



DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

By Alexandra Willis
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Sitting across from Ivan Lendl, drinking a cup of coffee in the Melbourne sunshine, Leon Smith admitted that he took a moment to give himself a tug.

A relative unknown from Glasgow, chewing the proverbial fat with one of tennis's greatest Grand Slam champions.

"It's a bit odd really," Smith said, chuckling. "I was thinking, 'I used to buy your t-shirts and pretend to be you at my local club when I was younger – how am I suddenly having coffee with you?'"

The rise of the softly-spoken Scot from club coach to his present position as head of men's and women's tennis at the Lawn Tennis Association, has been nothing short of meteoric.

"When I got the job, there were a lot of comments that it was a bizarre choice," Smith said frankly. "But I hope that slowly I'm proving that it can be done a different way."

There is a lot about Smith that is different. Firstly, unlike some of those who have taken home large paycheques as part of the ongoing quest to improve Britain's presence in world tennis, Smith does not have a glittering playing career to boast of.

"My parents moved across the road from a tennis club, so me and my brothers, who are also tennis coaches, we started playing, got the bug, and started to play every single day," Smith recalls. "We got pretty good nationally, but that's about it, no more than that."

But, what he lacks in personal experience at a professional level, he makes up for with a varied coaching background that has taken him from local clubs to one-on-one mentor, to performance supervisor and team captain.





In a Davis Cup press conference

"I started coaching at club level in and around Glasgow when I finished school," Smith explains. "The first three years was purely club stuff, then as I was still hitting the ball well enough, I got asked to do some hitting with the national squad."

Not only did Smith's foray into the Scottish national set-up mark the beginning of a very close relationship with the Murray family, Judy in particular, crucially, he maintained a variety in not only where he was coaching, but the level as well.

"I value that experience a lot," he says, "because it doesn't matter who you are working with, a very elite level player or an absolute beginner, you're still going to have to problem solve to get someone to hit the ball better. It also helps your communication, your administration skills, and it takes a lot of drive and energy and passion."

Moving on to become a national training coach for junior boys in Scotland and then in England, Smith was elevated to managing player development for men's tennis, then to head of men's tennis and Aegon GB Davis Cup team captain in 2009, and in 2011 added women's tennis to his responsibilities. Along that journey, he has settled upon two backbones to his coaching philosophy: Mentoring and teamwork.

"I've always had really good mentoring," he explains. "I'll go to Judy and ask for advice on a multitude of things, for example. I had four years working with Paul Annacone, that's priceless. Greg Rusedski, Louis Cayer, Nigel Sears, Steven Martens. I've been



With Andy Murray in 2006

very, very fortunate to be able to learn from these people."

And thus being open to learning is something Smith believes is crucial, from the very bottom to the very top.

"I don't really suffer huge egos very well, I think it stops the development of the team," Smith explains. "You need leaders who are confident and strong, but those leaders really need to listen."

"But there's a growing feeling that coaches want the other coaches' players to do well, and the players want the others players to do well. Although there's got to be a rivalry, they still want each other to win, and I don't know if that's been there before."

Part of the reason for that is that Smith has worked hard to instil a positive, proactive atmosphere.

"It needs to be fun," he believes. "You can get hard work done but enjoy it at the same time, and that's where the team element comes in. I remember taking Andy [Murray], Colin Fleming, Jamie Baker in the minibuses when they were tiny, they'd go out and work hard on the court, and then we'd drive back, playing all those games like 'I got on the bus at somewhere and got off at..', games we still use at Davis Cup and Fed Cup."

"There's a lot of drive to individualise programmes so young, and I think whilst you can get the key fundamentals and skills learned, you can do that in a more holistic group environment without sacrificing individual development."

Not that the Scot isn't aware of what it takes to succeed as an individual. He has worked almost as closely as you can get with the best individual talent these



With Judy Murray

Isles have produced since Fred Perry. It was Smith who took a 15 year-old Andy Murray out into the professional world as his hitting partner, an ear to bend, an administrator, and everything that goes hand in hand with being a one-on-one travelling coach.

"I helped Andy during a time of his career where you need to make it motivating, fun, travel a lot, hit a lot of balls, organise things, but it also allowed me to share a lot of experiences I would never have got before," Smith says. "I was finding myself going to work with Bob Brett, or at Sanchez Casal, or with Peter McNamara."

"You also see the level, commitment, which helps with assessing players coming through and making decisions on funding, selection, so I've got a good reference point."

That reference point is all the more important when keeping perspective on Britain's place on the world stage. Since taking over as head of men's tennis and Davis Cup captain, Smith has presided over five straight Davis Cup wins, a junior Grand Slam champion in Oliver Golding, six senior players in the main draw of a Grand Slam by merit for the first time in 20 years at this year's Australian Open, a World Group II Fed Cup play-off for the first time since 1993, a junior Davis Cup win, and many other notable fillips.

But he is the first to not get carried away in a state of patriotic euphoria.

"I think we should be a bit better than what we are," he says. "It's making sure that everyone's pulling in the same direction. I think things are going well, but not yet good enough." 🌀

