

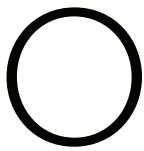
TAKING TENNIS TO THE WORLD

While developing tennis around the world is their mission, improving the lives of kids and coaches is the real victory for the ITF's Development Officers.

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By Robert Davis

From left to right: Amine Ben Makhoulouf teaching in Mali; Rafael Arevalo (ESA) in action at the Beijing Olympics; Sonam Yangchen (BHU)





n paper their job seems fairly simple: develop tennis, to produce more players, and better players. While clocking up one trip after another in exotic sounding cities like Alexandria, Calcutta, Dushanbe, Pago

Pago and Ulaanbaatar they have learned that the mission is anything but simple. The challenges are endless and vary in range from logistics to coordinating competitions and meeting with government ministers. Welcome to the ITF Development Officer team, an elite group of tennis professionals who both educate and inspire.

“The Development Officers are the eyes and ears of the ITF in over 140 nations,” says Dave Miley, Executive Director of Development for the ITF. “They monitor programmes, identify talent and train local coaches. Without them we could not have the huge impact that we currently have on the game worldwide.”

“You face different challenges from different cultures and you often have to find creative ways to overcome those challenges,” says Anthony Jeremiah, Development Officer for the Caribbean. “This keeps you searching to find the best solution. And if the solution does not work for one nation it might for another.”

Hrvoje Zmajic, Development Officer for Europe, is approaching the border crossing between Armenia and Georgia. Anxiously he walks across a decaying wooden

bridge. The immigrations office is housed in a rusty steel container. The officer-in-charge studies Zmajic closely without speaking while going through his tennis kit which is full of rackets, balls and equipment.

“And then he asks me if I know Goran Ivanisevic,” recalls Zmajic. “I was shocked. So you can imagine just how far tennis has reached.”

“In this job of promoting tennis, awareness of priorities is a constant challenge,” continues Zmajic. “People in National Associations like the glamour of a Davis Cup tie, but some are not ready to invest sufficient resources in grass roots tennis programmes. However, having said that, Ukraine is a good example of what can happen when a National Association makes improving local and national coaching the focus. Three years ago they submitted a specific project for coaching education. The ITF supported it through various forms of assistance and grants. Today, they have over 190 coaches registered ▶

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Left: Aisam Qureshi (PAK); right: Peru won the South American 12-and-under championships in November 2009

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DAN O’CONNELL

► with the sports authority and the National Association. To do so much in less than three years is fantastic.”

At the Regional Tennis Centre (RTC) in Fiji a sign hangs on the back wall. It reads, “The ITF house is the home of good people, good students and good athletes.” The words do not ring hollow and the results speak for themselves. In the past seven years, 17 of the 18 RTC student-athletes who have graduated from high school have gained US collegiate scholarships with many of them going on to represent Pacific Oceania in Davis Cup or Fed Cup. Considering that most of the players come from families that do not have university educations, this was an incredible success for the Development Officer for Pacific Oceania, Dan O’Connell.

“I would describe my job as being a teacher, friend and cheerleader to junior players, coaches and administrators,” says O’Connell. “In Pacific Oceania we all work together closely with the ‘let’s do it as a team’ attitude that has been the backbone of all of our work since the mid 90s.”

“I can still remember the day when he (O’Connell) came down to my country Vanuatu. He spotted me when I just lost a match and was pouring in tears,” remembers Andrew Mailtorok. “He came over and cheered me up and bought me a coke. I will always remember that day. Dan is a big influence in my life and in many other players’ and coaches’.”

Sonam Yangchen of Bhutan was identified by Suresh Menon, Development Officer for Asia, and included in the Performance Tennis Initiative (PTI) at the Bhutan Tennis Federation centre. She improved her tennis ability and was awarded a grant from the Grand Slam Development Fund (GSDF) to play internationally. Eventually she earned a scholarship to a US college where she played and graduated, and is now a member of parliament in Bhutan. Currently, she is involved in helping to promote tennis to Bhutan’s youth.

“Through the ITF/GSDF Pyramid of Opportunity a junior in an underdeveloped tennis nation can optimise their potential and achieve success,” says Menon. “In the end it’s not just all about being top-ranked professional players, and tennis provides them with opportunities and opens doors.”

While there are many examples like Sonam worldwide, there are also many players who were identified, selected and advised by Development Officers who would go on to earn a junior world No. 1 ranking and win professional titles.



Clockwise from top left: the 2010 Southern African Junior Championships were held at the Harare Sports Club; Dan O’Connell, left, and Andrew Maillorok; Amine Ben Makhlouf; a coaches course in Donetsk, Ukraine

“Being selected for the ITF/GSDF junior touring team and receiving travel grants had a great impact on my career,” says ATP player Aisam Qureshi from Lahore, Pakistan. “In addition to the great coaching provided, it was also good for my confidence and gave my career a big boost.”

Top players who have come through ITF/GSDF programmes include Marcos Baghdatis and Victoria Azarenka, but according to Miley one of the most inspiring stories centres on a young man from Rwanda called Eric Hagenimana. Orphaned in the genocide in 1994, he was identified as talented at a 14-and-under circuit in East Africa in 1995. He had not been to school for two years and at the age of 14 was invited to attend the ITF Training Centre in South Africa where he had the chance to improve his tennis while continuing his education. Hagenimana spent four years there on scholarship, made the top 100 in the ITF Junior Rankings and then reached an ATP ranking of 750. He played Davis



Cup for Rwanda and is now living and working in tennis in France.

In Zimbabwe, the jacaranda trees surrounding the Harare Sports Club were dying and the once beautiful pavillion leading into the club was in total disrepair. What was once a famed cricket stadium had become run down, filthy and squalid. Tennis Zimbabwe and Karl Davies, Development Officer for Southern Africa, decided on a plan.

“It was actually taken over by the rugby club to be used a drinking hole,” remembers Davies. “Tennis Zimbabwe went to the management to see if they could take over the club. The ITF through the ITF facility grants assisted TZ and a local sponsor to upgrade it to a nine court centre that will rival any facility in Africa. Now TZ hosts most of its national and international events at Harare Sports Club including the recent Southern African Junior Championships.”

In the small town of Santa Elena in south eastern El Salvador a physical education teacher is at home with her family watching Salvadorian Rafael Arevalo play world No. 1 Roger Federer in the Beijing Olympics. Cecilia Ancalmo, Development Officer for Central America, remembers her story very well. ►



Clockwise from top left: Dan O'Connell (back, fifth from right) with the ITF/GSDF Pacific Oceania Touring Team at Melbourne Park during this year's tour of Australia; Eric Hagenimana (RWA); Cecilia Ancalmo, left, with wheelchair players in El Salvador

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AMINE BEN MAKHLOUF

► “She told me she had stayed at home with her mother and children that morning to watch Rafael play Federer,” recalls Ancalmo. “They were so excited and happy to watch him play. The match was shown live on a national channel in El Salvador.”

Arevalo is a great example of what happens when a National Association and Development Officer work closely together. As a young boy, Arevalo got started in the ITF's School Tennis Initiative (STI) and Junior Tennis Initiative (JTI) and over the years earned an ATP ranking of 367. Now his success is inspiring physical education teachers who are eager to teach tennis in schools. It is Ancalmo's job to give those teachers the necessary tools to work with.

“There are individuals that took the challenge of improving themselves, using what ITF offered to them, and have become leaders in their countries and in the region,” states Ancalmo. “And some coaches have evolved so much that now they own their own laptops, are subscribed to iCoach, have passed the Level 2 Coaches Course, travel with their players in the region, and are reliable in their work.”

Amine Ben Makhlof, Development Officer for West and Central Africa, agrees with Ancalmo. “You can change the life of a coach by giving him all the tools to be a good teacher and person,” believes Makhlof. “As an ITF Development Officer we are trying our best to make life easier for every single person in contact with tennis.”

At the South American 12-and-under championships held in Pereira, Colombia the Peruvian girls' team has just captured the title, and for Miguel Miranda, Development Officer for South America, the emotions are running strong.

“When Peru won last November it was one of the most rewarding times in my career as a DO,” admits Miranda. “Two of the three Peruvian girls started tennis with Play and Stay and STI, and continued in the JTI programmes. And they were from a socio-economic background that does not normally come to tennis. It was proof that a strong desire to initiate these programmes and a consistent effort at grass roots will bear fruit.”

While teaching technique, identifying talent and organising projects gets most of the attention, it is the improvement in the lives of people like the young Peruvian team, Eric Hagenimana, Andrew Maitorok and Sonam Yangchen that makes the job of a Development Officer most rewarding.

“Dan O'Connell and tennis has changed my life and many others for the better,” says Maitorok. “He has shown kids like me that dreams do come true even if you come from a poor background.” ●