

28 COUNTRIES LATER

LTA COACH ENGAGEMENT MANAGER MATT SMITH HAS TRAVELLED THE GLOBE COACHING TENNIS AND ENCOURAGING YOUNGSTERS TO PICK UP A RACKET. IT'S BEEN ONE HECK OF A JOURNEY, AS HE TELLS "ACE..."

Can you tell us about your tennis coaching journey?

I used to play and compete. I was a member of a local club and as an 11-year-old I was asked to be a bit of a hitter, an assistant coach, and then when I was 16 I took my first qualification. Before I knew it, I went on to Loughborough University and did my DCA, which is now the LTA Level 3. I was coaching at a club alongside my studies and outside of university I became the head coach at a small, rural club in Essex called Epping Tennis Club. I completed my Level 4 qualification whilst there. I went to Australia for a year, delivering their Hot Shots, their mini tennis

programme. With the success at Epping Tennis Club, in 2011 I was lucky enough to be awarded British Coach of the Year. A lot of that was due to my work with mini tennis, so junior players, and also tennis initiatives like cardio tennis and engaging more of our local demographic into tennis. Growing our tennis programme from 12 up to 300. From that, I became the head of club coaching at the University of Bath. Then I took my Level 5 qualification and I was tasked with growing their programme. From there we went from around 300 weekly visitors to 1,000. We won education venue of the year. I was there for four and a half years and had a lot of success there.

So how did you end up travelling the world teaching tennis to kids?

That's a good question! We had fantastic retention within our coaching programme; we didn't spend anything on marketing. What we realised is actually that coaching isn't the sport. Things like football, where you train once a week and you play a match once a week – that's the real retention. We put together the Mini Tour, where our 10 and under players were able to play a fun,

themed event around the world tour. It was a competition, but it was just playing within your local environment with friends. We found that really gripped them and it gained that retention through the programme, which helped our success. With Tennis for Kids, which is off the back of the Davis Cup legacy. We realised it was such a great initiative from the LTA – why can't we do this around this world? It's basically tennis for anyone, anywhere. Anyone can play tennis anywhere.

How did you make the leap for it to happen? Many ideas are concocted and then fall by the wayside...

The idea was with a friend in the pub, where the best ideas are often formulated! I'd achieved this success at Bath and wanted a new challenge, and I wanted to give back to the game. So I spoke to the International Tennis Federation, who put me in contact with all the tennis associations around the world. From that, Zsig Sports, who

I've worked with since Epping Tennis Club, loved the idea and they wanted to sponsor the trip. That gave me an extra reason, really. What happened was, we formulated a plan that every country I visited I'd deliver tennis, but I'd also train up local ambassadors who could continue the delivery. So I'd go in, deliver the sport to children in primary schools or orphanages, and then Zsig Sports would ship out equipment to the locations so they could continue to play.

So you just went for it?

Yeah. I quit my job and just took carry-on luggage – a backpack filled with clothes – and a guitar case with a three-metre Zsig net, two rackets and

balls. It's quite funny, with the guitar case I blended in quite well through South America! I would often be asked if I played, which was quite amusing when I responded, "Yeah, do you fancy a game?" I'd get some perplexed looks.

Where did you go first?

In December 2016 I booked a one-way ticket to Brazil, into Rio. That was the biggest wake-up call. I wasn't sure about delivering the product, the programme, and whether it was going to work. It was whether it was more of a pilot. As soon as we got there we were staying in a hostel in a favela

and the owners there spoke to me about some kids around the corner who would love to be involved. One of the kids was actually one of the faces for the Rio Olympics, a bit of a poster child, and before I knew it we were surrounded by kids wanting to play and get involved. It's one of the poorer communities around and we realised it was going to have a lasting impact.

Sport's a real equaliser in a way, isn't it?

Yeah. There's this stigma around tennis that it's elitist, but actually it cuts through that social hierarchy – anyone can play. We went to Brazil, by bus, all the way to Mexico, stopping off in every country along the way. There's a whole host of stories, I could go on and on, and every country and community opened itself up to me. I ended up going to six

different weddings that year! Buddhist, Chinese, Indian – the communities and was accepted by the families. What it really showed me is that many of the kids are incredibly happy, if anything happier than those back home. They don't have anything, but what they do have – their families, that connection with people – bringing sport into it just enhanced that even more. They just don't have the equipment over there.

As the quote on your website says, "Give the man a fish and he can feed his family for a day. Give him a net and he can play tennis for a lifetime."

[Laughs] Yeah, as you can tell I made that one up, but it's true! The nets and equipment are being delivered by these ambassadors and we talk about the impact on 10,000 children but it'll go beyond that. That's just for the year. If you think about how

long those kits will be used in the community, it'll be hundreds of thousands of kids we've impacted. It's something I'm very passionate about, giving back to the sport I was very lucky to play as a child. My family were involved, then being able to play myself, to now being able to give back and allow other people the opportunity to be involved in the sport. As a personal journey, it was pretty incredible.

To cover 28 countries in a year is impressive...

Yeah, in 12 months we went through South America, Central America, then Eastern Europe, South-East Asia, and back. On the website you can see the map and routes we took. We've also had coaches asking about taking it beyond.

We didn't even touch Africa. This was just me, just a concept that anyone can play anywhere. It was fantastic for myself, my growth and giving back, and for the communities. It can work, it does work, and what we're looking for now is

gathering more coaches and volunteers who want to give back, to be able to take equipment with them and do the same thing. I've already been invited to go back to many of the locations and deliver again, and you make lifelong friends. You feel part of the community. I know I'll be going back to some of them and there are a couple of stories around an orphanage in Colombia where they've had a community meeting around how they're going to raise funds to tarmac their courtyard for this mini tennis net that's coming. There's more stories than that about how the communities really engaged. It's more than just tennis now.



Were there places where the conditions were so bad you wondered how you could possibly set-up a game of tennis?

Yes, that orphanage being one of them. There was another one in Ecuador where it was just a dust courtyard and the children were so malnourished I thought we were dealing with four or five-year-olds, whereas they were eight or nine. Their growth had been stunted by the lack of diet.

The big one was Myanmar. Some of the families literally killed their animals to eat there and then, with a lack of fridges and power. All their food was

pickled and fermented. But one of the great games the kids were playing – they're so imaginative – was that they'd have flip flops in a pile and one of the kids would stand on top of the pile and the others would have to try to steal their flip flops back without getting caught. And then we'd be setting up this net on a dust courtyard in the middle of all these shacks, and the excitement on their faces pressing up to the windows... Classes would come out one at a time to play this game that most of them had probably never seen before. In fact, in Belize I had adults asking me what the game was. They're in their own world, it was beach life and family.

How wonderful to be able to show people of all ages this game you have loved your whole life.

Exactly. The sport opened up the communities to me. In Myanmar, one

of the parents was so pleased about their child having access to all this equipment at school that I was invited to a Buddhist wedding. All of a sudden I'm engaging with all parts of the community.



This is the million dollar question – what were the major highlights of your trip?

Well, it's tennis for anyone, anywhere. The anywhere part, and this is kind of outside the story slightly, but as a way of proving it could be done anywhere, I took the tennis kit with me up the volcano at Acatenango in Guatemala and played with a friend there. The volcano opposite us erupted! We've got photos of us playing tennis with this unbelievable background. That was pretty epic.

As far as the children are concerned, the big story for me, and it was a bit teary and hard for me to leave, was the orphanage in Ecuador. There was a woman, Fatima, who was almost a mother to the children and she'd been there for 25 years. One of the assistants who was helping her was 16, and she had been dropped off at the

orphanage as a six-month-old. She calls Fatima her mum. They can't cope and she was teary that someone had visited and taken the time to help the children and the fact they've now got equipment there. You can tell it's life-changing. There are so many people out there who give so much. It's those people you meet along the way.

Another highlight was a bit of a miscommunication. My Spanish grew along the way, but when I was in Panama I thought we were going to see groups of 16 children through the day, and I walked into a hall, with a corrugated steel roof, with 64 children and all they had was three deflated basketballs. That was their PE kit for a primary school with 1,000 kids. As a coach, we adapted, we created mini games. That was a highlight of the fact they are in need, they don't have the equipment.

Coming back to work for the LTA, it must make you so grateful for what we've got here.

We're very lucky to be working in a Grand Slam nation, a first-world country, where being able to pick up a racket and play tennis is just a given. Coaches

and players are very much spoilt in that respect. But I'm still able to give back to the sport by engaging with coaches and helping them to deliver to more children and give more people the chance to play tennis. If we can prove that they can play in those countries, we can definitely play here. No excuses.



What do you enjoy most about your role as Coach Engagement Manager?

I enjoy engaging with coaches, helping them to get the most out of their careers as a coach and, more than anything,

getting more children and players on the court and making the biggest impact on British tennis that we can. It's really trying to facilitate and help coaches invest in their own businesses. Again, maxing out on British tennis basically.

How do you sum up this whole experience?

Life-changing. The perspective you gain in life – the things that matter are the people, the community. It's what sport can bring to that community. That was the biggest driving force, the giving back. Now, coming back to the LTA and realising how privileged I am; the more people we can put in a

position to deliver this fantastic sport to more children, the better.

For me, I could have bought a house – it was basically a deposit I'd saved up – but you look back and the biggest thing I learned is that there are different types of rich. That richness, through the communities I'll go back and see, that's what you are remembered for. The giving.

Check out minitenisworldtour.com for more of Matt's stories and help support his mission of 'tennis for anyone, anywhere' by helping deliver more tennis and equipment packs, becoming a part of the charity team or donating to the cause. You can also keep up-to-date by following @minitenisrwtw on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

