



The New Ball Kids

I fondly recall training and coordinating the ball kids for two ATP Paine Webber Super Series tournaments at the Jimmy Connors Tennis Center back in Jimmy's day in Southwest Florida.

They had to try out, with the average age of both boys and girls – the politically correct tournament director insisted that we refer to them as “ballpersons” – being approximately 14. They dreamed of the chance of being on court right next to their idols. Great kids all, aspiring players, and hilariously mischievous despite my apparently transparent attempt at a John Wayne leadership style, or maybe because of it.

They were hard-working, dedicated to serving the players correctly, on-time, well behaved and generally responsible. And the free uniforms and shoes didn't hurt – a badge of honor and achievement.

But...

There were other volunteers, mostly local retirees handling the usher duties in the stadium. Their motivations were very different. They wanted the accompanying free ticket along with the uniform shirt, shoes, cap or visor, so they could take in the matches when not on duty. But, I soon learned, never underestimate the importance of a free lunch with a retired person who's entitled to it.

The kids co-mingled with them in the volunteer food tent for lunch and dinner. The kids quickly figured out the

delivery times and orchestrated covert tactics to relieve the tent, and the ushers, of far more than their fair share of the desserts. That's when the trouble started.

They were “stealing” the desserts before the ushers could get back to the tent from their assignments, according to a number of the very distressed adults. I told them I didn't know anything about it. “Are you sure?” I asked them. They angrily accused me of covering up for “my kids.” And I happily was. Desserts – really?

But that was trivial to the tournament brass – more desserts would be provided and we got our own tent. However, stuffing tennis balls into some of the public toilets during one night session was an entirely different matter. The finger was pointing straight at them. This time I took the heat, and, in turn, so did they, although the culprits were, amusingly, too scared to fess up, my John Wayne act having gained credibility.

It never came up again. That's when we really became a team. A solidly functioning unit to the satisfaction of all concerned, especially the players themselves. I could see some of the older kids, cognizant of the big picture, now taking leadership roles voluntarily.

Early on in training, I had the kids throwing the ball back and forth, as was the custom on US soil. They were good tennis players. They were American. They were accustomed to throwing and catching. A total no-brainer for me. That is until a USTA official ball-kid trainer and entourage was brought in to evaluate our progress as the event loomed.

“No, no, no, they have to roll the ball back and forth,” the consulting Blue Blazers informed me. What? I explained that these are not eye-foot kids from futbol nations who can't catch or throw. These kids grew up polishing their hand-eye skills from the time they were tots. They could do it; they were doing it, and doing it well.

But it was a losing battle. I was outranked and not amused. Neither were the kids who, you could see it in their eyes, felt demeaned and underestimated. One of the new leaders came to me and said passionately, “Coach, we don't need to *roll* the ball.”

Rolling had started becoming the ever-increasing norm. We might have been some of the last of the throwers at that time who didn't get to throw.

Twenty-eight years later, ball kids are still a welcome necessity on the court, but ball-kid organization and training has taken on new dimensions, led by, who else, the predictably romantic French.

You will not see 250 ball kids, arm and arm, singing and chanting their way down a wide walkway prior to the start of the early matches anywhere but in Paris. “The positive vibe it transmits to the people, a welcome in the stadium, [creates] a good feeling in the morning,” according to their coordinator, David Portier.

Classic old school charm building *esprit de corps*.

It all began more than 40 years ago at Roland Garros, when a Tunisian-born tennis pro, Ridha Bensalha, devised a program to organize and train ball kids uniformly – all for





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one, one for all. Although it was successful, Portier, ironically, replaced him in 2010 when Bensalha’s long-standing old school manner – not so charming – was judged too harsh despite all his success.

Conditioning and physical balance became the hallmark of the French training, in which only 250 kids would be chosen among 3,000 applicants each year.

They begin each day by stretching, followed by running, hopping, skipping sideways, practicing rolling the ball and finishing with five minutes of meditation while lying prone en masse, all aimed at systematically preparing them for the challenges of the day ahead.

Although Portier plays down their collective confidence evident in their post-meditative singing – “We are the ball kids; we are the best in the world.” – many would judge they are second to none.

Not so fast.

Enter our own local ball-kid star, 40-year-old Terry Yonker. A solid tennis player in his own right, he was sitting in the nose bleed section of the Sony Ericson Miami event a few years ago and decided it would be far better to be down on the court with the players up close and personal. Over five consecutive weekends the following year, he got through the extensive tryout period that had a very strict “militant,” as he put it, flavor. He counterintuitively knew how to properly roll balls, and how to, in a somewhat sarcastic tone, “field ground balls.”

With his Sony experience, he recently assisted officials with the ball kids at the annual Sarasota Open, a minor league tournament held every April. Yonker told me that there was a startling contrast to the median age of the ball kids in Miami – approximately 16 – and the 60-something Sarasota club member ball “kids.”

In one match he was working, the time between points was

really slow-rolling...confused with bocci ball? He suggested to the umpire, a paid regular tour umpire, “I think we’d better start trying to throw the ball or we’re going to be here all day with this group.” The ump concurred.

Yes! Throwing however and whenever we can get it.

Then he thankfully reminded me that the US Open, which he also hopes to work someday, does indeed utilize good old American standard of throwing and catching with mostly late teen crews.

So, all is not lost after all! Although I did notice that the USTA did note “ballperson” information on the current website.

Then, right after Wimbledon’s completion, and already looking forward to the real ball-kid deal going on right now at Flushing Meadows, it happened. I tuned into the Mercedes Cup on the Tennis Channel. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. It was rolling as usual, but “fielding ground balls” was clearly verboten in Stuttgart. Each ball kid, except those working at the net, were equipped with fish nets that were approximately 12 inches in diameter mounted on a 2-foot handle to catch the rolling balls.

Ground control to Stuttgart. Come in, please! 📡



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