

## New-generation athletes

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John-Laffnie de Jager's life story reads like something straight out of D.H. Lawrence's poem about "never seeing a wild thing feel sorry for itself".

"When I was born, my heart stopped," the former SA tennis player begins. "Doctors tried to revive me, and when they gave me an injection to revive me they did it on my butt – instead of my side – and hit my main nerve going down the side of my right leg and damaged it.

"So I only have 10% use of the nerve in my right leg – from birth I've never had movement in my toes and I can't flex my foot. My right leg was an inch-and-a-half shorter because I had it in a cast to stabilise it for the first three years.

"I was told I'd have a 12% chance of walking properly and never play sport, so I had to work twice as hard as the others just to be even. My parents never brought me up as someone that had a disability, so I never had a boundary in my mindset in terms of what I can or can't do."

Thanks to his parents taking a no-coddling approach with him – which included his father throwing away his built-up shoe for his shorter leg when he was four – De Jager went on to play Davis Cup tennis for South Africa and make a name for himself on the ATP Tour as a doubles player. Not bad for a guy who should never have set a dodgy foot on a tennis court to begin with.

In a way it's understandable that JL – as everyone knows De Jager – with his particular brand of old-school tough love for getting results, would end up in the "mental" space: "I don't have a psychologist's qualification, [but] for the last 30 years I've been in high performance sport.

"I went to the military when I was 16, played my first Grand Slam semi-final at 19, I've had a gun to my face and my wife's had cancer. So I've had all these challenges that got me right for what I wanted to do, high performance [coaching]."

### **In with the new...**

There's a slight irony about someone with an uncompromising mentality like De Jager being in charge of the addled so-called new generation in his capacity as a high-performance coach for young tennis players at the University of Pretoria's Varsity Cup team.

Millennials – and their Generation Z cousins – are accused of wallowing in circumstances, real or perceived, and have a reputation for lacking in resilience and patience, as well as being entitled. The new generation is supposed to be different to its predecessors. But how different are they, really, especially as adversity has always been a key ingredient to bringing out the best in the human race?

"They're definitely different and they're different because of their parents," De Jager dives in. "Parents are the reason kids today are entitled. If you ask parents 'are you treating your kids the way your parents treated you?' the answer is no.

"An example is if your kid wants to play sport and he's in the A team and gets dropped. He no longer wants to play the sport, and the parents are OK with it. What we're teaching them is if you start something and you fail you can start something else.

"If you start something you have to finish it – at least do it until the end of the year and take up something else. Our parents were great because we turned out great, but do we treat our kids the same? No, we're soft on them."

### **What's in a generation?**

Tom Dawson-Squibb, the Stormers' high-performance coach, and head of the University of Cape Town's Varsity Cup team, is loath to subscribe to the idea of new and old generations, preferring to interrogate what that means in English in the first place.

"When I worked at schools level the matrics used to come and say the Grade 8 students were getting away with much more than they used to," he says. "I always thought that it was funny that the same narrative would repeat itself with the Grade Eights in five years' time – so I wonder how long that has been going on."

In his interview on Impact Theory in 2018, leadership guru Simon Sinek's description of Millennials seemed to agree somewhat with De Jager: "It's as if they're standing at the foot of a mountain and they have this abstract concept they want to have in the world called impact, which is the summit.

"What they don't see is the mountain. I don't care if you go up the mountain quickly or slowly, there's still a mountain. This young generation needs to learn patience ... that some things that really matter, like love, job fulfilment, love of life, self-confidence – all of these things take time."

### **Pro sport is not for the weak of will**

With sport having fulsomely embraced Malcolm Gladwell's theory that it takes 10 000 hours of intensive practice to master complex skills, learning that the new generation likes a quick and sure thing suggests they should find the gruelling task that is reaching the ceiling of their potential tough.

The time-honoured process of teasing talent out of athletes has always involved one part kick up the backside, one part arm around the shoulders, and allowing said athletes' special traits free rein every now and again.

Too often, old-school coaches have lazily favoured the former hypothesis, with one of the prime examples being how former Proteas coach Ray Jennings dealt with former SA fast bowler Makhaya Ntini's dip in form in 2005.

The country's first ever black African player had all the signs of a fast bowler operating on fumes on tour in the West Indies, which Jennings read as a comfort zone and responded to by riding him for days with threats of him losing his place in the team.

The result was an irate Ntini's career-best figures of 13/132 – still the best figures by an SA bowler.

There's a temptation to say all's well that ends well, but high performance coach Tom Dawson-Squibb, says it's an unsustainable mode of motivation.

"It works because human beings respond to threats, [because] it's fight or flight," he explains. "So if I, my ego or my place in the team is threatened it's likely to elicit a behavioural change. [But] That threat isn't always going to be a there forever, so you can't always just shout at someone.

"The truth is you're not going to last very long as a coach if you do that. You might get away with that if you're coaching the first team at school because you're only coaching them for a year or two. If you're coaching at a union and all you can do is shout you're not going to last."

### **Adapt and all that**

Dawson-Squibb agrees that not only have athletes changed, they have affected the way coaches coach.

"There are a few things that are different from 10 to 15 years ago. The one is instant gratification, which is a worldwide phenomenon. The patience and concentration levels are lower so you need to get information across quicker.

"The thirst for quick fixes and 'make me good quickly' is higher because that's the way the world works. Social media is huge and everything goes online, there's almost nothing sacred. The younger guys are self-aware in a self-conscious way.

"How that's changed coaching is there has been a massive movement towards a more facilitating style of coaching, where you ask more questions, are less dictatorial and co-create with the athlete."

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De Jager, who preaches doing the things that don't require talent – like getting up every time to greet someone, saying their name and thanking people like the medics after games – are the little things that make sports people better and gives a nod to the influence of the “new” age.

Through his advocacy for the Laterality and Brain Health Profiling programme, a study was conducted to determine whether individuals are right or left side dominant and to assess how their brains function. The results were compiled into a file that basically holds the key to the best teaching methods.

“A rugby example is you have a flyhalf and a fullback, both are great kickers. But the one is right hand and eye dominant, so under pressure he doesn't ‘lose’ his hand-eye co-ordination. The other one is right hand and left eye dominant so under pressure there's a possibility they could lose their hand-eye co-ordination.”

Even though De Jager's points of departure as a coach who believes “little things make a difference”, “no excuses”, “I can't feel sorry for you” and “make being uncomfortable comfortable”, sound a little retro, using a tool like the laterality programme suggests he's making the requisite adjustments to reach modern athletes.

But as Dawson-Squibb says, are they particularly different to begin with?

“I'm wary of saying things are different or not because how do I know? What am I measuring it on? There are some subtle differences but they're certainly not all for the worst. You don't want to be one of those old guys that say it's worse than it used to be because I'm not sure it necessarily is.”