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Of mushrooming coaches and plummeting standards

Sukhwant Basra / Saturday, October 22, 2005 2:48 IST

NEW DELHI: The number of synthetic courts has exploded, and so have the coaches. But the standard of our junior tennis has not.

Yes there are more Indians than ever amongst the international rankings and yes the number of kids flocking to chase their Leander and Sania dreams have mushroomed. However, when it comes to court-craft and ball-control, the growth pattern tapers off.

The number of ITF Level II coaches in the country have leap-frogged to an all-time high of 34. As far as the Level I is concerned, the slew of courses have resulted in so many of them that AITA officials very proudly say: "We've no precise numbers. Just too many to keep track."

The ITF coaching gospel seeks to disseminate the latest wisdom on the game and given the mushrooming of approved coaches, the word has reached far and wide in India. "The problem is in implementation," says Radhika Tulpule, a former top woman player and one of the new breed of good-player-turned-coach.

"While the courses teach a lot, I see limited impact on actual practice sessions. It is easier to mug the knowledge and pass the course but more difficult to pass it on to the kids."

Aditya Sachdeva, one of Delhi's best juniors a decade back, came back from the US two years ago after he saw the mushrooming interest in the game at home. Since then, he has managed to draw away the cream of Delhi's talent from the entrenched bastions like DLTA's coaching centre. "The difference is that I work out drills that mimic real-court situations instead of the dead ball feeds that many believe in. Other than that, there is enhanced emphasis on physical fitness."

Aditya has been partnered by Jaideep Bhatia, an MBA, who quit his job with Pricewater House to pursue coaching. These kind are the new face of Indian coaching which believes in meticulous work based on player specific drills and one-on-one interaction as against the herding that big centers offer.

The crucial difference emerges from the new lot being the coaches out of choice, unlike the many who fall into the profession by default. But their numbers stay few. For the record, Aditya has not bothered to do any of the ITF courses.

Sandeep Kirtane, who coaches in Mumbai, also does not believe in the ITF courses or in the abilities of the majority of the posers under the guise of being coaches. "Knowledge about the game is quite a rarity. The majority is into it for easy money. As such, kids suffer."

Even the second-rung coaches in Delhi charge as much as Rs 500 for an hour. The figure goes up to Rs 1000 with the credentials of the coach. The money involved is even more in cities like Mumbai.

Another crucial factor is the lack of an all-round game amongst the new lot is the preponderance of synthetic courts. "They do not allow the kind of ball maneuvering that natural surfaces like clay do. Power becomes dominant and everybody is just smacking the ball hard without the requisite control," adds Aditya.

Even as India offers its players the best of international equipment and a growing economy witnesses increased numbers take to the Tour, there is a genuine lack of good coaching across the country. Unsuspecting parents can seldom make out the difference between a con man and a genuine professional. Handing out of ITF degrees by the dozen has only complicated the whole issue.

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