**Enhancing Tennis Drill Effectiveness Through Active Coaching**

Throughout my career in the tennis industry, I’ve had the privilege of working with numerous coaches as a Coach Developer for the PTR. Over time, I’ve addressed many different questions during training sessions and workshops. One of the most common inquiries I receive is, *“How can I come up with more drill ideas?”* My response is often unexpected. Rather than providing a long list of drills, I challenge coaches to focus not just on learning new drills, but on executing simple drills in a way that enhances student learning.

A drill can be as straightforward as setting up players in lines for hitting practice with feeds or arranging them for rally-based drills to work on a specific stroke. While there are endless variations, target placements, and scoring systems to explore, it's important to remember that the primary purpose of drills in a developmental class is to teach the technical elements of a stroke and help players improve their skills.

To run more effective drills, we must focus less on complexity or the “look” of the drill, and more on active coaching. Active coaching involves the intentional efforts a coach makes to promote player learning and improvement. This includes speaking clearly to both individuals and the group, pausing to make corrections, and continuously providing instruction through varied teaching methods.

One of the best ways to enhance active coaching is through the technique known as *pausing-to-teach*. During a pause-to-teach moment, the activity—whether feeding or rallying—is stopped to give the coach an opportunity to make deliberate corrections and reinforcements. We want to avoid the common scenario where a drill goes on for minutes, with players hitting balls without receiving adequate instruction. Players need consistent attention and specific feedback to improve their skills. Pausing creates an environment where this is more likely to happen.

Pausing also creates the opportunity to use kinesthetic and visual cues to aid learning. Players often need more than just verbal cues to fully understand and carry out a task. For instance, during a forehand drill, when working on contact points, you could pause the hitting and demonstrate the correct position by having the player place their racquet on the appropriate contact point—next to the body and in front. This brief moment helps reinforce the correct positioning. A coach's close demonstration provides a visual cue, allowing the player to see the movement in action. Remember, it’s important to review and repeat instructions throughout the drill. Pausing for a moment to offer corrections allows players to process the information and retain it more effectively. After the pause, check for understanding and resume the drill with renewed focus.

Another key benefit of pausing to instruct is the opportunity to offer reinforcement when the player successfully demonstrates the desired technique. For example, if a player hits a volley with the correct stance and point of contact, the coach can pause to highlight the success and offer praise. This reinforces the correct action and motivates students to continue performing it.

As the drill progresses, persistence is key. Continue to address individual and group needs in an encouraging manner, offering instruction and reminders as necessary. For instance, if a player begins hitting the contact point too close to their body, pause for a quick demonstration and remind them to create more space between the body and the ball. Keep these individual instructions brief so as not to take too much attention away from others in the group. Using a positive tone and consistently praising efforts will keep players engaged and motivated.

To ensure the continued effectiveness of your coaching, it's important to narrow your focus to one or two main coaching points for each drill. Start by selecting one stroke and one technical element to work on, rather than addressing multiple aspects at once. This will prevent overwhelming the player with too many instructions and allow you to teach the skill more effectively. Remember, there’s a difference between active coaching and simply shouting out random tips. Intentional coaching will always result in a better learning experience for the player and help you become a more effective coach.

As coaches, we’re always eager to discover new drill ideas to keep our sessions fresh for our students. However, the true skill lies in how we execute these drills and make them successful, which requires ongoing effort and practice. Reflection is a valuable tool for improving our coaching skills. After each lesson or drill, take a moment to ask yourself: Did I narrow my focus to one or two key points? Was I able to pause and make effective corrections?Did I incorporate different instructional methods, such as visual or kinesthetic cues, in addition to verbal ones?

By reflecting on your coaching practices and enhancing your active coaching skills, you’ll increase the effectiveness of your drills, helping students learn new skills, have fun, and achieve success in your classes and programs.