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Profile Article by Liad Lerner (student); University of Missouri Journalism School

## Rock Bridge Tennis Coach Uses Psychology to Inspire Success

COLUMBIA, MO. – When you’ve coached a high school team to 17 state titles and 37 total final fours, it’s not hard to see yourself getting a little cocky.

But that’s not the case for Rock Bridge tennis coach Ben Loeb, who over the course of his 49 seasons in charge of the school’s boys and girls tennis teams, has turned the Bruins into a powerhouse of the sport in Missouri.

Including the 2018 title – which was recently won at the Cooper Tennis Complex in Springfield, Missouri, in October – the Rock Bridge girls team has won the last five Missouri State High School Activities Association Class 2 state championships. The boys team, which plays in the spring, has won the last three. For reference, each team competes against more than 170 other schools in Missouri.

But Loeb doesn’t name himself as the reason for the school’s 20-year tennis dynasty.

“You have to have enough players that have the talent and commitment to play the sport,” Loeb said. “Without that you’re not going to do nearly as well as if you do.”

Even so, the sheer number of times Rock Bridge has stood atop the podium suggests there is something different about the coach, the one constant through two decades of success.

“A lot of the teams in high school will go to practice and just do lots of drills and scrimmages,” Rock Bridge senior and four-time state champion, Eleanor Fay, said in a phone interview. “But what differentiates coach Loeb from other coaches is that he goes just as much into the psychology of a sport, and I think that that really helps a lot with our athletic performance.”

Fay describes one of her favorite drills, a Loeb classic called “shadow boxing,” where the players visualize being in a real match and do the corresponding swings and movements, only there is no ball involved.

“It helps us imagine winning, losing and hitting different shots,” Fay said. “He says that if you spend time visualizing, then the outcome you want is more likely to happen. You prepare mentally before physically in order to get better.”

Loeb knows a thing or two about the mental aspect of sports. He has been teaching a sports psychology class available to all three of Columbia's public high schools since retiring from teaching full time in 2011.

The 63-year-old also published a 212-page book over the summer of 2018 called "Next Level Coaching: How to Use Sports Psychology to Educate, Motivate and Improve Student Athlete Performance," which contains some of the psychological lessons he has learned and taught throughout his career.

The book is available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble and on his website, [benloebcoaching.com](http://benloebcoaching.com)

"(Writing the book) was a lot more work than I ever thought it would be," Loeb said in a [July 15 interview with KOMU 8's Chris Gervino](#), on the TV show "Sports Xtra with Chris Gervino."

"I wanted to come up with a resource for coaches, athletes and parents of athletes to use that could help the student athlete with the psychological and emotional side of sport, which is so important."

The St. Louis native said his interest in psychology began in the mid-1980s, when he took a sports psychology class under Rick McGuire while studying post-graduation at MU after completing his undergraduate studies at the University of Colorado.

Over the years, Loeb has attended sport psychology and mental toughness workshops with notable psychologists such as James E. Loehr, Jim Taylor and Lorenzo Beltrame.

"I learned a lot about different topic areas in sports psychology," Loeb said. "Whether it be mental toughness, confidence, focus, emotional control or others. I learned more about the theory of it, and then it was a matter of trying to figure out how to apply it."

That application came after class, when he was a coach for MU's tennis team. Loeb has been playing tennis since he was 11 and jumped at the opportunity to become a coach for MU. After completing his educational specialist degree in business education in 1988, he accepted a teaching job at Rock Bridge High School.

He also accepted the tennis head coaching job at Hickman High School, where he applied the lessons he learned in psychology to coach the Kewpies' boys team to the

state championship in 1994, a foreshadowing of the many trophies yet to come for the up-and-coming coach.

The next season, he became Rock Bridge's head coach, and 24 years and 17 titles later, the former business teacher is still molding Bruins into winners through his focus on the mental game.

"My favorite (quote) of all time is 'Go confidently in the direction of your dreams' by (Henry David) Thoreau," Loeb said. "If you can get kids to follow their dreams, some of which are associated with athletics, they have a better chance of being successful."

Another lesson that Loeb uses a lot is the concept of having "competitive balance." He describes this balance as being on a tightrope and balancing competitive fight on one side, and emotional control on the other.

"If you have the competitive fight but you don't have the emotional control, you're gonna be out of balance," Loeb said. "You're not gonna be able to perform as well as you could if you were in balance."

"On the other hand, if you have the emotional control but you don't have the competitive fight, you're not gonna have what it takes to bring out the best in yourself and truly be successful in a truly competitive arena. These are the types of things we talk about leading up to the ultimate competition: The final four."

Sometimes Loeb's teachings even transcend the tennis court.

Sophi Farid is a 2014 Rock Bridge alumna, who won two state championships playing under Loeb, and now is a high school teacher and tennis coach of her own at West Mecklenburg High School in North Carolina. Farid still finds herself using tips she learned at practice seven years ago in her everyday life.

"He used to say that you should expect that (your opponent is) going to hit the ball back," Farid said in a phone interview. "Sometimes you get excited when you hit really well, but he wanted us to have the confidence to want them to hit it back so that we could then we could come back again and get another big hit on them. Not even just in tennis, I have learned to appreciate and expect that people are going to rise to the occasion so that I can step up and do my best."