

*This article was authored by Mark McMahon, President of the tennis consulting practice, McMahon & Associates and was published in the CMAA "At Your Service" newsletter in February, 2009*

***This is the first in a series of tennis department-focused articles written by award-winning tennis consultant Mark McMahon which will be published in At Your Service during 2009.***

## Hiring a Tennis Pro

One task that is almost certain to raise the stress level for a club manager is hiring a new tennis pro. Whether it was your decision to replace a pro, or the pro left on his or her own, just thinking about all you need to do to find the right person can be overwhelming.

The good news is there have never been more ways to get the word out that you need a new pro. And the bad news? Well, there have never been more ways to get the word out that you need a new pro! With all those online job boards available, you're probably thinking, "How will I sort through all of these resumes?"

The two major teaching pro associations, the Professional Tennis Registry ([www.ptrtennis.org](http://www.ptrtennis.org)) and the U.S. Professional Tennis Association ([www.uspta.com](http://www.uspta.com)), have made practical and relevant enhancements to their job-posting sites in recent years, driven in part, I suspect, by the emergence of many for-profit job sites. The USPTA and PTR provide managers with job-listing services at no cost and reach a broad range of pros searching for new positions. But those sites, as well as the many for-profit sites, do not offer advice or assistance with the search process as is the case with PGA's *CareerLinks*; they only post job listings.

So, as a manager, how can you identify a pool of viable candidates who possess the relevant skills, applicable experience and are at an appropriate career phase for your open position?

Most of the candidates considered for a director of tennis or head professional position today originally entered the profession soon after completing school, or maybe after competing on the pro circuit. Many likely hold a degree in something other than being the department head of tennis at a private club. They probably started as an assistant or associate pro and advanced up the ladder. Almost all will have played tennis, and may continue to play, at a very high level. Needless to say, all will profess to be friendly, enthusiastic and energetic!

Choosing the right candidate is like putting together a great dessert. The executive chef has a list of the ingredients, so you'd think everything should just fall into place. But experienced chefs know the ingredients represent only the start of the process. It's the nuances—such as how fresh the ingredients are, mixing them properly, cooking it at the correct temperature and for the right time, what it is served with and the presentation—that really gets people talking positively.

And so it is with almost any area of specialty. Knowing where to list the open position; having a solid understanding of the education, experience and certification level the new pro should have; and having a high number of experienced candidates represent only the fundamentals around a great process for hiring a new director of tennis. Like an executive chef, you need to be able to sort through the extras. And that's where sometimes it might make good sense for a manager to seek out help with the search process.

## RELEVANT SKILLS

For a tennis director or head pro, one benchmark you should consider as a “first cut” for candidates is their professional certification. Start by considering candidates who hold the highest level of certification from either the USPTA or PTR.

Beyond that, the skill set required of a new pro will and *should* differ from club to club, depending on the many unique needs of your tennis program as it is *today*. Those needs are likely *not* the same as when the club hired the previous tennis pro.

A club manager looking to hire a tennis director needs to consider the different player types, player levels and playing patterns of the club membership. For this reason, one of the most critical aspects of the selection process is to match the expectations of your tennis players with the appropriate skills and experience of your candidates.

## APPLICABLE EXPERIENCE

Every applicant for tennis director will say they have proven teaching skills, creative programming expertise and exemplary member service. These all are important, but as a manager, you need to dive deeper.

- What level of player and in what type of environment has your favorite candidate demonstrated “proven teaching skills”?
- What play opportunities (competitive, social, etc.) did each candidate offer at their previous clubs, and how did players respond?
- For what player type(s) did each candidate develop “creative programming”?
- From what geographic or socio-economic perspective was member service considered “exemplary” at each of the candidates’ clubs?

For instance, say your tennis committee determines that, since you’re hiring a new pro, the club needs “a much better junior program.” You include this as part of the criteria in your job posting. Your tennis chairman, meanwhile, is the father of a highly ranked junior in the state and recommends a pro his son has worked with. You receive a resume from this pro and see that in his 20 years of experience, he’s had short stints at several exclusive clubs and has spent the last five years at a club with a large pool of top state- and section-ranked juniors.

Is he your new pro? Well, maybe, maybe not. For your club, you need to consider the length and quality of his service at his previous jobs. He may be a genius with juniors, but what about his work with adult players? What about his relationships with club superiors? And just what is he looking for at this phase of his career? Does that fit in with what you need?

## APPROPRIATE CAREER PHASE

In my 25-year career as a tennis director in the private club industry, I was employed at five different clubs. My tenure at each, in order, was 1 year, 2 years, 8 years, 3 years and 12 years. I considered each move a “step up” in responsibility and, except for my last move, financially. But my last move had nothing to do with compensation and everything to do with work/life balance and member demographics.

As you consider your pool of candidates and the skills you desire, think about how long your choice will likely stay with you. As private clubs begin to look at a generation of 30- and 40-somethings as the next tennis directors, consider how your open position (including

responsibility, status and compensation) matches with the career phase of the candidate pool. Your search may not result in hiring the pro with the most experience, but instead someone who, in his or her career, is "ready" for exactly the type of position you're offering.

## PERSONALITY

How, as a club manager, can you measure the ambiguous criteria of personality? Tennis pros are experts at "talking the talk" and it is a good bet that managers will be confronted with a choice of "friendly, friendly and friendly" when comparing the personalities of candidates. The better question for a manager to ask is, "Can this candidate walk the walk"? How can a manager really *know*?

The first thing I always did when hiring was to try and talk with people who had *played tennis* with the candidate. Speaking with a former tournament colleague, school teammate or club member can say much about how your candidate will respond to pressure, maintain perspective and in general "get along" with co-workers and members.

The second consideration, and maybe the most important reading you can get regarding personality, is what I call the "sitting on the porch" test. Would your candidate be comfortable sitting on the porch (or in a formal dining room, if appropriate) with you, your tennis chairperson or the captain of the club's A-level women's team? The issues that normally trip up even the best tennis pros often have more to do with "sitting on the porch" than "sitting courtside."



**With almost 30 years of success in private clubs and the international tennis industry, Mark McMahon runs *McMahon Consulting*. Mark personally manages Director of Tennis retained-search assignments for clubs. His company provides a broad range of operational consulting services including targeted training and professional development programs for Managers, Department Heads and front-line staff. McMahon's broad experience includes directing the tennis operations at Boca West Country Club in Florida and Dunwoody Country Club in Atlanta; being a founding faculty member of the CMAA Sports Management Education Program; delivering workshops and seminars worldwide, including the CMAA World Conference; Volunteer Board Member and Division President for the USPTA; International Pro of the Year (2000) and recipient of the USTA Tennis Facility of the Year – Private Club Category (2003). He recently completed a three-year assignment with the U.S. Tennis Association where he managed a new industry growth initiative that was driven by introducing 90 tennis consultants (Tennis Service Representatives) to clubs, tennis facilities and parks across the country. Mark may be reached at [m.mcmahon@earthlink.net](mailto:m.mcmahon@earthlink.net) or (404) 271-3088.**