

A short summary of what was discussed at the Workshop with Steven Martens in Carrickmines LTC on the 26th of March 2008.

The topic of the workshop:
“Developing Performance Training Structures”.



Steven Martens is originally from Belgium, and is a former Davis Cup Captain for his home country. He has coached top 20 players Sabine Appelmans and Xavier Malisse. You can see an in depth interview with him on www.tenniscoach.com. He is currently Head of Technical Support at the LTA (UK).

After a short introduction we started a discussion on the points that participating coaches wished to talk about.. Most discussed topics were these:

The importance of high performance surfaces and indoor facilities in Ireland.

The importance of clay courts was outlined as Irish juniors get used to playing on fast surfaces and it limits their learning process of tactical richness and clever mind game on a tennis court.

Rallies on artificial grass courts last on average to 5 to 6 shots, while on clay players would be forced to experience longer rallies and they would learn more tactical variety in their game.

The importance of government support to tennis.

Steven gave an example of the Belgium Tennis Federation's financial income per year. It consists of 3 independent sources.

Firstly - membership fees.

Every member of a tennis club pays a fee to the Federation each year. Steven thinks that payment straight to the Federation, rather than to the club is better as there are less management levels and it's easier to define responsibilities of the Federation to the member.

Second source is commercial income.

Companies sponsor the Federation and its projects. Everyone understands that it's easier to attract money when you have produced stars like Henin, Clisters, and others, but Steven said that it's vital to get someone independent.

Thirdly, government supports sports in Belgium a lot.

For instance for every single player that is selected to national squad, government/Federation pays a grant of a certain fee to the club that produced the player. Also, juniors in the national squad are sponsored. The national programme in Belgium utilising national centers started in 1982.

High performance approach from an early age.

In Belgium talented children are taken to a National Centre (there are three in different parts of Belgium) from the age of 11 or 12. They practice in those centers for 4 to 5 days each week and attend schools local schools.

Accommodation for those players is provided in one of the families close to the Centre. The older they get, the more they practice in the Centre. For younger ages Steven gave guidelines for the amount of time they have to practice in their clubs. For 5 to 6 year olds Steven's guideline was around 3 to 4 hours a week. For 7 and 8 year olds it has to increase to 7 to 10 hours a week. For 9 and 10 year olds it should be 10 to 15 hours a week. The ratio of physical to technical work he gave is 2/3 of tennis to 1/3 of physical activities. Physical activities at that age should include different ball games, athletics and other easy physical on court work.

It was outlined as well that schools should be flexible towards talented players. Discussion agreed that National Tennis Federation should step up and try to change Irelands schools attitude towards sport kids. They should be allowed to miss more lessons and should be provided with possibilities to practice in the mornings and travel.

Lastly, Steven suggested putting kids into appropriate competition format as soon as possible so they get used to competition from the age of 7/8.

One of the main problems as regards the lack of high performance junior players in Ireland - peoples attitude towards professional tennis. Parents in Ireland don't want to interfere with their childs decisions. But the problem is that by the time children can make their own choices it's often too late to catch up with the basic work that has to be done at early age.