennis is a, is a new position for you. You were my boss for the past few years, but you've been head of director of player ID for, was it six, seven years before that. So we thought it'd be a great opportunity to talk about leadership and some of your philosophies and some of the things that are really important to you when, when leading others and getting the most out of others. So I guess we can start off there as really, you know, diving down to, you know, what are some of your influences or role models that, that have helped shape some of your, your leadership philosophies and then maybe talk about what they are. Well,

[01:31](#)

K: I mean I think, again, thanks for having me on and it's been a new assignment since October, taking on this head of men's tennis position and we've got a great group of people working here. I love the people that I work with. I love the, the culture the atmosphere. I think as Kathy Rinaldi and I came into these new positions, we really were focusing on two main areas that we really wanted to attack and one was for all of us to get better. I mean everybody here is passionate and very good in my opinion, but everybody can continue to get better and we can make each other better. So how do we come together, make each other better, and then in turn help impact players and coaches and parents across the country and working with them and them making us better. So it's

very synergistic. I mean that's definitely one principle that I really believe in. And then I would say the second one is raising the standard of the training that's going on here full time with a lot of players coming in, coming in and going and a lot of coaches and so on. And to really be professional in every aspect possible and raising the bar in those areas is another probably main, main objective of what I would consider my, my leadership style. I think as far as people that have influenced me on that, I mean I've always loved relationships. I think when you can, when you can sit down and spend time with people and learn from them and they have a growth mindset, you have a growth mindset. I think really good things happen. And so I've seen that played out in coaches that have coached me in my life. You know, coach Creasy at Clemson is incredible example of that. A gentleman by the name of Steve Bierman who coached me from a very young age has always had growth mindsets, always were very giving, always were very, were great with relationships and I think that just helps everything get a little bit better. So those, those would probably be two names that come to my mind that have helped shaped those, uh, those thoughts. So Kent, you mentioned relationships and for you, what is the foundation of a, of a relationship in a leadership position? Because in many cases that people you're craving relationships are people that have to report to you. So what do you look in terms of how do you create a relationship in a leadership position with people who are having to report to you? I mean, I think regular communication is important. I think everyone is so busy and oftentimes we get stuck in our little silos or, or you know, just have to too busy calendars or whatever. And so I think first of all, being very deliberate about constantly being in touch and communicating and showing that you care and showing that respect for what they're doing and their position and how they're moving the dial, not only with the people that are directly in contact him, but as part of this team and then how this team's moving the dial. I think those are really important things to, to keep in mind. And it's tough because we all, we all know. And um, and also the listening audience knows how in this day and age, business can just run out of control. And when that happens, your priorities get messed up and the people that you need to be communicating, especially the ones that maybe you're working closely with or reporting to or so on, you need to make sure you're on top of that sharp communication. So I think that's a key.

[04:23](#)

L: So it sounds like, you know, one part of this is just the meaningfulness of and letting people know what they, what they do matters. And that's something that a leader does. And through your communication, through letting them know that as well and then just this intention, right. Or this engagement with them. So when you, when you think, Kent, about sort of the way that you lead, how do you, how do you see sort of, what are you trying to get out of the people that, that you're leading. How do you see that relationship? Cause sometimes people cause some, so maybe more managers and they're, it's a transaction. I need you to get this done so therefore we can get this done. But it doesn't seem to me that that's the way you lead or the way you think about leadership in terms of what you're trying to do for them or what they provide to you. That interaction. I guess that's not a very clear question, is it Johnny?

[05:09](#)

K: But well I mean I think it makes sense. I think at the end of the day, at the end of the day we have a mission and that is to try to raise up top 100 and and grand slam champions. And so we all have our part, whether it's your one of the coaches is working on with a specific birth year or a group of professional players or whatever the case might be. They've all got an important, an important role in that. And in the, the big and the big scope of things. So I think listening to them but not just to listen, but also to hear what their, they're experts, a lot of them are experts, some are continuing and we're all continuing to learn. But taking the bits and pieces from each one of them and applying it to the team is incredibly helpful. So it's not just listening or, or having the communication just to have the communication, but it needs to be productive. Obviously. One thing I love about working with USTA is we can try new things. We're open to new ideas, it needs to get properly, but I love that process. So with the regular communication, with being a good listener and really listening to the ideas that are brought to the table, I think shows respect, which is really, really important. But also it's, it's key to us continuing to get better as a team. So taking what is, what can work, vetting it, trying it, all these kinds of things I think helps build morale at the end of the day makes us a better team and we can be better at at accomplishing our mission.

[06:22](#)

J: For sure. I mean when I was reporting to you, one of the, one of the greatest things I valued was that you allow, you did exactly that. You allowed me to approach you with ideas that I may have had and if you, you know, if you thought, you know, let's run with those and you allowed me flexibility to go after them. But one thing that really stuck out to me was you also looked at the bigger picture. You already processed things at multiple different angles that I may not have considered or you know it. Was that something that you worked on in terms of like seeing the bigger picture or is that something that just is maybe part of your personality that you always look at those multiple angles or is that something you had to work on?

[06:57](#)

K: Well, I mean, that's nice of you to say. I mean, I feel like if when you're talking big picture, personally I feel like I've got some good ideas maybe, but not to the point where I, probably stronger than that, I feel like I need to get the ideas from around me and the, and the great people around and how, you know, I can add to the conversation certainly, but I don't feel like it's my way or the highway and that and I wouldn't feel comfortable with that. I don't think I'm that great at it. So the idea, again, it gets back to the relationships and the communication, the synergy that there's a tremendous amount of power in that. And you know, you mentioned kind of having different eyes and seeing things. I mean, uh, that's why we've got to work together because you're going to John and you're going to see stuff that, that I do not see coming Larry the same way. And we could literally sit here and think of dozens of examples of that if we looked at how we've worked together the last couple of years. So I think by sharing things, by vetting it, by bouncing it off each other, uh, we're going to try some very, some, some great things and we're going to, I'm confident we're going to get better and the system's going to get better. And I'm kind of a systems guy. I think I like, you know, there's some flexibility in that. But in general, I think it's

really important to get to learn from the past to, uh, implement what works in the future and to continue to try new things out. I think those are very, very important things and I think we do a pretty good job of that. We, we gotta get better, but I think we do a pretty good job.

[08:12](#)

J: It's a lot more fun doing it together. You know, I think, you know, bouncing those ideas off each other is yeah, as you say, like how we can, how we can sprout some more creativity in, in, in those, around those. And so, you know, that is just a lot more fun. I mean, doing things by yourself and trying to run with them. I mean, it's not necessarily mean it's going to be the right way of doing it. And so it's just a lot more fun to start brainstorming ideas and then coming to, you know, if you're working on a project and then you're all able to reflect on that as a way of the, you've all collaborated on pretty satisfied, you know, there's a lot of satisfaction for the whole team, you know? And so that creates good synergy and it, and it helps you move forward as a team really productively with, and then in turn that it creates stronger bonds and strong relationships in your team members. So it's a, it's just a lot more fun that way.

[08:56](#)

L: Yeah, I would agree. And I obviously I've seen, can't do this for many years since I joined. And, and part of what, you know, I would, I might characterize this as kind of this ego-less leadership that you have. You do a great job of setting aside any ego that you might have. Everybody has an ego, but I, and really making it about everybody. I really respect that you do that and that's, but that's hard to do. And I think a lot of in this day and age, a lot of leaders think they need to come in, change everything my way or the highway. Um, you see that with a lot of coaches, for example, going into big programs, but you're, you're not that way. Why do you think you wouldn't take that approach? Or why is that not your approach? Cause it seems to be that a lot of a lot of leaders do take that approach. Come in, blow it up. It's my way, you know, this is how we're doing it. Strong, really strong. Kind of forcing maybe in some ways. But why would you use a different approach than that?

[09:42](#)

K: I mean, I think it's probably a little bit the way we're wired. I'm not wired that way. I want to be approachable. I want to work together. I love being on a team. Probably all those different things kind of contribute to that. But I do think too, there comes a time too, I think in leadership and Jose whose influence Jose Higuera, who's influenced all of us a lot, you know, he talks about there's so many commonalities I think in leadership and in coaching. And he talks about the importance of commanding the court as a coach. You know, that doesn't mean talk all the time or, but, but there's standards out there and there's things that you're gonna set in place and you're running the court and you have different styles of leading that, and you're going to have different players out there and have figuring out how to engage each one of those players is an art form. He calls that the art of coaching. And I think that's, that's true with leadership too. I mean, I think there's times when you've got to step up and you gotta make decisions. There's calls that you're on when there's 25 people on that you gotta, you gotta lead, you know, you've gotta lead. But then there's also the, the portion of that where you've got a, I believe you've got to listen

and you've got to uh, work together and so on. So it's, you know, it's maybe a little bit complex, but in general, those are some of the things I've learned I'd say in the last 10 years with the USTA. And I continue to learn on how and how to try to do that better all the time. Whether it is engaging a player or whether it is engaging a staff member and how to maximize that relationship and maximize everyone's output.

[10:59](#)

J: So you are now six months into the new role. What are some of the challenges you faced going into that and maybe talk about how you've worked through that to, to overcome some of those challenges.

[11:09](#)

K: I think some of the challenges have been just getting really up to speed on, uh, everyone's role, their relationships with, you know, I'm dealing a lot more at the pro level now. So what does that player's team look like? Whether it's their primary coach, whether it's their, their strength and conditioning coach, their, their mental skills coach, their agents, you know, so getting up to speed with all that. And again I would refer back to, we've got great people that have been working and have been in that space a, some of our national coaches who have great relationships at that, those, and that's helped a lot. You know, that's helped a lot. So they kind of would help me get up to speed. I've been on the road a little more than I used to be on some longer trips and went to the Australian open for instance, you know, for about three weeks and I was in Indian Wells for nine days and so that's helped also really get up to speed. So I think that's been one of the biggest challenges. I would say overall it's gone pretty smoothly. I would say. Another one is just the fact that I've got to lean hard on our coaches and know that they, they are doing a good job at doing a great job and that they need to take care of a lot of things in their space that I would never really be able to do because it would just spread everything too thin. So, and again, that gets back to a lot of confidence in our employees and our, and our coaches. And then I guess all that in the scope though of the, we all got to keep getting better and how do we, how do we hold each other accountable and, and get that done. It's a little complex.

[12:23](#)

L: It is complex in tennis world is very complex I find because if you, if you're hired to be a gym or a coach of a team, it's pretty structured, right? You know exactly who you're dealing with, what the structure of the who reports to whom and when in this tennis world there isn't such a structure that I like to think of. They're all like teams ends of one. There's a team over here and I know there's a team over there. Right. I've seeing the pro space and with even the juniors now too, we think of them as as teams but a how challenging is that? Does that make that when you're, you're leading and yet your maybe not able to be, let's say close to them in proximity because they train somewhere else or um, you don't get to talk with them as often. Cause you mentioned, you know, communication and communicating regularly as one of your primary objectives as a leader. How challenging does that make it in the world of tennis knowing that you're trying to lead people that might be 2000 miles away from you?

[13:13](#)

K: I mean, I think that, I think that is challenging. I think, you know, the last few years, last five or six years, the whole team USA initiative has been a huge initiative for all of us and working closely with the private sector. We've got so many great private sector coaches out there. But even having that rare communication with them too is so important. And it is, it is tough because you're talking about a lot of numbers. It's a lot of numbers. So that's where I think it's important to have the coaches taking a lead on a lot of that and think my job is going to be to make sure all those things are in good places. I'll do as much as I can, I'll step in when I need to. But in general it's all the cylinders firing and managing that. It's, it is, it's a challenge. But I, I keep learning, I keep learning and I keep trying to get better. And I think as a team were trying to get better all the time, which is good.

[13:55](#)

L: Well, I believe so, I, I hope so. I mean cause it's what we ask our players, right? We asked them to come in open growth mindset and to learn and to get better. And you know, from your experiences Kent, you don't have to say who, but what's something you learned not to do as you observed other leaders cause you've been around a number of leaders, whether when you are playing college tennis or pro or coaching or being a part of USTA, but what's something, a valuable lesson that you learned? Cause I always hear leaders talk about there's things that I learned to do and there's things that I learned not to do based on observing others. What's a very important one you felt like you learned, it's shaped your leadership.

[14:28](#)

K: I mean, I think one that that definitely comes to mind is following through with what you say you're going to do for moving the team in a certain direction. But then it just kind of loses steam and they don't hear anything about it again, I think that's, that's not good. So we have, as you know, we have twice a year our national coaches come in for meetings. Uh, that's the only two times a year that we're all together. And we come in with some clear objectives and we leave with pretty clear takeaways. And really following through with that is really important. So I think that's one thing that's I know near and dear to my heart is, is following through with, with promises that are made. And I think with that then there's more trust that's built also, which obviously is really important if, uh, if, if people are going to have confidence in your leadership.

[15:09](#)

L: Yeah, absolutely. Go ahead Johnny.

[15:11](#)

J: I'm sorry. I'm gonna ask you a question about your playing days, how much did you know, cause you played on the tour for a, for a long time and how much did that help prepare you as a leader because obviously going around a lot the time by yourself traveling, how did that help you as well with your leadership qualities having to take ownership over you basically yourself, you're your own CEO of your own career. How did that help forge, forge you into, uh, into your leadership style?

[15:35](#)

K: Yeah, that's a good question cause it's not like you're, you're leading others too much in that kind of a lifestyle. But I think that 11 years on tour helped me

become confident in being able to take care of logistics and confident of being able to move around and deal with different adversities and you know, the world maybe became a little bit of a smaller place during that time, which is, which is I think helpful. And I think also through those 11 years on tour, there's certainly a, you know, people say it all the time. The tennis world is small world. There's definitely a network of players and whether it's former pros or current pros, there's a collegiate system too that I went through. So I think those years kind of built a web of or a network of people and tournaments and so on that, that are helping me now from a familiarity standpoint that I think do help from a confidence standpoint, which helps. So, uh, so that is there, it's not about, you know, obviously when you're out on the road and you're traveling on your own, you're pretty much looking after your career and taking care of those details and so on. So it's not about, as I mentioned, you know, taking care of, uh, other, other people as much because an individual sport and so on. But, but I think that foundation definitely was helpful in, in gearing up towards leading others.

[16:47](#)

L: So Kent, we're going down the memory road here. I'm going to go even further back. When's the first time you felt like you were in a leader pursue a leadership position? When did you feel like you were in a position where you were maybe influencing others? Maybe not, not even purposely, but you ended up being in a leadership position.

[17:03](#)

K: That's a good question. That kind of brings me to another kind of place in my memory. I, I do think even as a junior growing up in the program that I was in, you know, I had decent success at a young age and junior tests. So, but you become a little bit of a leader in that program. And actually when we have camps, you know, Johnny and Larry, when we, we brought in kids for camps, we talk about, you know, doing a great dynamic war because you need to go back to that program where you are a leader and show the younger ones, they're looking at you, you know. So you know, now that you mentioned kind of that way, I think some of those leadership skills that might have been some of the first exposure I had to that back in Indiana and growing up I also had the chance to play different sports growing up and played on a basketball team where I was put in a leadership position later in high school and so on, which I think became helpful. And then certainly in college, I mean played at Clemson and we had a great team there and again, played for Chuck Creasey who, uh, I think taught all of us how to, a lot of leadership skills. And so I'm sure that's kind of helped build that foundation a little bit too. Hadn't really thought about that much, but what all those things, I think when you grow up and you have these experiences and stuff, that all adds to the pot of who you become, how it, what kind of leader you're going to be and so on. So that was definitely influential.

[18:08](#)

L: Yeah. Having even, you know, at a young age you, you get thrown into leadership positions and you're not even fully aware of it. Right. But you have an opportunity to lead and you can lead by your actions. You can lead by what you say, but I think a lot of times, as you mentioned, our, our young, young players could lead more purposely. And I'll see if that's going to happen, that our, our coaches need to be the ones communicating to them. Right. Right. And their

parents that this is an opportunity where you could be a role model for the rest of the program for the younger players. Maybe even your peers if you're trying to bring along a group of players, you know, in a high performance or some kind of program. But I do think a lot of leadership opportunities are missed every day, don't you think?

[18:45](#)

K: Yeah, and I think, you know, one thing that came out recently too, I think it was the February meetings, we as, whether it's coaches or leaders, sometimes I, sometimes we may assume too much on what that individual that we're leading. Let's just say we assume too much that they're connecting the dots. And we talked about sometimes with our, with our coaches and the players that are working with, we need to be maybe a little more deliberate about really teasing up these teachable moments and really doing something before the moment, making sure there's engagement during the moment and then after the moment, going back and saying, okay, how does this, how can this really help you? Or how does this affect your, you know, because I think sometimes we've learned that we do tend to take things for granted too much and that those, those dots are getting connected. So, so that's an important thing to let you know. When I took the job after playing, I spent a couple years working for a fellowship of Christian athletes in Indiana, but then I went and worked the university of Illinois for a couple of years. And I remember when I got that job coach Creasey, he said, don't ever forget to every day's an opportunity to teach as a coach and don't ever take that for granted. And I think that's the essence of, of leadership, is understanding that there's always opportunities to make an impact and don't take those for granted and try not to let all the noise and the busy-ness, all the other stuff that can get in the way. Don't let it get in the way and make sure you're helping that person connect the dots. So that's been a good lesson for me to learn.

[20:03](#)

L: I do want to.. Johnny, he's leaning forward, ready to jump in, but I love that pre, during and after approach because that's how learning occurs, right? And we're, we're showing people how they have opportunities to lead and helping them learn how they're influencing others by their action leading themselves, but also leading others. And really being, preparing to lead and in executing and then obviously reflecting on it, that's where the lessons get segmented in.

[20:24](#)

K: Absolutely. And I also would add, I think humility is an important and important thing in that process. So if you miss the opportunities or you make the wrong decisions or you lead the wrong way or whatever, to be transparent about that is, is pretty valuable too because I think that helps build trust and confidence and that you're leading for the right reasons, your hearts in the right place. And, and I think that uh, that's a good quality to have to as a leader is to admit when you're wrong and they will be afraid to do that.

[20:48](#)

L: That's great. Cause I remember when I was younger I thought, you know, leading was okay, I was so best player and I get to tell you what to do when you know the young mind. Right? I'm a leader so I get to tell you what to do. Rah rah, you know, do it this way. I know I'm the best player and, and I think

sometimes remembering back to where we used to be when we had these opportunities when we're younger helps us to understand what the young young player is going through. So yeah. Yeah.

[21:10](#)

J: No, I wasn't really going to say much other than what Ken just said was a dropped the bike moment and then I ruined it. I'm sorry. Yeah, but no, I mean it was great. I mean these camps, we just had one that just this weekend and as you say, [inaudible] got those teachable moments. Got me thinking about, you know, there's nothing, there's nothing greater than being able to sit back and see which kid steps up and wants to lead the group through a like a warm up or cool down. Or I guess in your case, Larry, when you have the kids for your mental skill sessions and you put them in groups or your, you're asking those questions, which one's a, a stepping up and asking questions or which ones are getting the groups together and, and getting the conversation initiated, which can be a tough thing at a young age, you know, 12,13 with the social side. So, but no that's fantastic. So I know you're very busy. So as we wrap up here, can we always like to finish off with some key takeaways and there's obviously a lot that we've ingrained there, but what are maybe some of your three clearest takeaways that you could offer the listeners, whether it's to players or coaches or parents could take with them from this?

[22:08](#)

K: Well, before I get into three, one, one other thing I'll just mention, just as a segue from the last comment was that, you know, these camps you mentioned, it's great to see who does step up and who does take a leadership role. But I also have found that another great thing is to put a person in a position who maybe doesn't feel that comfortable, but it's such a great opportunity, right? To feel a little bit uncomfortable. And the more I think we, you know, we can do that. We do that as parents, you know, we, we want to help stretch them a little bit. And I think as you kind of give them those opportunities, they do stretch and then that builds more confidence in them. And I think that's another really important piece that we gotta we gotta keep remembering. And that goes for us too. The more we get into positions that, you know what, I'm not that comfortable doing that, but I'll try it, you know, and try to get better. And a lot of learning can go from that. So, but I think as far as three maybe takeaways, you know, on leadership, I think the relationships are key and really being deliberate and intentional. It shows the respect, which is really important, obviously. And it's gonna make you better, the person, better the team better. So I think listening, being a good listener and communicating is definitely very, very important. I think giving people the opportunity to get better is very important. The professional development or like we were just talking about for that player to put them in a position where maybe they're not that confident, but you give them an opportunity to get better. I think giving them those opportunities and encouragement along the way are really important. And then I'd say the third one is following through with what you promise or what you're, yeah. Basically promising and be, be true to your word and, and think as you follow through with what you say. I think that that's going to help also build a lot of trust and get a lot of good forward momentum going on. So those would maybe be my three main, uh, leadership takeaways.

[23:46](#)

L: Those, those are great. Ken, very simple but very powerful takeaways. No, it seems to me this is a very much a transformational sort of approach to and servant to, I mean, I look at your leadership style and I don't see you power mad or running around telling people what to do. It's much more that you're serving the people to get them to where they want to be. Right. And that's what we do in leadership.

[24:09](#)

K: Yeah. Yeah, I like that. I mean, I hope so. I mean, I, I do think, like I said, there is the times to step in and step up and make decisions and, and correct and hold accountable and, and all of that. But at the end of the day, uh, I, I do believe that if the heart's in the right place that, you know, you want to just keep forward momentum going for that individual, for the team. And if your heart's in the right place, there's going to be good things that are gonna happen. Awesome. That's awesome, Kent.

[24:33](#)

J: Yeah, great stuff. Well, again, thank you very much for joining us. You know, we'll, we'll definitely, you know, I know I certainly watch you a lot and I've had a lot of the fortunate of being able to learn from you, so, so I appreciate that. And, uh, you know, good luck with everything with the men's side and keep plugging away. And yeah, I'd be good to get, I think coach Kathy on next time and go through the, go through sort of the same exercise on her and I'm sure we'll gonna find a lot of similar traits, but, but different experiences, I'm sure.

[24:58](#)

K: Well, it's been great. Absolutely great. Working closely with Kathy and the women's side, we're doing a lot more together. The men's and women's coaches and a lot of great things are happening. So again, it's that, it's that synergy, it's that collaboration that I think is really gonna help.

[25:10](#)

J: Well, that's it for this week's episode of compete like a champion. We thank, coach Kent Kinear, for taking the time to talk through his leadership and, uh, we'll, uh, look forward to speaking to you next time. From Dr. Larry Lauer, Coach Johnny Parkes, checking out.