

## **The Journey to High Performance Wheelchair Tennis with Jason Harnett**

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Hi, I'm David Ramos, senior manager of coaching education and performance analytics, and you're listening to compete like a champion.

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J: Welcome to Compete Like a Champion. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, a mental skill specialist, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA Player Development. Today we've got a very special guest on the podcast, Jason Harnett. Welcome to the podcast.

[\(00:24\):](#)

JH: Thanks guys for having me.

[\(00:24\):](#)

L: Jason.

[\(00:25\):](#)

JH: I appreciate you guys having me on.

[\(00:26\):](#)

L: I'm looking forward to this conversation.

[\(00:28\):](#)

JH: I know you've been waiting for this, Larry.

[\(00:29\):](#)

L: All my life here. We have some intense conversations.

[\(00:34\):](#)

JH: We have. We've had a few.

[\(00:35\):](#)

L: A few, yeah.

[\(00:36\):](#)

J: So Jason, you are, if you didn't know already, the national manager and head coach of team USA wheelchair.

[\(00:41\):](#)

JH: I did not know that, but I know it now.

[\(00:44\):](#)

J: It just occurred to me. I forgot to explain what your role was.

(00:47):

L: You're not supposed to announce that on the podcast. Now he's going to act all upity.

(00:52):

J: Yeah. All right, so Jason, welcome. Thank you for joining us. Really appreciate you taking the time. I think before we get going here, it'd be great to give the listeners a background into how you've come to be in the position you are now.

(01:04):

JH: It could take a little while, but yeah, I've been around a little while.

(01:07):

L: A long time!

(01:07):

JH: I know. So I was born in 1972, no I'm kidding, I won't go back that far. You know, it's an interesting journey and I've told this story before, but it's, you know, I first saw wheelchair tennis when I was 12 back in Southern California, grew up in orange County, California. And when I was 12 years old, 12 to 15, 16 we used to have the US open for wheelchair tennis in our club, the Racquet club of Irvine. And every year 200 to 300 people would come through in wheelchairs. And I just remember visually, it was not shocking, but it was just an unusual... I didn't know anybody in wheelchairs at that point. And then here are 200 to 300 coming to our club. And that was really the first introduction, I guess as a kid. And we always heard about Brad Parks, the founder of the sport. And Randy Snow, the first great US champion and it's all you really heard about at that time. And you know, you go on in life and you can play high school tennis, college tennis, come back to Southern California and start coaching. And I remember I was reintroduced to wheelchair tennis through the Vic Braden tennis college. My first real job as a coach and Vic had asked me to help a couple of local guys put some ball machines out and get started. And I told them, I said, yeah, I remember seeing this as a kid and it'd be my honor to get, you know, get back on court with these guys. So that's where I was really re-introduced. And then I moved to a town next door and work with a pro, [inaudible] and he's a fantastic guy and really was my mentor, I would say, you know, as a young coach, a very important guy in my life still. And he said, why don't we start a wheelchair tennis clinic? And he couldn't believe that I knew something about that. So how do you know anything about wheelchair tennis? And I told him the story. And so from there, you know, that was a mid-90s, 95-96. In 1998 the USTA came on board as a national governing body for wheelchair tennis handed off by Brad and Wendy Parks, founders of the sport, the national foundation for wheelchair tennis. And it just had grown internationally to the point where I think they were a little overwhelmed, I would say administratively. And so then, you know the NGB, that's us. We're really proud of that, that we came on board. First NGB in the world to do that. And that's where I was hired on as a coach in '98. So '98 to 2016 I'm a national coach specifically for wheelchair tennis, head coach at a club in California in Mission Viejo and then really 2016, our former national manager and head coach for team USA stepped down when the move to Orlando was going to have to happen here with the campus. That was a mandatory move. And Dan's a wonderful guy, Dan James and his wife had just a great position, I think with Amazon up in Seattle. Then he's decided to step down and stay in Seattle. And so that was the opportunity for me that was presented here. They, you know, someone had reached out, it

was actually Jo Wallen and Jeff Waters on the community tennis side had called me and said if I was interested in the position. And I think at that point, you know, for all of you guys out there who have been teaching pros for decades, like I have been, you know, you saw it as an opportunity to maybe, not say use your brain, but you know, be creative, getting more of a business sense, corporate sense. I think it was, that was enticing, and getting off the court was a big deal. You know, physically you're starting to break down a little bit. You're putting 40 hours a week on court and it just, it seemed like the right time. I had young kids and my wife was all for it, you know, get a break from Southern California and do something new. And so I took the position end of 2016.

(04:03):

J: That's a great trajectory, Jason. And you know, we love having you, you know, as a colleague and now wheelchair tennis is fully integrated into Player Development.

(04:12):

JH: Huge moment.

(04:13):

J: So your role, I mean, you're one of the hardest workers out there. I mean, you're on court, you're in the office, you're working on growing the game, you're working on camps and different training opportunities. I mean, you know, whereas you know, we're Player ID development, then you've got the kind of transitional pros and you've got the actual pros and then you got the mental skills specialist. So you do a lot of this, you're a one-man department. So can you tell us a little bit about the mission of your department now as now coming on from 2016 and what your, maybe what your goals and aims are?

(04:41):

JH: Yeah, it's a huge task. It's a huge lift. You know, and I tell people, and it's hard I think for people to understand who haven't been on my side of the fence, you know where I've worked both sides, right? You've worked with able body collegiate athletes and young pros and I've also worked with obviously grassroots and collegiate in a wheelchair tennis players and professionals and Paralympians for many years. And I think, you know, coming in here, I knew we needed to, I'm not going to say gut the place, but we needed to do a hard audit on what we had done and what needed to continue to grow and do. And you realized our foundation was so weak in so many ways. And some of it is body count, we just don't have the coaching staff here. It's me and me alone on the high performance side. Fortunate to have wonderful, wonderful independent contracted coaches Paul Walker and John Rideburg and John Devors, long time. Both players and coaches are just fantastic guys. And together, and I've always said this, I don't work in a silo at all. I mean how fortunate am I to be around you guys every day. I mean, honestly. Either bounce ideas, look at how you work and so forth. And I see the foundation here in player development and I see the template that's in front of me. It's not a different template that maybe I had coming in, but it's affirmation that I knew that I'm on the right track. And again, having great coaches around me to bounce ideas off of makes it that much easier. But it's a, it's a heavy lift because there's a real history behind me. You know, I came into this sport probably halfway through, you know, the sport came into play in 1978 so here I come in the mid '90s, I'm about halfway through and now 44 years later, you know, here we are. How could I have ever known I'd be in this position to make, you know, trying to do so much good.

[\(06:09\)](#):

L: Yeah, I think that's incredible, Jason, and I want to go back to your experience of coaching players, right, any player in high performance, right? And in the club. And then you start working with wheelchair players. How was that adjustment for you? Cause I know we've talked about the need to get more coaches coaching wheelchair players. What was that adjustment like for you? Was it a big one, was it not? And what can you say to coaches who are considering that or would consider that but maybe it feels like a big change for them?

[\(06:36\)](#):

JH: Yeah, I think that initial step in is, you know, I asked that question, you know, why is there hesitation with coaches getting involved? And it can be a variant of reasons why that is. And what I've kind of tried to narrow it down to, I know guys are busy, I know people, you know, full schedules and I'm like well where can I fit this into my schedule? And it can be circumstances, but I think that, you know, it's tough at the beginning is really, do you know anything about disability that can be really intimidating. And then of course the sport chair itself is really intimidating cause it looks cool but then you're getting closer to it and it's complicated. And you see that it's set up specifically for the person, not only their height, weight, you know, length, all that, but also their disability. So there's stuff you have to kinda, you know, maybe investigate a little bit before you jump in. And I think the biggest part that helped me at the beginning was how willing the players are to help you. You know, as a coach, it's almost like a role reversal. I don't think on the able bodied side, I could ever say a player mentored me. I can't say that one time. I mean we always had more experience. We were older, we had what they wanted. I think the roles are definitely reversed here. Do they have what I need and that's information about them, their disability, what they can and cannot do. And then I apply, you know, my coaching knowledge and creativity and, you know, the ability to make adaptations for that individual person. And a mistake a lot of coaches make is they assume if you're in a wheelchair, everyone's the same, you know, everybody's disability's the same. Well he rolls in a chair, I guess he's going to have the same complications as Joe right here in the chair. And it can be very different situations. And so and that is a huge challenge and that scares some coaches away. They're just like, that is, I would love to do it, but it's super complicated and I think it might be more than I can handle or have time for. And you know, going back to what you just said, Larry, you mean getting coaches has been a huge challenge for us for 25 years.

[\(08:20\)](#):

L: Jason, we've also talked about maybe people being uncomfortable with addressing that the athlete is in the chair, right, and the disability. How can you help the listeners maybe you know, ways the language that you would use, ways you would address it? Because sometimes people feel uncomfortable. I don't, should I talk about the fact they're in a chair? Should I talk about, you know, the, the disability, how should I address it? You know, any advice on that?

[\(08:44\)](#):

J: You know, it's going to be different for everybody's comfort level. I mean, I think, you know, if someone has a disability, I would imagine they don't want the first thing coming out of your mouth to be, you know, what happened and, you know, how'd this happen? Why are you in a chair? That will come organically through conversation. It will come up. There's no doubt about it. They know it will and it's okay. And I think, I don't know anybody who's been belligerent about, I don't want to talk about it or you know, it always comes up and it's okay. And I think, you know, being compassionate and trying to understand, you know, what, what that might've been like for that person is the way to approach it.

And, and in daily life, if you're coming across folks in chairs or anybody with a disability, you treat them like anybody else. Hold the door for them, they'll hold the door for you. If they look like they're struggling, help them just like you'd help anybody else. I don't think they expect, you know, society to bend over backwards for them. I don't think that's an expectation. I think it's gone the other way where people, you know, tend to avoid. And so they learn how to become amazingly independent and self sufficient. And you know, sometimes when we jump in to help, if it looks like we think they need help, we end up disrupting a complete system that they have in place in doing something. You know, you take the example of getting into a car, someone's jumping into a car, not jumping but transferring from their chair to the car and they're looking to break their chair down. And I've seen people run up and help them and rip a wheel out of their hand and grab the chair and let me help. And it completely disrupts everything they were doing cause they have a whole system. So I think it's, you know, use your instincts and your instincts are typically right. And I think, you know, I don't think they mind you overstepping and trying to help, but I think, you know, just, just use your instincts.

([10:10](#)):

L: I think at the end of the day, they're athletes and they're players.

([10:12](#)):

J: That's correct.

([10:13](#)):

L: That's where it begins. And that's how they want to be seen, right?

([10:15](#)):

JH: That's right. Their dreams and their desires are the same as ours. I mean, and sometimes I would say some of the athletes I've worked with, it's, you know, their dreams are the same, but they're going to, it's almost like they're trying to prove themselves to the able body world that, you know, not only can I do it, I can do it better. And that's always an amazing journey to watch is see someone that you know has physical, you know, struggles, but what they do to adapt and overcome to e themselves as remarkable.

([10:40](#)):

L: Can I ask one more question here, JP, along this line?

([10:43](#)):

J: Sure.

([10:43](#)):

L: I know. Hang in there. So, Jason, you and I, you've helped me a lot as well. Just understanding wheelchair tennis and some of the experiences the players have had, and you've talked about the trauma that they've experienced. They've all experienced some trauma or multiple instances of trauma related to their disability. It could be a causing event, like a car wreck or something, or it could be congenital, right? It could be something...

([11:07](#)):

JH: That's right.

(11:07):

L: But can you talk about that and the importance of understanding as a coach and what that means when you're coaching somebody?

(11:13):

JH: Yeah. Trauma. Trauma is a tough one. And I know Larry, this is what you do. You understand that probably better than anybody here. Just from your experience. I mean trauma, you know, we've always learned that, you know, if there's a traumatic moment or you know, in a congenital issue where it starts early and you know, I try and take a really broad scope with the ripple effect there, you know, what does that do to the family? What does that do with the parents? Because I'm dealing with a young kid, obviously I'm going to deal with the parents right away and as a layer of protection that's put over these kids early because of disability. And if it was an accident where, you know, maybe a parent was engaged in that accident, there's a sense of guilt and there's a sense of now for the rest of this kid's life, I'm going to make sure his life or her life is the greatest life of all time. Which could be an enabling that really actually makes the child more disabled. And so, you know, we try and talk to parents, we show compassion of course, and now as a parent of young kids, my attitude, I wouldn't say has changed, but it definitely has made it emotionally more complicated. I mean it's for me to witness some of the things I've seen and some of the challenges, it's really difficult to watch sometimes. But again, I don't think I've seen any of our kids not come out high on the other side and be successful people once they're done playing. But the trauma part, you know, it complicates things because players, I'm not going to say they stop growing that moment, you know, if I have a 20 year old, you know, who gets in a car wreck or again, like you said, a moment happens. What happens at that moment as far as their ability to listen, be coachable, not be cynical, not have, you know, more dark moments than the person who had a congenital situation who was born and raised with it. And that person who was congenital may have been teased in elementary, in middle school because you know, they're the only kid in the chair. They're the only kid that looks different, but they didn't have a traumatic moment. But the moments come throughout their early childhood and how do they cope with that? So it comes in all different, you know, from different directions and different times in life. But I think as coaches, you know, I would not treat anybody any differently than an able-bodied, you know, kid, or you know, adult that you know you're going to be compassionate with. You're going to push them, you're going to challenge him, you're going to try and figure out what they can and cannot do and you're going to try and push them beyond that. Cause I think most of the athletes that I've dealt with, there's some mentality of this is about as far as I can go. And I think that's a mistake. I think we as coaches have to be, and teachers, right, we're trying to be creative, adaptive and look at the full spectrum and see how can we make this person better. I mean that's our job at the end of the day. But we're all about creating better people. Right?

(13:27):

L: There's some real resiliency in this because they have made a decision, although that they're in a chair, they're experiencing some disability, they're going to be an athlete and they're going to strive for their goals. And there's a lot of strength in that decision. Right?

(13:40):

JH: That's correct.

(13:41):

L: Cause it would be another decision to avoid playing tennis being in a chair. An easy one, cause it's not an easy game to pick up.

(13:48):

JH: No. I mean we've always said it doesn't matter. Tennis is hard and it's really hard to be good at it. I mean I think it's a simple statement. It's a tough sport. I mean, why do we struggle with numbers? I mean it's naturally a very difficult sport. It's not for everybody. And so when it comes to an individual sport like this, you know, we've had struggles where we've lost numbers to team sports. Like you know, wheelchair basketball is the best example of that where there's a social environment that's really healthy right away. It's very supportive. You've got maybe a rehab hospital behind you providing chairs and providing financial means to go to tournaments and parents have other parents to talk to immediately and it just becomes this massive support group. And I think tennis isn't really wired like that, you know, not naturally. There are circumstances where it can be, but I think when you're talking about young people failing early, I think the great fear, I think for most parents with a child with a disability is that not only has their child had a bad hand in life, but now they're failing at a sport that they think they would really enjoy. Right? And so that's a huge component. I think with tennis it's just, I'm not going to say it's a tough sell, but I think when they realize how long they can play and how they can integrate with their families, and the able bodied counterpart, by simply having one rule change, two bounces. I mean that was a brilliant, brilliant move by Brad and the groups at the beginning, the players at the beginning because they saw the court, you know. do we change the court, do we change the racquets, do we change the balls? Do we make it that different? And they said, no, we're going to go two bounces. And that's it. Because then they could play with their family and friends and, and I think that's what parents look for. How can we integrate our kids back into life? You know, after either growing up with a congenital issue or again, a traumatic moment. And this tennis is, tennis is magical that way. It's by far the best adaptive sport for that reason. The other sports are all great sports, but this one is magical because it allows kids to reintegrate with their families almost immediately. And they can't do that in wheelchair basketball. It's just difficult to do that. So this is where tennis is really king.

(15:34):

J: You know, we've talked about that where the two bounces is the only difference. Everything else is the same and therefore, you know, but we've also had these conversations, cause I think, you know, when I first watched wheelchair tennis, you're thinking, okay, the tactics as a coach, the tactics of it, how's it different? So that if, you know, you're in a situation where you can coach a wheelchair athlete, you know the ins and outs and really the answer to that is it's really not that different. Maybe you can explain from the coaching side that element of it.

(16:00):

JH: Yeah, from a coaching element, I mean I, again, I felt at the beginning when I first started, you know, I'd played enough and you know, coached for a couple of years. I felt pretty confident with my knowledge. But then as I got in I started realize you know mobility patterns in disability really are key elements, key ingredients to being a good coach in wheelchair tennis. You have to know what the player can and cannot do and you have to understand the dynamics of what the chair can do on the court and so that's important that I can actually play decently in a chair because then I can have an understanding. I never understand disability. I never claim to say that but I will understand what it is to play tennis in a wheelchair and so that element, and like you said, as far as tactical stuff, the sport's evolved. I would say



back in the late 70s, 80s, and even early 90s, sports was pretty North and South. Great ball strikers, very good athletes but the sport at that time was populated heavily by spinal cord injuries and that function level or lack of function really caused the sport to be played differently or it had to be. It just wasn't as dynamic as it is now. And so now the sport is really dominant either by minimal spinal cord injury or non spinal cord, meaning amputees for the most part, or you know, congenital issues that are degenerative meaning at this moment this person can still walk, however, they technically have a permanent disability which allows them to play. Sports changed because of that function though. And you look at the tactics now, you have, you know there's a couple wheelchair athletes out there now that serve and volley, and you know, you gotta be kidding me in a wheelchair. There's no split step, there's no ability to move lateral but these guys are serving in such a way now that they can actually take advantage and sneak in and volley and using the width of the court. That was a huge change probably about 15 years ago, which was really following the path of professional able body tennis. And doubles tactics have changed. It used to be four players back just battling. I mean points were amazingly long cause you just couldn't get the ball through the court. Now you got players rotating up and back. Both players rotating up and back, athletically, making switches, making crosses. And it's just, it's so dynamic now. And I think that's function driven, but that's disabled sport, right? Parasport is all about function and that's why classification is such an important part of Paralympic sport. That's undeniable.

(17:59):

J: Those are some great points. And then as well, talk about the role of having a growth mindset. I mean all coaches have challenges with players about a growth mindset versus the fixed mindset. So that you come across a lot of athletes obviously, you know, maybe due to my disability I may not ever reach that level of the sport. So how does the role of growth mindset factor into your coaching with the athletes you work with? He has a really tough, uh, it's really tough to, to continually have growth mindset attitudes from, myself, I am very growth minded, you know, but our athletes come in sometimes a little bit too rigid, too fixed. And again, that could be the traumatic, you know, Hey, it's different now. Different in sort of a permanent way. And again, the burden then falls back on me or other coaches like me, uh, to convince them to, Hey, you know, we're going to look at everything you can do and we're going to make adaptations to make you better. And I think a lot of those athletes don't believe it at first. They don't believe it's possible. They say, how can I do that? I'm a C6, C7, you know, quadriplegic and I have to take the racket in my hand. How am I ever gonna hit a topspin backhand? Or you know, we have an athlete on our team, Nick Taylor, who's in a power chair, was born with arthrogryposis, which mean he was born with his umbilical cord wrapped around his body, which stunted the growth of his arms and legs. He has to bounce the ball up on his foot to flip the ball up in the air. His hands are actually inverted backwards, and then he hits the ball, you know, after flipping the ball up off his foot. And you see that adaptation, you can't say he doesn't have a growth mindset. I mean, that guy's looking forward, you know, I need to figure out how I can do better, always do better. And a challenge for someone like him is just function. Look at the function in the sport now he's, you know, it's outgrown him in some respects we have to become more clever and it goes back to tactical. But again, that's part of that growth mindset. If you have a fixed mindset in anything in life, it's a failing mindset. And so this population just can't afford that and they have to be willing to take risk.

(19:40):

L: You know what, Jason, when you look at your mission, what would you say are some of the biggest challenges to achieving that mission? Really growing wheelchair tennis, getting more coaches so you can develop the players, have those great experiences. What are the biggest challenges that exist and what plans do you have to overcome them? Well, I'll tell you the last three years we've been so fortunate



here. We have such good people. I mean, two of my coworkers, my former boss on the community tennis side, Jo Wallen and Jason Allen who's the manager of the grassroots side of wheelchair tennis, you know, they came in here probably not knowing very much about wheelchair tennis, but again very good tennis people, very smart and really compassionate people and I think we took a hard look on how we are going to, how are we going to push this sport forward? Cause numbers have been stagnant for years and so we knew coaches, Larry, like you just said, coaches are a huge component to this support from the NGB maybe on a different level than we've been doing it is needed and we also knew the divide between professional tennis, the Paralympic side, my side, now in player development and community tennis needed to happen. That had never happened before. And I think that was a, that was a historical moment when we broke ranks with community tennis at least on the high performance side to slide over to player development and that takes a lot of courage. I think we'll look back 25 years from now and say that was a massive moment and I believe it was just a lot of the right people at the right time coming together and making the sale of why this should happen. Because if you look around the world and you see what other NGBs are doing with their high performance teams, we're way behind. And that's just from a resource standpoint. So that's why we knew player development could ultimately be a tremendous foundation for us to compete with other NGBs. Now the next step is coaches. Getting more coaches engaged, maybe growing our staff at some point. And I'll have a discussion, you know, with Martin Blackman about that and looking at what our needs are going to be in the next five to 10 years. Because I think once we get those things in place, I can retire and go play some golf, you know what I mean?

(21:27):

L: Not just yet.

(21:28):

JH: Not yet. I've got three young kids. I'm not going anywhere. But I see it clearly is, you know we have coaching workshops, development workshops, which we had never really done. We wrote those workshops. We've done so much curricular writing in three years to to make sure that we're covering grassroots, we're covering coaches, we're covering, you know, PTM. We're talking about USTA, talking about being integrated not only in creating courses or anything like that, just language just being incorporated because that integration ultimately is what mainstreams you know, wheelchair tennis. Language. It's a big deal.

(21:56):

L: You know Jason, you've definitely been growth minded cause just the conversations we have, but even just talking about scheduling and camps and camp structure and what we're trying to do with bringing players in and having camps and then going to small tournaments with them so you can really have a lot of coaching access. What are some of the things that you see changing with the way you train players? What's going to be going on in next five years that's really going to bring the game to another level?

(22:22):

JH: I have player development. I think that that was, I can't stress that enough. The ability to bring players here and have access to resources that some of these players have never been exposed to. That to me is going to change, it is the growth mindset, right? It goes back to professionalism. What does it mean to be a professional athlete? That's essentially what we do. We're trying to get younger people to

buy into the philosophy and buy into the lifestyle and that's not for everybody. High performance lifestyles are not for everybody. I don't care if you're in a chair or not. It just isn't. And that's our job and I'm not saying to weed people out, but you know, we squeeze our athletes a little bit and we're trying to get them to buy into a philosophy. If they're not willing to come here, I mean, I'm not going to hunt you down and throw you on a plane and bring you here, but we're making amazing opportunities available for our athletes to come here, get exposed to guys like you guys, and get to talk to you guys and then see what other young, able body pros are doing right in front of them. And that's inspiring to them, going look, if they can do it, we can do it. And we're so great to, you know, as you guys know, we have Mackenzie Soldan here. That was a massive, massive get for us because we knew visually that needed to happen. I mean if I'm sitting up at a desk all day and yeah, I'm working hard, I got seven different projects going on, I'm doing budgets, I'm doing all the work that a department does with one guy. Yeah, we don't have any athletes here. And I remember some of the coaches here when I first started, like you got to get some athletes here. You gotta somehow get them here. I said, I don't know how am I getting them here consistently, but in and out with training blocks like we talk about and training camps. But to get a player here to buy in fulltime like that was fantastic. And now we have the number one women's player, Dana Matthewson moving here in just a couple of weeks and that is two athletes now, what does that do to my day? That turns my day on its head a little bit.

(23:55):

L: You're back on court. He's smiling.

(23:58):

JH: Oh yeah.

(23:59):

J: Do you want me buy you some sunscreen? You're going to need a lot of it.

(24:02):

JH: Especially she's coming right in the Spring as the heat starts to crank again. I know that. But yeah, that's the player development, we knew it. We knew it years ago. And the fact that we have an opportunity now to be, you know, brought into the family has been fantastic. Very fortunate.

(24:16):

J: This is really exciting. I mean, really exciting times for the culture you're trying to grow. Speak to the culture that you're trying to develop and nurture, people that are playing their part in helping you create that culture. What are you trying to do with that?

(24:29):

JH: Well, I mean, again, it's a growth minded culture. It's a professionalized culture. I think that sometime I say we've been lacking, we just didn't have the resources to really drive that vision home before, you know, the former national manager, Dan, was living in Seattle and Minneapolis working remotely. It gave him flexibility, which I think was good in some ways, but there really wasn't a home base for us. And so now, the home base has made the collaborative efforts so much easier and that's what's going to help with the culture for us. It's just, we're engaged everywhere, and again, convincing, and the player development model's perfect for us. You know, again, we're ultimately trying to make better people and so to show them, and hopefully through example, they see how hard we work on their

behalf, there's going to be some buy-in. You know, they see us working hard every day. They see things happening. But it takes a staff, you know, that we have and Paul Walker and John Ryberg and John Devors to, again, be mentors to our younger players. John Ryberg and Paul, both in chairs, are the first, you know, wheelchair coaches in the United States to who have gone through the high performance coaching program. That is a massive deal. I know it seems like, ah, it was just another couple of guys going through. That's a historical thing for us and the fact that this is all happening within, you know, two and a half years. I've only been officially a part of player development since last March. It's nine months. And so we're way ahead of what my timeline was and that's, it's almost frightening. Like there's, I feel the pressure is growing like great things have got to happen next year and we have a, we had a real clear culture minded 10 years, which I think is totally fair that, you know, to implement what we're trying to do and to drive home the language and the vision of what we're trying to do, it's going to take time. And so our real goal is 2028. LA. We're hoping that, you know, one or two kids that come through our system will qualify for the Paralympic games in LA. That's the goal. That we know our system was what worked and brought that kid to that level. That's what we're hoping.

[\(26:13\):](#)

J: So Jason, for all the coaches, parents, I mean whoever's listening to the podcast now, but maybe more advice for coaches in helping you reach that mission, what advice would you give to coaches out there to open up the doors to increase more opportunities to make wheelchair tennis a part of their programming?

[\(26:29\):](#)

JH: Sure. I think for coaches that are interested, I think you can, that's the beauty of the internet, right, you can jump on YouTube, you can see wheelchair tennis videos, we have some videos and great 'improve your game' videos that are only two or three minutes long for coaches essentially that are very effective. They're very pointed, and I think that would be a good starting place. I always tell coaches that, you know, our head coaches or directors at their clubs. Take a look at your menu and look at what you offer your clientele or the outside community. What you offer. And 99% do not offer wheelchair tennis clinics. 99% do not offer an adaptive clinic. 99% don't offer veterans. To me, those three are no-brainers. If you're trying to change the culture of where you work in your community, start bringing that stuff in your clubs and it's a winner. I mean they're all winners, but you have to have some knowledge and adaptive can be even more complicated. If you have cognitive disabilities that you're working with, that can be as challenging as physical, but wheelchair tennis is a winner. And I think, you know, we do coaching development workshops in conjunction with the USPTA and they're fantastic. I mean, they're day and a half long, sometimes they're day long depending upon our clientele and you know what kind of timeline they have, but they're incredibly educational. They're 8 to 12 hours long. But man, by the time you leave, you know what you need to know to start a program. And I think that would be where I would start. And another great, you know, resource would be the USOPC. If you're looking to get a Paralympic sport club, you can go on their website, [www.usopc.org](http://www.usopc.org). Right? And you would be able to go on there and look up Paralympic sport club and that will tell you nationwide where these clubs exist. And that's always a great resource as far as finding people who know what they're talking about and can help direct you in our way or you can reach out to us here. That's always easy.

[\(28:03\):](#)

L: Now you mentioned it, Jason, USOPC?

[\(28:06\):](#)

JH: That's right.

(28:07):

L: Tell me what that meant to the movement.

(28:09):

JH: Massive, Larry. Massively. Some of you might go, what does USOPC mean? Most of you would know USOC means. USOC, the United States Olympic committee. Well, there was a decision made by their new CEO now two years ago, maybe even 18 months ago, to add the P for Paralympic, the United States Olympic and Paralympic committee. That was massive. And it seems like it is one letter, right? Like, one letter changed, I think, the whole culture, cause I think, you know, having been around long enough, and there's another part of this, not only just the letter, but they also decided to do equal pay for medalists. So for an Olympic gold medalists receives \$45,000 for an Olympic gold medal and a Paralympic athlete gets a gold medal and gets \$7,500. That was a problem. And that's where I think the Paralympic side, you know, the athletes were having a hard time buying in to stay and engage in their sports, staying engaged with the USOC at that time. But when they saw those two things go down, you know, adding the P and then adding equal pay for medals, I think you just bought for whatever it cost them, 2.3 million, 1.8 million, whatever it was, that was the best investment of all time. You just bought an entire generation and maybe the generation before's loyalty and getting those athletes engaged with becoming coaches, becoming administrators, keeping their sports alive by simply supporting and treating them like equals. And that's all they've ever asked is treat us like equals, not more, not less than the able body side. And I think that was a huge move. Fantastic move.

(29:27):

J: That's absolutely fantastic, Jason, and it all seems to be going in the, in the right direction and you know, you've engaged so many of the national coaches here and the staff here to really open their eyes up. And so you know, we really encourage the listeners out there to improve the accessibility, to improve the opportunities. You know, you've got Jason here, he's a fantastic resource that can get you go in and as he mentioned, there's other resources in USOPC too. But I know we're running short of time here, and I really appreciate, again you coming and taking this time out. If you could give maybe some key takeaways for coaches. I know you just gave them some advice on how to open the doors and maybe some key takeaways for coaches in their approach towards coaching wheelchair athletes. What would be your top ones?

(30:09):

JH: Boy, you know, show some courage, you know, really step up. I mean there's a population that flies under the radar out there, you know, the population with folks with disabilities that are starving for, not attention, but just remember that they're there. And I think that again, it's a population that we have not catered to in the tennis world very well, talking like, you know, in public life, not necessarily high-performance, we've done that, but I think, you know, making sure that your directors, your leadership know what's going on and what you're trying to do. I think there's so many opportunities for all adaptive sports, but tennis being the most professionalized, remember we're in all four grand slams, got the Paralympic games, we got the ones coming up in Tokyo. You're going to start to see more than commercials and advertisement and sponsorships for Paralympic athletes coming on TV and on radio. You're going to start seeing it all over the place. That's always the way it's been, but I do think we're turning a corner as far as popularity. So for coaches looking to get engaged, I think again, the resources

are there, but I think you show some courage and you try and you know, remember what it's like to be a student again and learn something new. That's what drew me to wheelchair tennis was, I'm not going to say the mundaneness of what I did on the able body side, you know, the day in and day out grind of, of having a job and a career on court. But I think when you bring, you know, your excitement to something new and I'm going to tell you flat out if you haven't felt gratitude before, go work a wheelchair grassroots clinic, an entry level clinic with new players who are new to the sport and you're going to feel gratitude like you never have in your life. And that it's addicting and you want more and you want to do more and you always feel, I always look back and say, man, I could have done more. I mean, even though I've done a lot, I feel like I could do more. And I could've done more. And that's always kind of one and it's not a regret, but it's like there's so much more we can do for this population to help them enjoy what we got. Tennis is giving us our lives and why couldn't we help them in the same light?

[\(31:48\)](#):

L: You know, I think Jason, those are great summary points and also talking about, it's an individual athlete you're talking about, individual history, individual goals and individual game, right? So treat them as that individual and honor their strengths and get to know their history and what they've gone through and get to know them, right? That's a big message.

[\(32:09\)](#):

JH: It's a big, is getting to know them. I mean the disability part, you have to get to know and you have to be willing to talk to them. And I think you know, after your first lesson with someone, they're going to open up and that is what they want. They want to talk and they want to share. And I think that's what makes such a special relationship between player and coach anyway. But this is a little more unique because you're getting to an intimate place to where you're willing to talk about why they're sitting down in that chair. And one thing I would recommend to coaches is be willing to get in a chair that is something a lot of coaches like, ah, it looks tough. I don't think I can do it. Now, to get to the point where you can actually play in a chair where you feel like you could actually show them how to do it correctly, that takes a lot of work. But I think there are ways that we show, I know in our workshops how to hit on your feet, not to get into the [inaudible] of that, but that's tough because, you know, we're standing in a higher position, it is a different trajectory and there are techniques that you can learn and walking patterns and never running after balls. Little things like that make for a better lesson, for a better experience, and that's something that coaches have to be willing to do. Most coaches want to step up on the baseline and just hit, take everything on one bounce, never turn around, never replicate what the wheelchair athletes are going through and it's just not a good experience. So as coaches, our job is to give good experiences to everybody who comes on the court. And so why would that be different from anybody in a chair? And that might take some prep work, that may take some research, that might take some, again, some courage to go, you know what, I'm going to know a little bit about this before I get on the court. Otherwise, you know, you may go, you know what, maybe this isn't for me. And that's unfortunate. So I think it's a wonderful part of tennis that I think we should all, you know, engage in on some level and maybe not the level I'm at, but I think everybody, at your homes, I mean, you could easily add this to your program and just to be such a great addition to your club, and your community.

[\(33:42\)](#):

J: Awesome. Those are great takeaways there, Jason, and that wraps it up for this week's episode of compete like champion. Jason, thank you so much.

([33:50](#)):

JH: My pleasure, boys.

([33:51](#)):

J: Larry. Thank you. So for more information on that, we're going to put up some resources on the show notes. Um, the resources up to the website, [playerdevelopment.usta.com](http://playerdevelopment.usta.com), so be sure to check out the show notes and get in touch with Jason Harnett, It's [jason.harnett@usta.com](mailto:jason.harnett@usta.com) for more information. Larry, till next week. We're out.