



Ignoring Tennis's Biggest Contributors

When will tennis coaches be given their due by the International Tennis Hall of Fame?

BY CHRIS ODDO

Earlier this year, much was written about the fact that legendary coach, innovator, and founder of one of the world's most renowned tennis academies, Nick Bollettieri, was passed over by voters for inclusion in the International Tennis Hall of Fame's class of 2010. When the news broke, tennis journalists clamored—Pete Bodo of Tennis.com, Tom Perotta of ESPN, James Larossa of Tennis Channel, to name a few—that the leather-skinned, gravelly-voiced Floridian's exclusion was "ludicrous," according to Perotta.

"Ludicrous" may be harsh, but harsh words may be the most effective method of ensuring that proper attention is given to a very serious matter. Is a Hall of Fame that denies Bollettieri—a man whose name has been synonymous with building tennis champions for the better part of three decades—really living up to its name?

Whether ludicrous or not, the International Tennis Hall of Fame has never given coaches a proper place in the Hall. It's unjust, but at least the International Tennis Hall of Fame's consistency proves that Bollettieri's snub isn't a personal affront designed to keep just him away from their neatly manicured grounds and the coquettish Victorian architecture of the Newport Casino. Conspiracy theorists are barking up the wrong tree here.

At the International Tennis Hall of Fame, Bollettieri is as welcome—or apparently, not as welcome—as any other wildly successful and truly game-changing tennis coach. For instance, he's as welcome as the great Dennis Van der Meer, who formerly coached Billie Jean King and Margaret Court and has literally taught

thousands (and by extension, hundreds of thousands) how to play tennis. He's as welcome as Robert Lansdorp, who coached Pete Sampras, Lindsay Davenport, and Tracy Austin. In other words, he'll be considered—but ultimately denied entrance.

Look at the 35 members who hold the title of "contributor" in the Hall of Fame—there is only one true coach among the group. The venerable Dr. Robert Johnson, coach and mentor to Arthur Ashe, Althea Gibson, and so many others during a challenging period for African-American tennis players, was the first and only coach to gain admittance to the Hall, in 2009.

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Nine of the 35 contributors were writers. Others were presidents of the USTA or its British or French equivalents; Russ Adams was a photographer; Gustav was the King of Sweden; Ted Tinling was best known as a tennis couturier, making dresses for players such as King, Martina Navratilova and Maria Bueno. Very interesting people, all of them, and they've all done their part to color the sport and increase its profile across the globe. But does the inclusion of this eclectic mix of

deserving contributors really have to come at the expense of our sport's greatest coaches?

It took a half-century for the Hall to finally admit a coach as one of its esteemed contributors. After Bollettieri's denial this year, we are forced to wonder, how long will it take for it to happen again?

Coaches are the engine that powers tennis. Bollettieri, Van der Meer, Lansdorp, Harold Solomon, and many others give every ounce of their life force to growing the character of the game and ensuring its evolution. Tennis is the dynamic extreme sport that it is today because of them, and it's time that the International Tennis Hall of Fame recognizes them for what they are—legends of the sport.

Let's hope that in July 2011, when the Hall of Fame inducts yet another fine class of deserving men and women, Bollettieri, or Van der Meer, or another coach, is among them. Not so much for Nick's or Dennis's sake, but for all those coaches who have gone before, and all those who are certain to come after.

Let's open up those doors wide, and show the coaches the love and respect they deserve. ▀



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