

Character Building Through Tennis

By Dr. Jim Loehr



“You cannot dream yourself into a character; you must hammer and forge yourself one.”

- Henry David Thoreau

From my four decades of work in the tennis world, the opportunities for forging character through tennis are endless. I define character as who we really were when we were here. I have found it helpful to think of character in two ways. The first is moral character and the second is performance character. Moral character consists of acquired competencies that govern our treatment of others. Examples would be honesty, sportsmanship, integrity, respect, gratitude, and trustworthiness.

Performance character consists of acquired competencies that support high achievement. Examples would be mental focus, confidence, resilience, self-discipline, positivity, and mental toughness. Both moral and performance character assets are related but also uniquely different. Both are clearly necessary for an enduring life of real success.

When we think of someone being a “good” person, we are referring to his/her moral character and when thinking of someone as an extraordinary achiever, we are referencing his/her performance character.

This article will be divided into two parts, the first of which will provide examples of how coaches can build moral character development into their teaching and the second part will provide examples of how coaches can build performance character strengths into their training with players.



Core Insights:



Moral character strengths should receive a far higher priority than performance character strengths. Being a “good” person should always take precedence over being a high achiever. The ultimate goal is both.



Strengths of character, both moral and performance, are acquired in the same way muscle strengths are acquired- the investment of energy. Going to the gym and intentionally investing energy in your biceps through targeted weightlifting stimulates growth in your biceps. Intentionally investing energy to strengthen the muscles of sportsmanship, respect, positivity, or mental toughness will stimulate growth in the same way energy investment stimulates growth in physical muscles. Energy investment in character muscles can be achieved by writing about the strength, talking about it, visualizing about it, reading about it, and acting it out in the real world. The more energy one invests, the more growth will be stimulated.



Tennis can become a gift for a lifetime so long as the primary purpose for playing tennis is clearly established: to leverage the tennis experience to help players become stronger, more fully functioning persons of great character. Rankings, titles, college scholarships, etc. must be of secondary importance. Who one becomes as a person as a result of the tennis experience should always be more important than extrinsic markers of success. Real success in tennis should be defined in terms of acquired character strengths that better prepare players for life.



Building character skills through tennis can occur at all levels of competition, from beginners to world class.



All tennis coaches should work to become skillful coaches of character, both moral and performance.



The healthier the player is as a person in terms of character health, the greater the chances are for enduring success in both tennis and life.

Building Character



STEP 1: Let your players know that your highest priority as a coach is building strengths of character that will help them throughout life.

STEP 2: Make it clear to all your players that the Golden Rule reigns supreme with you - Treat others the way you want to be treated both on and off the court.

STEP 3: Create the following score card for your players that is to be placed in their racquet bags. The score card should be read before competitive play and thoughtfully and honestly reviewed following competition.

Moral Character Scorecard

- I do not cheat to win.
- I treat my opponents with respect whether I get respect from them or not.
- I do not throw temper tantrums on the court.
- I do not express my frustration with racquet abuse or obscenities.
- I call lines honestly to the best of my ability. When in doubt, I rule in favor of my opponent.
- I do not engage in trash talk.
- I acknowledge my opponent's exceptional shots.
- I always respectfully shake hands with my opponent and make eye contact at the completion of every match, even if my opponent dishonored himself/herself and the game itself.

Coaches can add any moral or performance strengths they might wish to on the scorecards of the players.

Performance Character Scorecard

- I give my best effort from the first point to the last.
- I always display a positive, hopeful attitude regardless of the score.
- When things don't go my way, I show great resilience.
- I bring my best here and now focus to every point.
- I will constantly look for opportunities during play to display self control and self-discipline.
- I will display positive, confident body language during play, no matter what.
- I will keep an open mind for opportunities to learn new things.
- I will always work to find positive ways to believe in myself, regardless of setbacks.
- I will be proud of the way my inner voice coached me during play.

Winning in tennis is clearly an important goal but leveraging the demands of tennis to help players win in the larger game of life is the true measure of tennis success. When parents and coaches get players to score high on the scorecards presented in this article, everyone wins, both short and long term.

Everyone wins when players grow assets of character because of the tennis experience!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

A wonderful resource for coaches in the character space is a newly released book entitled *The Tennis Character Playbook* by Clay Hamlin, Gene Miller, Jeanne Craft and Brendan Petersen.

Dr. Jim Loehr is a world-renown performance psychologist and C-suite leadership coach and author of 16 books. Dr. Loehr is a member of the PTR Foundation Board of Directors and prepared this story for the Foundation, which has a mission of making tennis available to everyone through focusing on supporting coach development and continuing education. Visit ptrtennis.org/ptr-foundation.

