

Training 101

TENNIS, ANYONE?

By Eric R. Baron, president of the Baron Group, 57 Wilson Road, Westport, CT 06880; phone: 203/227-7907; fax: 203/221-8411.

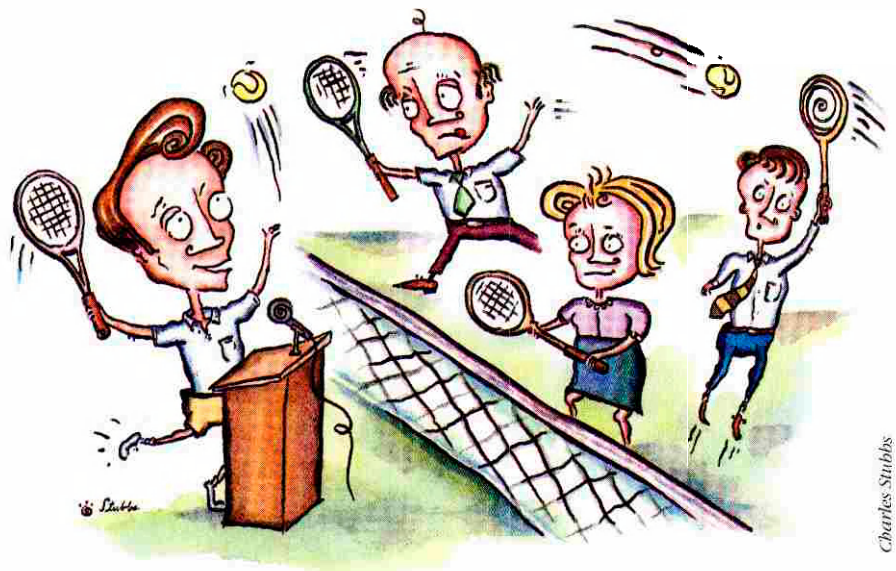
Four days of tennis camp provided me with a better backhand, a stronger serve, and a bit more knowledge about the strategy of the game. But it also taught me a lot about training and development.

For the uninitiated, tennis camp is intensive tennis training that can range in length from two days to several weeks. Participants vary in skill level, from beginners to advanced players. The groups are large, and there are many staff people—mostly college students. Most of the lessons are in group situations, but players receive private lessons as well.

As a mediocre tennis player, I learned a lot about tennis over the course of the four days. By the time I left tennis camp, I knew I was a better player. But when I went home, I realized that although I had learned a lot about the game of tennis, I had learned at least as much about some important training and development principles. Being a participant in a program for four days enlightened me about some of the things we as trainers do that we may not even know about—things that can have a major effect on our trainees.

The lessons cover six important concepts and techniques:

- ▶ the consistency of the message we deliver
- ▶ the constant need for positive reinforcement
- ▶ the ability to demonstrate sensitivity to poor performance
- ▶ the use of videotape as a training tool
- ▶ the intricacies of group dynamics
- ▶ relationships between staff and participants.



Charles Stubbs

Tennis camp brought all of those lessons to my attention in new ways. And that knowledge gave me a new perspective on my role and my responsibilities as a trainer. In fact, I was so impressed that I wanted to send my entire training staff to tennis camp!

Consistency of the message. Perhaps the thing that impressed me the most about tennis camp was the extraordinary consistency in the way all the staff taught the same skills.

Of course, each instructor had a personal style and a unique way of communicating those skills. Some taught a skill by using examples, others demonstrated a right way and a wrong way, some let the group learn each skill through a process of discovery, and others used humor when appropriate. The methodologies varied. But every instructor was talking about the exact same principles. The process could vary, but the content was the same.

Each staff person explained in the same way what skill was being taught, why players needed it, how to apply

For a corporate trainer, four days at tennis camp served up a few important lessons about running a classroom.

it, what benefits were associated with it, and how to use it effectively.

When we, as trainers, co-teach or team-teach courses, it is critical for us to be consistent. When we split our groups into subgroups with different trainers, we must do everything possible to ensure that each trainer knows what information should be communicated—and, more important, why a particular approach has been chosen.

If we bring in outside speakers, we must be sure that they know what the instructors and other speakers will be saying. In most cases, presenters should reinforce each other's messages—not contradict them. If one presenter is offering an alternative point of view, trainers should explain why to trainees.

In other words, we must be very careful to avoid confusing the participants by sending mixed messages. Consistency of the message is something we as trainers must always strive for if we want people even to consider modifying their behavior as a result of a training experience.

Positive reinforcement. We all know the value of positive reinforcement. When someone does something well, letting them know about it takes little time, but it can have great impact. Just think of the last time your immediate manager or a peer sent back something you wrote, with a positive comment. It feels good to know that someone invested a few minutes on your behalf.

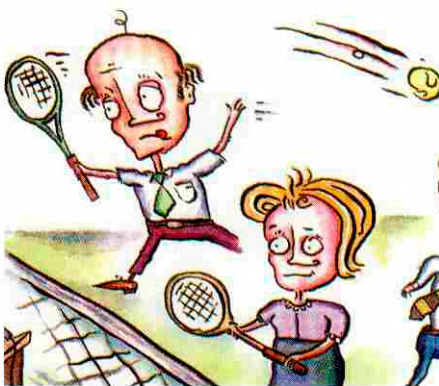
The effects of positive reinforcement are magnified in the classroom. That's because the stakes tend to be high. People in training programs are learning new skills and new approaches to their jobs.

When I was at tennis camp, several instructors were quick to point out what I was doing well when I tried to adjust my serve or incorporate suggestions for improving my game. Those positive comments made a surprisingly big difference. I found that I worked harder for those instructors than I did for the ones who focused more on what I did wrong. And it wasn't just me. Other trainees in the group said they also felt more comfortable working with staff who took a positive approach.

Of course, that doesn't mean that a trainer should focus only on the posi-

tive. It means giving balanced feedback, starting with the positive and then focusing on areas that need improvement.

It's like a coaching session. If your subordinate understands what he or she is doing well—and why it is important—then his or her ability to hear and respond effectively to the problem areas increases dramatically. Even people who are extremely accomplished like to know what they're



doing well. And that's particularly true when they are trying something new and different.

Sensitivity to poor performance. For many people, training is an uncomfortable experience. That's especially true for adults who were not terrific students in their school days but who have succeeded in the business world. When they find themselves in training situations, they face a common fear: "People will find out I'm not so smart after all." This syndrome can make the training experience a scary one.

The importance of being sensitive to this fear became abundantly clear to me on the first day of tennis camp. Each of us trainees had to get on the court with one of the professional players and try our strokes in front of everybody.

The exercise was analogous to the "benchmark tape" that some training programs use, in which participants begin a training program by making a videotape. In the tape, they give a presentation (or make a sales call, or conduct a coaching session, or participate in a meeting, or whatever the training topic might be). The videotape helps the trainer and trainees gauge their proficiency levels, so that they can build from there.

At tennis camp, the experience was

a mortifying one. Most people performed poorly. And having to do it early in the program—and in front of the group—only exacerbated the situation.

The need for the exercise was clear. The staff had to be able to judge our abilities, so the trainers could place us in subgroups of people with similar levels of expertise. But it was not the best way to start a program. The trainers should have known that people would have trouble with performing in public at such an early point in the program.

As trainers, we need to remember that most people want to perform well in front of their peers. It is our responsibility to do what we can to minimize the risk of embarrassment. People learn best when the stress level is low. We should treat the training arena as a laboratory environment—one in which people are free to experiment without fear of failure.

Use of videotape. At one point in the tennis program, the trainers videotaped each of us playing tennis.

I often refer to the use of videotape in training programs as a "painful pleasure." It is a wonderful training tool that enables people to increase their self-awareness while learning the value and applicability of the new skills. But few people relish the videotape experience until it is over—and sometimes, not even then. Even people who appear relaxed in front of the camera are likely to be uncomfortable if they are not used to being videotaped.

Videotape is not a terribly flattering medium. Nobody seems to like the sound of her or his own voice on tape, or the way video seems to add pounds and years and to exaggerate receding hairlines.

Trainees will be more comfortable using videotape for feedback if participants establish certain ground rules:

- ▶ Set specific criteria for feedback; for example, it should be solicited, specific, appropriate, verifiable, balanced, and helpful.

- ▶ The person on tape has the right to focus on areas of importance to him or her.

- ▶ The debrief session must have a positive climate. Participants must be sensitive and honest; they should work together in a collaborative manner, not a competitive one.

Trainers who use videotape all the

time tend to become cavalier about its use. We forget what it is like to be taped. In fact, we forget what it is like to be a trainee—particularly one who has to apply new skills in taped exercises, and in front of peers.

When trainees complain about having to be taped, we trainers tend to play down their anxiety. We think instead about how they will feel after the experience—which is usually positive. In other words, we tend to be insensitive to the feelings of people who are looking to us for support during an uncomfortable moment.

Tennis camp reminded me of those feelings by bringing my own anxieties to the forefront. I suddenly found myself on the other side of the camera—doing something I don't do very well and trying to apply some new learnings. And it was a mind-boggling, enlightening, and humbling experience. In the end, the experience turned out to be a good one. When I watched myself on tape, it became even clearer how powerful and useful videotape can be. And the trainer's approach to the debriefing was one I felt comfortable with.

Group dynamics. Quite often during training programs, subgroups start to form within the larger group. Relationships, both good and bad, develop among the participants. Too often, we as trainers are oblivious to this. And that can work against us.

It all became clear to me at tennis camp. I was assigned to a subgroup of three other people—and I found that I just didn't like two of them. It was hard for me to learn in that situation. No matter how hard I tried to concentrate, the personalities of the people I was with were more than I could handle.

You could say that it was my problem, and the trainers could not be responsible for making sure that every subgroup was harmonious. That's true. Luckily, when I asked to be reassigned, the staff person was accommodating, which was helpful.

Of course, such a reassignment isn't always appropriate—as I once heard a trainer say in a similar situation, "I can protect you from this person here and now, but who will protect you from people like that when you return to the real world?"

That says it all. The trainer has to decide what to do in each situation.

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Nine Commandments for Adult Educators

Etched by Edward H. Rockey, but derived from many prophets.

1. Thou shalt not assume ignorance in thy trainees, for oftentimes they have learned or lived through what thou hast not.
2. Thou shalt create a place of learning where trust abounds and where participants help each other.
3. Thou shalt give prompt, useful commentary on thy trainees' work.
4. Thou shalt provide patience. Thy trainees contend with broken chariots and clogged roads, with tough jobs, and with the needs of their families—not to mention rendering taxes unto Caesar and assignments unto thee.
5. Thou shalt not commit boredom; therefore, thou shalt not lecture long nor drearily.
6. Thou shalt respect know-how which trainees can use on the job and in their daily sojourn through this life of bliss and woe.
7. Thou shalt involve thy trainees in their quest for knowledge; yea, thou shalt declare them masters of their own learning.
8. Thou shalt manifest what thou teacheth; verily, practice thy proverbs.
9. Consider this last commandment deeply: Thou shalt never contrive a tenth commandment when nine are enough.

(Edward Rockey is in the department of management at Pepperdine University's School of Business and Management, 400 Corporate Pointe, Culver City, CA 90230.)

And the trainer's sensitivity to the dynamics of the group can be a major factor in the success or failure of the training. As trainer, you should pay special attention to group dynamics, early in the program. Apply your observations in the way you assign subgroups, role-plays, and working teams. Those observations can even affect decisions about whom to call on for answers to questions.

Staff/participant relationships. Another lesson I learned in tennis camp is that most trainers lose sight of the way program participants regard them—particularly when the trainers are doing high-quality work.

When the training experience is a good one, the bond that develops between trainer and participant can be strong; in many ways, it becomes exaggerated. This usually lasts only during the program, of course. But until things return to normal, a good trainer may find himself or herself on a pedestal that really isn't deserved and certainly isn't necessary.

The problem is that most trainers don't realize this, so they seldom deal with it appropriately. Too many of us are not approachable or available enough to the course participants during breaks and after the day ends. In many cases, this is understandable. We may have to do our prep work for the next session. Or we might just need some down time. But the lack of access can hurt the group.

This may have been the strongest message I took home from tennis camp. On the last evening of the program, the staff invited the group to join them for drinks at a local pub at the end of the day. The group was pleased to have the opportunity to mingle with the staff, off the court. About half of the training participants showed up.

That evening, the instructors did three things that taught me a big lesson:

- ▶ They showed up late. This was the same group that was extremely punctual during the week, while

they were teaching tennis.

- ▶ They mingled among themselves and made little effort to seek out the trainees.

- ▶ When we did talk to them, they seemed uninterested in what we had to say.

The trainees were feeling discounted—rejected, even. Later, at dinner by ourselves, we could put it in perspective. We were a group of somewhat affluent people ranging in age from our mid-30s to our mid-50s. And we were feeling bad because some college students weren't excited about having drinks with us!

We got over it. But it showed me how easy it is for us, as trainers, to affect a group. We work hard for trainees during a program. But when we go out of our way to avoid them at dinner, when we don't make ourselves available to talk at the end of the day, or when we appear indifferent when they approach us out of the classroom, we do affect them.

I know how important it is to have some down time. After doing a stand-up piece for an hour-and-a-half, the last thing you want to do during your break is to hear about someone's problems. But think about how strongly a bunch of college students affected our tennis-camp participants by avoiding any interaction with us. And remember that your perceived lack of interest can demoralize the participants in your training session.

Bringing it back home. So I did leave tennis camp as a better tennis player—OK, so I was still mediocre at best. But I was at least a little more proficient at the game than when I began. Of course, without the necessary practice and reinforcement after the program, the skills could atrophy. That in itself is another lesson I could relate to the training world.

But in addition to all that, being a participant in the program taught me some important lessons about what I can do to be a better trainer.

And those lessons have lasted.

"Training 101" is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to "Training 101," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.