

My Experience Teaching Alexander Technique at Princeton

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This fall I had the good fortune of teaching the Alexander Technique to the Princeton University Women's tennis team. Assisted by a private grant, with the help of ATI, and a lot of persistence, a long-time dream of mine came true. The Princeton tennis team has traditionally been one of the strongest contenders in the Eastern Conference, and this year's team has a lot of depth and talent. Because of the high calibre of players on the team, I approached this opportunity with a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement.

My background in Alexander Technique is as follows: I completed a three-year teacher-training course at the Alexander Technique Center at Cambridge with Tommy Thompson in 1992 and spent an additional year training in Israel at several schools in Tel Aviv. I have had a private AT practice for the past ten years and more recently have begun to specialize in working with tennis players. This is because I played five years of professional tennis after college and because I have taught tennis for the past 20 years. Also, I love the game of tennis.

I found my experience working with the Princeton team very gratifying. I was able to learn from the students at least as much as I taught them. Their enthusiasm for the game and for life is infectious and whenever I found myself getting too serious or felt what I was doing was overly important I would see a big smile or hear a giggle or laugh and remind myself to relax, lighten up, and have fun. In retrospect, this openness to life and the ability to have a good time were what I needed to learn from the experience.

The prospect of working with the team initially presented some concerns for me. First, I wondered how the women would receive the work. Would they feel okay about being touched by an older man that they did not know, using a technique with which they were completely unfamiliar? Would they have the patience needed to experience the lesson? Would they even be interested in what the technique had to offer them and would they be willing to apply the principles on- and off-court?

Curiously, my concerns were largely unfounded. First, because they were told that I had been a pro tennis player and am a tennis coach, this gave me credibility with the team members. Secondly, because I explained that the work might reduce their effort level and could prevent and alleviate some of their injuries, many became interested. Thirdly and most importantly, I received a tremendous amount of support from the head women's tennis coach, Louise Gengler. Louise was well aware of the numerous AT and tennis lessons I had given to her mother, Jeanne, for many years. She also knew that her mother's tennis game improved significantly with my input. Jeanne's strokes smoothed out, tension disappeared from her face and body, and she learned to play with an ease and economy of motion. She also became a top senior player in the US. Because of my positive experience with her mother and because she had experienced benefit when receiving some hands-on work from me, Louise was a believer and committed herself to supporting me and my work with the team.

The team is composed of 13 players. Because practices were only two and a half hours long, five days a week, I wanted to work with each player several times a week. I did not have the time to give a typical 30- to 60-minute lesson. Instead, I resorted to giving short 10- to 15-minute "turns" to each woman, working with each individually two to three times a week. A short turn, as opposed to a longer lesson, was preferred by players as it allowed them a longer on-court playing time. The tennis court itself became my classroom and it was here that I worked with the players. I often would take a chair and place it on the side of the court to do some traditional chair work. Time permitting, I might follow this with a few minutes of "shadow stroking," which is stroking with a

Teaching AT at Princeton

continued from page 16

racket without hitting a ball. As the player would go through the stroke I would put hands-on and at the same time offer verbal suggestions. I might also work with their lateral movement, monkey position (called “ready position” in tennis), or have them do a split-step (a hopping move performed by players before each stroke). Some of the time I spent watching and helping them with their use while they were hitting live balls. Every couple of weeks I tried to fit in a table turn off-court to improve their ability to inhibit and to undo.

At the semester's completion I gave out a questionnaire with a few brief questions. Overall the responses were very positive. In response to a question about how they benefited from the work, players reported improved relaxation, better posture, more power, greater body expansion, feeling more efficient, more ball control, smoother and more fluid strokes, and more pleasure and enjoyment. In answering a question about off-court benefits, players reported improved posture, less tension, more awareness of how they carried themselves, and greater ease. Suggestions to improve their experience included more lessons, more verbal suggestions and explanations, and more on-court work with a live ball.

Because of the quality of my experience working with the team, I am continuing my work with the team members in the spring semester and hope that the work will continue to benefit them on- and off-court. ☺

Gary encourages any other teachers who have worked with tennis players or athletes to contact him to share their experiences, teaching ideas, or suggestions. He can be reached by email at garyadelman@earthlink.net or phone at (609) 430-4710.

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless.
Neither from nor towards. At the still point, there the dance is.
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity.
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards.
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

T.S. Eliot, from “Burnt Norton,” (*Four Quartets*)

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continued from page 20

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