



Book Review: The Sweet Spot – Unleashing Potential in Tennis Coaches, Players & Parents

Book by: Keith Humphrey and Simon Wheatley

Reviewed by: Chris Chapman

What a read *The Sweet Spot* is; whether you read it cover to cover, select specific chapters, or search for a specific area in your 'time of need' there is something for everyone. Whilst the subheading 'Unleashing Potential in Tennis Coaches, Players and Parents' suggests it's a book for tennis people, and the content and examples are tennis based, the ideas, approaches and principles are adaptable to all sports.

Humphrey and Wheatley take you on a journey of player development beginning with the very premise, what is the 'Sweet spot'? The sweet spot is that moment when the triad of athlete, coach and parent are working together effectively to ensure that the player, and by relationship, the coach and parent are able to maximise their potential (see figure 1). The dynamic is around co-creation and support as they take you on a journey to explore the essential ingredients to a fulfilling life inside and outside of sport.

'The Magic of Three'

They begin with the simplicity of three in a relationship and also explore the dark side of a triad with the 'drama triangle'. The three are all based around the individual understanding, and fulfilling, of their roles and responsibilities within the support team.

A strength of the book is that it covers the principles of player/athlete development using an applied and practical approach. The authors use tips, sporting examples and visual display models to allow the reader to understand and make sense of the approaches.

The book is jam-packed with ideas and a review could never do them all justice. So I will focus on the three sections that stood out for me.



Figure 1: The core development team

Choosing a coach and choosing a parent/player

"Relationships are built on trust, and open, honest, communication is key...people will never thank you for leading them into a 'false sense of security'."

The authors introduce the continuum of challenge and support, and the importance of trust within this. This is equally important for the coach and parent as it is the player and coach. Based on the foundations of credibility, reliability and intimacy for the trio as they build a strong and connected relationship, the authors highlight no matter how powerful these three foundations are, they will crumble if the level of self-orientation is too great and one party feels that they are being exploited or manipulated for an individual's self-interest. Suggestions for parents and players when looking for a credible coach include:

- authority
- presence
- lasting impact.

In summary, a coach who has built and demonstrates a presence and delivers with clarity and conviction. This builds a feeling of impact in every interaction and a desire to make a positive difference in a developmentally appropriate way. The authors state we need to think long-term in our relationships and take the time to build and strengthen them. This can be achieved through engagement with parents and players and by creating credibility and presence as a coach.

Constructive alignment

This leads into the second section with a focus on constructive alignment. The authors share a model created by Muir et al (2011) that enables the coach, player and parent to understand how each session and intervention is aligned to the next. This creates a sweet spot of development. Using the model, the team can discuss their aligned thinking within their journey and see the connections between long, medium and short-term planning within the learning activities. Used as a model for planning and reflections, all three parties can observe and discuss the nested interactions of session objectives, coach behaviours, player engagement and practice structure against the longer-term outcomes and goals.

Feeling...the role of emotion

One of the key messages in chapter four is the role of emotions. The authors explore beyond the surface and ask the reader to consider how to manage and transform emotions rather than just control them. The chapter highlights that all feelings have a purpose and, collectively, people need to devise strategies to harness their usefulness. How people act and react to negative emotions can have a significant impact. The lens people look through as a coach, parent and player influences the impact these have. A negative emotion can have a positive outcome; feeling distressed during a game, losing temper and blaming the match officials can be 'spun' into a positive if the emotions are acknowledged, accepted and then used to build a plan to build resilience when losing.

The concept of shift through thinking, feeling and behaving is introduced as an extremely powerful approach; one that all are able to contribute towards. Noticing, building and acknowledging small shifts that collectively accumulate to make real sustainable change happen. Every small shift matters and moves us closer to an ideal performance state. The book includes ideas on how to reimagine yourself and a situation, create positive beliefs and manage internal reactions to challenge to minimise performance disruption. These ideas are subtly introduced through examples and tips to enable you to reframe the conversation and make the change.

The authors suggest: *"The most important conversations you have should be the ones with yourself."*

Whether a coach, curious parent or interested player, the book challenges your thinking and approach, and encourages you to consider the dynamic between the triad to ensure you are hitting the sweet spot.

Communication, understanding and connection are in every page of the book. When you're in the sweet spot you are working in harmony to create a supportive network for all. It doesn't prevent the rocky road, but it does provide fellow passengers to support you for the journey.

This is destined to be a well-worn and used book on my shelf.

"Losing is not my enemy, fear of losing is my enemy."

Rafael Nadal