

A Game of Zero Love

By Isabella Cook | Jun 25, 2024



SWING Brent Zeller's passion for tennis is fueled not by a competitive spirit, but one of fun, collaboration and community. Photo courtesy of Brent Zeller

Brent Zeller, a local tennis coach, has made it his mission to take the competition out ... of the game and players' mindsets entirely.

Zeller has taught tennis for the past 50 years, and that half-century of instructing students taught him a thing or two about the sport and, (un)surprisingly, the negative impact of teaching through the lens of being competitive.

Seeing his students not respond well to pressure, Zeller pivoted his philosophy and coaching style to reflect a less stressful and more impactful approach. Now and for the past 32 years, Zeller's tennis coaching has aimed to teach his students to lob tennis balls and their own expectations for the sport into an entirely different court.

“[Tennis] is a recreational activity—a great recreational activity, one you can just play and play and stay in shape for the rest of your life physically, mentally and emotionally,” Zeller said. “Now I’m 70 years old and I figure I only have about five more years of teaching left, but it makes no sense that we have this system in place that prioritizes competition over enjoyment.”

“The whole competitive thing is sort of like air to us,” Zeller continued. “We don’t even recognize it’s there, but people think they can’t live without the competition. But it’s not air ... it’s a problem.”

While many say that the whole point of tennis—or even life—is to win, Zeller’s philosophy takes a complete 180 from modern society’s expectations, redefining what it means to be a winner. Rather than prioritizing beating other tennis players and teaching students how to stress out about a game they may otherwise love, Zeller encourages enjoyment first and foremost.

“To be joyful is the No. 1 key to my performance,” Zeller said. “It’s not about being joyful only after you’ve won something or beaten someone. Joy is in the process. You’re supposed to have fun with it. Everyone’s been taught to be so serious, and people are taking that mentality into every day-to-day task and experience.”

This seemingly foreign concept of prioritizing enjoyment isn’t always popular in the sporting world, but Zeller thinks that it should be.

“People don’t realize how fully indoctrinated they are into the competitive mindset,” he said. “The competitive mindset is a constant quest to show that you are better/superior to everyone else ... The harsh reality is that competition can become an addiction. Some may say it’s a more positive addiction, but is it really? [There are] many negative side-effects to the competitive mindset—cheating, intimidation and fear are just a few.”

“The fear, the anxiety, the stress, the wanting to quit ... all those emotional blocks come up when you’re learning,” Zeller continued. “But you can actually work through these feelings while learning the sport in a noncompetitive space, so you don’t get freaked out in competition and can stay cool, calm and collected when you’re on the court.”

Zeller’s half-century of teaching students tennis has afforded him a glimpse into the short- and long-term effects of competition on young minds. Through 50 years of observation, Zeller came to believe strongly in the counterproductive effects of cortisol and stress in the scholastic competitive sporting system. In fact, Zeller more or less hung up his visor when it came to teaching within those spaces because of his baseline distaste for the problematic aspects of this approach.

“What I realized is that there’s a fatal flaw to the way we think that competition creates the best,” Zeller said. “Because how can you play tennis against somebody and be your

best when the other player's goal is to prevent you from playing your best?"

Zeller's concern for people being more or less forced into competitive spaces grows stronger with each year, and he believes societal expectations to excel are only growing.

"A vital element to understand [is that] each generation has to be more competitive than the previous generation," Zeller said. "Each generation has to be more competitive, not to achieve an absolute standard of excellence, but just to keep up. Where does it all end? More stress and expectations on each successive generation of kids. I believe this is why our world is in the crazy shape it is. How much more competitive can we be? Seems like a dead end to me."

But how can one escape this dead end, or at least stop supporting a system that funnels youth into said dead end? Other than having a noncompetitive approach to tennis and life, Zeller believes anyone can practice a few mindset tips and tricks in order to bring a sense of peace to sports and ... well, everything else.

"The keys to peak performance ... are joy, relaxation and concentration," he said. "The rest are patience, perseverance, self-motivation, cellular memory, hand/eye coordination, stroke mechanics, footwork, rhythm, breathing and confidence."

How many people stop doing something they enjoy because someone else is better at it? And does that comparison and discouragement have anything to do with the mindset society imposes at impossibly young ages?

Throughout not only sports but in schooling systems and dating and basic day-to-day enjoyment of passions, hobbies and more, there seems to be no room left for what really matters ... joy, wonder and a sense of community. Compared to these things, the sense of some individual satisfaction in winning seems rather pale.

"That's the good thing: I've been here 50 years doing this, and the last 32 years have been completely noncompetitive. And I'll stick by my beliefs on this until the day I die—we need a new way of doing things," Zeller said. "And all we should be concerned about is giving it our best shot."

While some will continue to complain about a world where children receive participation trophies for trying, others fight the good fight for a more loving form of sports. And Zeller's tennis tactics of prioritizing joy, relaxation and concentration are rare gems of wisdom. After all, the true success and best way to excel isn't in stress and cortisol, but in a regulated nervous system and the steady acquisition of skill for the sake of pleasure.

To learn more about noncompetitive sports and Effortless Tennis, visit the website at effortlesstennis.com. To contact Brent Zeller about tennis lessons, or to become a generous benefactor to the cause and contribute to the anti-competition movement, send an email to effortlesstennis@comcast.net or call 415.717.5446.

PQ

Seeing his students not respond well to pressure, Zeller pivoted his philosophy and coaching style to reflect a less stressful and more impactful approach.