

# CAUSING A RACQUE

Two coaches and teachers share passion and unique experiences with tennis

**T**O AN ATHLETE, THEIR COACH is often someone they look up to and idolize. No matter what sport, coaches teach their athletes many skills and life lessons. Veteran business teacher Ann Dark and new English teacher Traci Rhodes, and 13-year head tennis coach for both boys and girls, are as devoted to their teams as they are devoted to teaching. Rhodes is currently involved with the girls tennis team while Dark is enjoying the Olympic successes of a former player.

"Coaching and asking players to do drills until they get it right follows me into the classroom," Rhodes said. "I teach so that my students learn new material, allow them time to practice, and then ask them to show me 'mastery' on the big game day. I have high expectations for students and athletes no matter if I am on the court or in the classroom."

Rhodes is not an Overland Park native, despite her undeniable spirit for the school. When she moved to Kansas City 13 years ago, she brought experience as a tennis coach, along with her positive attitude.

"When I first moved here I was excited to see a tennis opening and I jumped at the chance to coach here in KC," Rhodes said. "But what I didn't know at the time was that West was such an amazing place. I love the atmosphere from inside the building, all the way to the support outside to the courts."

In coaching, Rhodes has been able to develop unique relationships with her student-athletes, seeing a side of

them that usually is not exposed in the classroom. "Coaching allows me to have a different type of relationship with students," Rhodes said. "They don't take my class because it's an elective—they are forced to take ELA—but seeing student athletes try something new and different outside of the classroom allows me to see a different side of them."

Rhodes' athletes have definitely developed for the better through her coaching. Senior Reagan Sherron, one of two team captains, admires and respects Rhodes.

"Coach Rhodes has become someone that I definitely look up to because she really loves the sport and West and the team in general," Sherron said. "[She] works hard to

make every season better than the last."

Despite the stress from coaching in conjunction with teaching and grading assignments, Rhodes loves what she does.

"Our student athletes are amazing and so are their families," Rhodes said. "I wouldn't trade this place for anywhere."

Hopes are high for the team on the upcoming season, especially for team captains Reagan Sherron and senior Brylin Staats.

"Our goals for the season are to just have fun and grow as a team and improve the program," Sherron said. "We hope to get as many people to qualify for the state tournament as possible and just work on personal goals."

## Jonah Park Contributor

Freshman Danielle Ferrigno accepts advice from tennis coach Traci Rhodes at a match against BV Southwest on Tuesday, Sept. 19. Photo by Bradley Mittleman



Business and computer sciences teacher Ann Dark also enjoyed a rewarding career as a tennis coach. Despite her day job at BV West, she coached at BV North. Her most successful athlete is Jack Sock, who won a gold medal in mixed-doubles at the Rio Olympics on Aug. 14.

Dark was Sock's coach for his last three years in high school and was able to form a strong relationship with him.

"I knew before I even met him. He as a freshman did not lose a match," Dark said. "He was a name I'd been hearing. He was on a whole other level than any other high school player I'd ever seen."

Sock was unstoppable, and started traveling around the country frequently during high school to compete.

"You might think 'Oh, this tennis player's really good too', then Jack can turn it up to a whole new level and make them [other players] look like they just started playing tennis," Dark said. "He was heads and shoulders above the competition."

In August, Sock won both a bronze and a gold medal. "It was... awesome," Dark said.

Dark followed Sock's progress as soon as she heard he was going to represent the USA in the Olympics. She watched him compete on television and streamed some of his matches online.

"Just knowing that 'Hey, I know him,' and having that personal connection. You always want the best for your players," Dark said. "For him to win bronze, I was thrilled with that, then he got gold. I'm really proud of him."

Throughout her years as his coach, Dark saw him develop, both on and off the court.

"It's been really fun to follow his progress," Dark said. "He's had to grow up in the public eye. As a celebrity really. Countless interviews, public speaking, and all those things."

Sock's tennis abilities were so unbelievable that there was little he could learn and improve on. Dark even admits that she probably did not teach him anything new about the sport, but she believes she has taught him other things.

"He came to me at a level where there wasn't much more I could coach him on because he really didn't need my help, but I like to think that I may have helped him become a complete person. Holding him to a higher academic standard, sportsmanship, being that well-rounded athlete and person," Dark said. "I think that I've contributed partially to that."

Even though Sock has achieved the things he has in the sport of tennis, Dark is more proud of the things he does as a person.

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"The thing I'm probably most proud of is his connection back to the community and to the youth tennis in the area," Dark said. "Spending time with kids, getting them excited about tennis, answering their questions."

Arguably the most important thing between a coach and athlete is their relationship.

"I would say we have a good relationship. I try not to bug him and say, 'Good luck in your match' or 'Congratulations,' because I know there are plenty of people who do that but we are really happy when we do get to see each other," Dark said. "[We have] a mutual respect and admiration for each other."

After things settle down from the Olympics, Dark hopes to get a chance to see Sock and catch up with him.

"I'm hoping in November we can go out for some Chipotle - that's his favorite and I don't mind it either," Dark said.

Common thought is that the coach makes an impact on their athletes' life, but the athlete can make just as big of an impact on their coach. Whether it's the life skills that are learned, the memories that are made, or the Chipotle that is shared.

Olympic gold medalist Jack Sock poses with teacher and former coach Ann Dark at the Elite Tennis Club on Sept. 15. Photo courtesy Ann Dark

