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Coaching is a man's job; Even on the women's tour, most players to be guided by men

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Illustrations: DARIO AYALA, THE GAZETTE / Marion Bartoli reacts after losing a point against Petra Kvitova Friday at Uniprix Stadium. Bartoli was one of the players Galina Voskoboeva upset at last year's Rogers Cup, thanks to coaching from Alina Jidkova, one of the few female WTA coaches.;

The WTA Tour is one of the world's pre-eminent women's sports franchises.

Yet it remains, on many levels, a man's world.

One notable area is on the coaching side; you'd be hardpressed to name half-a-dozen pro players who have female coaches.

With so many former players around the game, it's surprising more women haven't gone that route. Certainly their male counterparts are legion on both the WTA and ATP Tours.

Why? But for many reasons, it's just more difficult.

It's tougher for women to work their way up the coaching ranks, and the pool is tiny to begin with.

Given the travel required to coach a professional player, coaches who put off starting a family during their playing careers would have to put it off even longer. And many are worn down by the grind when they hang up their racquets.

And, even in the 21st century, many female players still prefer to be coached by men.

In many cases, it is their fathers. If that seems a little out of the Stone Age, being coached by a woman still remains out-of-the-box thinking and athletes, in general, tend to stick with the status quo.

"I enjoy it, passing along the experience I acquired as a player, and what I've learned in my new job as a coach, because it really is a whole new trade that I've learned," said former world No. 3 Nathalie Tauziat of France, who works with rising Canadian Genie Bouchard.

"It's not because you were a good player that you'll make a good coach.

"I think there are things you can say to a woman you can't say to a man. (Bouchard) and I don't share everything, but I'm sure there are things she wouldn't say to a male coach."

Tauziat, 44, has three kids, including 4-year-old twins, and lives in Biarritz, France.

She makes it work. "I have a fantastic husband who accepts the situation, for the moment at least. I'm gone a lot of weeks, but at home a month and a half or two at a time," she said. "I do groups of weeks. It's

a question of organization, but for now, it's working."

One of the more successful female coach-player partnerships around has been in Montreal this week.

Galina Voskoboeva of Kazakhstan and Russian Alina Jidkova, who retired at the end of 2010, have worked together since about a year and a half. It is Jidkova's first coaching job.

Voskoboeva's ranking stood at No. 621 after she missed the second half of 2009 due to shoulder surgery.

She has come all the way back; Voskoboeva went through qualifying to reach the quarterfinals of last year's Rogers Cup in Toronto, upsetting top-10 players Marion Bartoli and Maria Sharapova along the way. This May, she set career highs of No. 42 in singles and No. 27 in doubles.

The 26-year-old is currently ranked No. 57.

"I didn't know if she would be good," said Voskoboeva, "but I thought she may be because she had a long career. She worked hard. She did many things on her own so she understands much from that side. She didn't get everything easy."

Listening to Jidkova analyze matches while both were on Tour together convinced her their philosophies about the game were compatible.

Jidkova, who reached No. 51 in singles and No. 50 in doubles in a career that began back in 1992, had helped a couple of teenagers at home in Florida, neither of whom was pro material. As a coach, she jumped straight into the major leagues.

"I think for the player who had her own career, and a good one, it is very difficult to start coaching young kids or someone who will never get to this level. It's completely different motivation, and they get used to this feeling," Voskoboeva said.

"Once a racehorse, always a racehorse," Jidkova said, with a laugh.

"Once you've been a player and you know how it is, and you go back to normal life, there is no winning and losing, no adrenalin rush," she added. "You miss it; you want to go back and pass on the experience and be in the environment."

For these two Russians, this arrangement is hardly out-of-the-box thinking; they grew up with it.

Jidkova is Voskoboeva's third female coach. The first was Tatiana Naumko, famous for being one of the rare female coaches on the ATP Tour during her long association with Andrei Chesnokov. The other was Evgenia Maniokova, who won the 1993 French Open mixed doubles and currently works with another Russian, Ekaterina Makarova.

Jidkova's first coach was the legendary Larisa Preobrazhenskaya, from Moscow's Spartak club.

Jidkova said several players have approached her expressing interest, including former French Open champion Anastasia Myskina (who has worked with Russian Svetlana Kuznetsova), Wimbledon champion Conchita Martinez and Tatiana Poutchek, who retired last year and is the new Fed Cup captain for Belarus.

Iroda Tulyaganova, who reached No. 16 in the world as a 20-year-old in 2002 before her career was cut short by injuries, has started working with countrywoman Akgul Amanmuradova of Uzbekistan.

They are the notable exceptions. Hopefully, they'll be the start of something.

Among North Americans, there have been few, mostly family members.

British Fed Cup captain Judy Murray, mother of Olympic gold medallist Andy Murray, told The Gazette that the British Lawn Tennis Association sent four young female coaching prospects along with the Fed Cup team to its last competition, to get their feet wet.

Murray, who has never coached a WTA player on tour, said one of the challenges is that while a male player of even average ability hits hard enough to also serve as a practice partner, having a female coach would require also having a male practice partner.

In most cases, except for the players at the very top, that's cost-prohibitive.

The other option is constantly rounding up fellow players to practice with. "Some like it, some less," Tauziat said. "But when I find partners for Eugenie, she's not reticent about it. She likes hitting with the girls."

Voskoboeva said it's not an issue. "All my women coaches actually hit the ball not harder than men, but they don't do any mistakes. The men, they hit, and every third ball is a mistake while the women, they're like a wall," she said. "I think it's not very important that your coach should play to a good level. The main thing is that

she should coach on a good level."

Jidkova said going from playing to coaching was an adjustment. "I like it, but of course there are some challenges. First of all, you have to put yourself in the background; the needs of the player always come first," she said. "But it's always nice to see the progress, and somebody getting better. For me, it's a satisfaction.

"When she loses, I feel the same as I did when I played."

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