

USPTA | Master Professional Corner



Filling the Shoes of Retiring Tennis Directors

Will Hoag, USPTA Master Professional and Former National President

What a great time to be in the tennis-teaching business. I reason that many Baby Boomers like myself will soon be retiring, and significant positions will become available to qualified applicants. However, the keyword is qualified.

Competent candidates have been a concern of mine for quite some time but that does not need to be if today's tennis directors and the USPTA address it head-on. We need to prepare the next wave of potential directors with the skills necessary to succeed.

When I landed my director's job, I was in the right place at the right time. Looking back, I now see that I was not qualified to take this position, but the demands in the 1970s were nothing like those of today. I was fortunate to have had one year's experience at my facility, so I knew the members, their needs, and what was expected of the director from the owners and management. To this day, I give credit and will always be grateful to the USPTA and the Florida Division professionals who helped me learn this business. I was also blessed with having Spike Gurney as my mentor. Without him and numerous USPTA pros, I would never have succeeded.

So, what can we do to help the incoming group of directors? Three groups will make an impact: management, current directors, and the USPTA. Let us begin with management. Those in charge of a facility need to offer a respectable salary and benefits to their tennis-teaching staffs. We know that most tennis-teaching professionals, except for directors, make

their living on the court. While this is an important segment of a tennis-teaching pro's learning experience, it takes away from studying other critical components of the profession that occur off the court. By providing a fair salary with benefits — pressure is taken off the pro to make a living solely from giving instruction. It helps this person become a more valuable employee of the facility. The more this individual knows about operations, the better the club will run daily. The best tennis-related facilities today are led by a team. To act as a well-oiled machine, everyone must understand the operation and needs of the club.

The second group who can help mold skilled directors are those that currently hold director positions. It is our responsibility to assist our staff in succeeding in this wonderful profession. Directors, think back to your early days in

the industry and what helped you move up the chain of command. Mentoring and coaching your staff takes a lot of time and energy, but that's what must be done to help those who aspire to become a director. Each week, current directors should spend time with their staff to instill better understanding of how procedures work daily, monthly, and yearly. Some of the off-court competencies that should be addressed include running events, court maintenance, budgeting, managing staff, working with other departments, programming, pro shop operations, communication and member relations, and customer service.

Tennis is much different and more demanding today than it was when I became a director. Nowadays, it is a business. I was fortunate to serve on the Executive Committee of the USPTA. I



fondly remember my friend, Jim Davis, president of the Midwest Division and part-owner of a tennis club in Toledo, Ohio, hammering home the fact that if we did not look at tennis as a business, we could see our jobs and facilities disappear.

I recall the May 1994 cover article of *Sports Illustrated*, in which the headline read, "Is Tennis Dying?" The sport took a significant drop in the 90s due to tennis-teaching professionals being more focused on their lesson books rather than growing the membership at their facilities. Many clubs closed because of this extensive oversight. Jim Davis changed my outlook and made me a better director because of his sage wisdom.

Last but not least, the USPTA needs to be engaged in bettering future candidates, both nationally and divisionally. The association needs to work more closely with the clubs that do hiring and encourage them to provide more competitive salaries and benefits to their staff's tennis-teaching pros. Providing more education for those professionals who wish to advance in their careers is essential. There should be different "tracks" at national and divisional conventions – and online offerings that provide content targeted to future tennis directors. Each division has great tennis directors – and so, they need to be called upon to speak, write, and mentor those who plan to make tennis their career. One of our members, Mark McMahon, offers a course that deals with specific management competencies.

We are so fortunate to be part of this great sport and business. Looking back, I am thrilled with my decision to become a tennis-teaching professional. I have no regrets. But the last thing that I want to see is tennis departments being managed by another department within the club because of a lack of proficiency or expertise. During my first few years on the USPTA National Executive Committee, I remember Joe Thompson, USPTA National Past President, and CEO Tim Heckler, emphasizing the importance of getting our professionals off the court so they could learn how to run our businesses better. They were right then – and even more so now. Tennis directors, it's your serve! ✨

