



# Dennis' Amazing Journey

It is never too late to start! Kent Coach, Dennis Saunders, changed career after 30 years as a London black cabby, retraining as a LTA tennis coach at 50. Over the past 3 years he has worked through his Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 qualifications and is now halfway through his Level 4 Senior Club Coach course. Click on the link to take you to info about LTA coaching qualifications:

<https://www.lta.org.uk/workforce-venues/coach-teach/tennis-coach-qualifications/>



***Dennis told his story to Kent Tennis volunteer, Susan Peters-Berg:***

### **Starting out**

Dennis Saunders grew up in Waterloo and Bermondsey and started playing tennis in his teens. Tennis courts were few and far between so he organised tennis tournaments for his school friends and was so successful that he was crowned Junior Champion at West Norwood LTC two years running from 1980 and 1981 and, at fifteen he reached the final of the LTA tournament at Spencer Park. At the age of seventeen Dennis lost his father and was unable to continue playing tennis competitively because he had no access to funding or support. One of his friend's fathers was a black cab driver and encouraged him into a career that lasted thirty years.

### **His inspiration**

Dennis has three sons and started his coaching career in football in 2002. He has the FA Level 1 & 2 qualifications as well as the UEFA level B which he put to good use when he formed a local club, Hayes FC. As an involved parent he coached the U10s and U18s and had a son in each team. In June 2008 he joined the Tennis for Free scheme at The Parklangley Club and paid for his three sons to have coaching before he started to give them lessons himself. One afternoon in Beckenham he found himself on a court next to Paul Dent (an LTA Senior Performance Coach and BASES Accredited Sports Psychologist and co-author of The Tennis Coaches Toolkit.) Dennis was fascinated by his coaching techniques and returned on a regular basis to watch him from the sidelines so he could; "...steal his ideas and coach his sons more effectively", and he soon found that he enjoyed this more than football.

### **The challenges he faced**

All black cab drivers need to pass the London Knowledge test which is generally acknowledged to be one of the hardest in the world and on average takes three years to master. After driving a black cab for thirty years, he felt that the arrival of Uber in London has had a hugely negative impact on the industry and led to his decision to re-evaluate his future. Dennis decided to return to coaching and attended a Kent Tennis Coaches Forum, where he met Sue Bamford who encouraged him to make this career change. It was an emotional day for Dennis when Sue told him he had passed his Level 2 exam and he has not looked back since.



### **What made the journey more of a challenge?**

While Dennis was taking his Level 2 coaching exams his brother, who was also a black cab driver, was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia; it was a devastating time for the entire family. A year later while Dennis was taking his Level 3 exams his brother was matched with a donor from California and had a bone marrow transplant and is now in full remission. As a result of this experience so close to home, Dennis is philosophical about life being short and aims to make the most of his new career while he can and is currently half way through his Level 4 qualifications which should be completed in April this year.

### **What in your opinion makes a great coach?**

Dennis believes that the greatest asset a coach can have is patience and that; "...to succeed you have to trust the process and find a way to develop every player, there is no right or wrong way to get the result you want." He suggests that we all need to channel our "Inner Chimp" to be able to achieve the best in ourselves. He is referring to the book called The Chimp Paradox by Steve Peters describing a theory which focuses on the part of the brain which controls emotions and instinct. The idea is that if you can manage pressure, rising emotion and anxiety you will perform much more effectively. The most successful athletes learn to perform under extreme pressure, but they are also prepared to listen to advice. As Sir Alex Ferguson was famously quoted as saying; "There's a reason that God gave us two ears, two eyes, and one mouth. It's so you can listen and watch twice as much as you talk. Best of all, listening costs you nothing."

### **Where would he like to be in five years time?**

When I asked where Dennis would like to be in five years time, he laughed and said; "Alive and still coaching!". Coaching tennis has literally changed his life, in 2016 Dennis says that he weighed 18 stone, just over two years later he has lost four stone and feels fantastic. "I look forward to going to work now and every day is different, every day is rewarding."

Dennis currently coaches at The Parklangley Club in Beckenham.