

# **“Focus on the Pros: Matt Tomayko”**

*By Gwynn Thayer*

Matt Tomayko, Director of 10u Tennis at RRC, is known for his calm and centered presence on the court, a master of embracing mindfulness and emotional balance and control in tennis. Most remarkably, he models this behavior for his young students so that they, too, are able to stay focused in order to play their best game and learn how to conduct themselves with dignity on and off the court.

Even when surrounded by a horde of eager and excited young players, Tomayko can readily summon his inner calm and share that state of mind with his young students in all sorts of on-court situations, even when they become frustrated by the challenges of learning the game. He explains, “Part of it is building self-awareness. They (young players) don’t always realize that they are upset, so I can be a mirror for them. I tell them, ‘You look like you are upset. What do you feel?’ I help them recognize what is going on.”

Likewise, when a young player becomes distracted by a bad call, or other obstacles, he talks to them about how to handle it. “I explain, what can you control and what can’t you control? I work on this with them; if someone makes a bad call you can get really upset or you can call a coach over to see if they can watch. They learn that it is going to be easier if they call a coach over rather than having a big argument.”

How did Tomayko learn to summon and direct his inner calm? He first started playing tennis during city-sponsored summer camps in Solon, Ohio, when he was six years old. In eighth grade, he decided that he wanted to get involved with varsity high school sports, so he began taking tennis lessons. He enjoyed success in high school (he was the district finalist in doubles during his junior year in 2005) and later ended up returning to the

same summer camp where he himself had learned how to play tennis but in a new role as a tennis coach.

Tomayko played tennis in college for John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio, and received honorable mention for the All Ohio Athletic Conference in 2007. While in school he studied psychology and also began to explore comparative religious studies. He was drawn in particular to the work of the famous Vietnamese Buddhist scholar Thich Nhat Hanh, and was intrigued by the concepts of mindfulness and walking meditation. He was also attracted to the Buddhist notion of releasing attachment to self, expanding one's consciousness, and embracing the interdependence of all things. Tomayko's awareness of universal interconnectedness proved to be an interesting counterpoint to the structured and competitive game of tennis.

Tomayko describes college tennis as "very rowdy" with lots of heckling and loud and boisterous behavior, but he learned to harness his emotions in effective ways. He explains, "My style was always steady; I never really had a big offensive weapon, but I could stay really consistent and focused. I focused on letting emotions move through me without letting (myself) get too tight. I learned to stay focused and calm."

Tomayko graduated in 2010 at the top of his class and considered pursuing a Ph.D. in psychology in order to focus on mental health. But he decided to follow another path instead: coaching tennis. He recalls, "My first job out of college was working at a group home for adults with developmental disabilities. It was really rewarding and really tiring. I was freelance teaching tennis all along. One of the coaches from Cary Tennis Park ran into me while I was teaching and invited me to apply for a job there." When Tomayko realized that he could teach tennis as a full time job, he was elated. "I really like staying active with my job and also having the variety of planning programs, supporting customers, running clinics, coaching teams, organizing coaches' teaching schedules, and teaching lessons."

He worked at Cary Tennis Park from 2013 to 2015, mainly coordinating one Junior Team Tennis (JTT) team and helping to teach junior and adult

clinics. After that, he returned to Solon where he had grown up to teach tennis at the Wembley Club in Cleveland, Ohio, from 2015-2017. The Wembley Club had come under new ownership and Tomayko was given a special opportunity to help build up the juniors program and manage the adult USTA teams and events.

Once this was accomplished, Tomayko decided to move back to Raleigh. After continuing at Cary Tennis Park for a period of time, Tomayko decided to look for full-time work elsewhere, and he landed at RRC beginning in July 2017. RRC appealed to him because he could teach tennis while also assuming a more significant leadership role in directing the 10u juniors program. In addition to the indoor facilities, he liked the opportunities that RRC had to offer, especially in building new, younger players.

While at RRC, Tomayko has been able to explore some creative ways to teach tennis; he has even incorporated tennis into his teaching with yoga classes for adults, Academy juniors, and camp participants. He was first exposed to the practice when his mother took him to yoga classes in high school. He gradually became more and more interested in meditation and other relaxation techniques designed to focus and calm the body and mind.

Tomayko identifies the nexus between tennis and yoga as the interplay between ease and effort. In tennis, one must find a balance between running hard to get to a ball, but then move with calmness and fluidity when actually hitting it. For instance, even though Rafa Nadal is not known for his calm -- quite the contrary -- Tomayko points out that after Nadal uses all of his fiery intensity to get to the ball in lightning speed, the swing itself is relaxed and smooth, with a finely executed spin. A more obvious example of balancing ease and effort in tennis is Roger Federer, who exudes calm throughout his game but still plays with power and force.

The notion of balance of ease and effort has other manifestations on the court. Tennis is a game of starts and stops. Tomayko explains, "There are two phases of playing: during the point, and in between the point. During the point I am focusing on targets: 'What am I going to do with this shot?'

but then I also watch the ball as it leaves their racquet. I look at the ball and consider what I am going to do with my shot.”

In between shots, Tomayko focuses on relaxing his body. He describes the process and his technique for harnessing his concentration and focus: “I focus on the bottom of my feet and I feel my breath. Sometimes I’ll move the strings around on the racquet and try to make myself invisible, especially if the other coach (or player) is reacting. I let it pass through me without reacting to it or holding on to it. I keep my mind clear.”

Even though Tomayko is primarily responsible for younger kids at RRC, he works with clients of all ages. Somewhat surprisingly, he notes that he “does not notice that much difference between adults and kids,” while he teaches tennis, although he points out that the very youngest kids don’t necessarily have a reason to be highly motivated to play and improve their game: “You have to provide the motivation to make it fun.” But when they start competing in junior tennis, however, that “flips the switch.”

Even though his primary responsibility is 10u juniors, Tomayko is open to working with all age groups. He can effectively connect with the very youngest of clients as well as elderly players, including individuals with cognitive or physical challenges. People of all ages and abilities can play tennis and can benefit from what the sport has to offer. He explains, “I enjoy teaching those who are hungry to learn. Watching someone have an ‘Aha’ moment or realize more ease or better results on a shot is so rewarding.”

Throughout his busy teaching schedule, Tomayko tries to carve out time each day to focus on the state of his mood and reflect on the day. He practices yoga several times a week and works on *pranayama*: the yogic practice of breath control (Prana is a Sanskrit word for ‘life force’ or “vital energy” and Yama can be translated as ‘control’ or ‘restraint’). “I try to be with what is actually happening (in the moment) as much as I can. The moment of focus just makes so much sense (to me). It is the only thing that is actually happening.”

In order to become more connected with the present moment, Tomayko tries to be aware of his breathing and practices an informal type of walking meditation. “I come back to my breath often,” he explains, “I take little pauses during the day.” He often connects his movement with his breath; he centers himself even while walking to his car before and after work by focusing on his feet and the ground below them. Tomayko is also a musician; while playing music he is able to connect with the present in the same way that he can during a tennis match. Both music and tennis allow Tomayko to focus on his breath and relish the significance and immediacy of the moment.

Since Tomayko joined RRC, the 10u program has grown tremendously. Three teams from RRC qualified for Junior Team Tennis (JTT) states and one 10u intermediate JTT Team became finalists at the state competition this year. Tomayko reflected, “I hope to create competitive JTT teams again this spring with strong representation for RRC at the JTT State Championships 2020.”

His goals for RRC move well beyond his more concrete plans for program growth, improved play, and more wins. Tomayko embraces the intangibles in tennis: “I hope to create a stronger team and community feeling of camaraderie amongst the kids. Respecting each other is even more important than the tennis.” Tomayko hopes to continue to nurture a safe learning environment in a space where coaches are mindful of how they communicate to the young players and the young players feel like RRC is family.

--Gwynn Thayer

See four images below:



Matt Tomayko at Millbrook Tennis Center with young players, 2018



Matt Tomayko at RRC demonstrating a yoga pose to his adult clinic, 2019





Matt Tomayko with RRC junior players at JTT 10u states, Wilmington, 2019





Matt Tomayko bringing together his love of tennis and music at RRC