

FRIEND OR FOE?

by Dr. Natascha Wesch, PhD

Recently, Eugenie Bouchard (Canadian professional tennis player) was asked who her best friend was on the tennis Tour. Basically, she said she has no friends on Tour, that all the other women are her competitors.

It's different in beach volleyball, though, because players are constantly switching partners. You don't want to offend an opponent or a teammate since he or she may, one day, be lining up next to you as your partner or against you as an opponent. So I'm addressing this article by trying to answer one important question: What are some characteristics of a positive teammate relationship that will foster respect?

Sport has shown us that it's not always the most talented team that wins, and that often the chemistry between teammates is most critical to success. In many ways, a positive relationship enhances effectiveness and enables peak performance. So what are the characteristics needed for being good teammate and creating a positive relationship? I read a great paper published by Washington State Athletics about what makes a good teammate, and I have summarized the 7 key points below.

Communication – We all know this word, but what does it truly mean in terms of action? Be vocal in practice and in matches; talk with your partner about what's going well, what needs to be changed. You are in this together; talk often and clearly about what you are doing and why. Communication builds fluid team chemistry. Being on the same page means letting teammates know what you plan on doing and listening to what they plan on doing.

Honesty – Constructive criticism is an absolute must in any team sport. Partners must develop the skill of honest communication and shouldn't be afraid to bring up the mistakes of others, or honestly providing encouragement and reinforcement. In doing so, a team can sort out their flaws and focus on what they need to practice. Also, honesty helps build camaraderie as teammates will take at face value constructive criticism and positive feedback.

Trust – It's easy to see when teammates don't trust each other. Instead of staying in position, they are

moving all over the place because they don't trust their teammate to do their job. This causes teams to play in erratic patterns and will hurt them overall. Teammates need to trust each other, which will allow them to play as one.

Compassion – Every athlete will go through tough times in their playing careers from slumps to injuries. Good teammates understand this and are ready to offer their compassion rather than their disappointment. Rarely will you find a championship team that didn't get along. The fact is that good teammates make great teams, all with a little character.

Remain Positive & Maintain Control – All in all, good teammates are those people who remain positive. They remain positive about themselves, and positive about their teammates. They quickly "brush off" mistakes by themselves and others and focus on the next play, the next opportunity, and the next game. They also maintain control; they keep their cool in difficult situations and do not allow their emotions to overtake the task at hand.

Cheer – Teammates cheer for each other. Cheering for your teammates is a sign that you support them, that you have their back. Particularly when you are going through a slump, it's important to know (and hear) that your teammates are still behind you and believe in you.

Take Responsibility – When things aren't going well or when they get tough, it's sometimes easy to blame mistakes on others, it's human nature. It's hard to resist the temptation to blame others. But good teammates take responsibility for themselves and their actions – good and bad.

So what does all of this have to do with opponents? Competitors are not people to hate, they are people to respect. If you take on the above characteristics with a teammate, invariably you will be showing opponents that you can be a good partner. Similarly, taking on the above characteristics with an opponent also shows respect for them. This gives them a pretty good idea of what kind of person you are and what kind of teammate you will be if you two ever become partners!