

The role of parents in the training of beginner tennis players

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the role of parents during the first development phase of the player towards high-performance. It is based on a scientific literature review correlated with the personal experience of the author as an expert in training young beginner players. Throughout the early development phase, parental behaviour can greatly influence long term development in either a positive or negative fashion. Research will be discussed in line with this suggestion.

Key words: Tennis 10s, initial training, parental involvement, parents/child relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Developing young players towards the elite is a gradual process (Coté, 1999) that includes an initial phase (6/12 years), a specialisation phase (13/15 years) and an investment phase (16+ years). Children showing predispositions for tennis are detected at the beginning of the initial phase (6/7) so that they can become part of a training and competition process (from 8 years old onwards) leading to parental investment in terms of time and money.

The individual nature of competitive tennis has triggered the emergence of parental behaviours that can have an influence on the anxiety of children (Blois, 2009). Parents bring their children to the competition venue and stay throughout the match, which means that parents have a number of instances where they can potentially affect the child and their behaviour. During this phase, it is essential that children develop self-confidence as well as confidence in their sport skill level (Lubbers, 2003).

Three major roles of the parent have been brought to light by the model defined by Fredricks and Eccles (2004):

- Purveying experience: transportation to training sessions and tournaments, money for lessons and equipment (logistical and financial support).
- Interpreting: reactions associated with the performance of children in relation to their expectations, how much importance is attached to the sport with regard to social acceptance etc.
- Acting as models: this is conveyed in various situations such as in the relationship with the other parents, the coach, the umpire, or as a player.

RESEARCH ON PARENTS AND YOUNG TENNIS PLAYERS

The various roles and behaviours that parents exhibit have generally been studied using two methods. The first one is based on the administering of the Parental Involvement in Sport Questionnaire (PISQ – Lee et Mc Lean, 1997) to players (Lee et Mc Lean, 1997; Bois, 2009) or to players and their parents (Wuerth, 2004). The PISQ evaluates 4 aspects: (1) active involvement; (2) directive and controlling behaviours; (3) support and understanding; (4) pressure.

The second method of research in this area is by interviews with coaches working with young players only (Gould, 2006 ; Gould, 2008) or with the parents/coach/player triad (Wolfenden, 2005 ; Lauer, 2010).

Content analysis of these interviews has helped identify behaviours deemed either positive or negative, which were then ranked according to their rate of occurrence and impact on the child's behaviour.

Main negative behaviours:

- Too much importance attached to victory: pressure is put on the child

who may come to perceive his personal value only through his level of performance.

- Criticism and directive behaviours: loss of intrinsic motivation, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem (Lavoie, 2008).
- Lack of emotional control: heightened anxiety in competition (Bois, 2009).

Main positive behaviours:

- Emotional support and unconditional love: presence during difficult times, affection regardless of the result, encouragement towards doing the best possible.
- Financial support: investment in individual lessons, camps, equipment, etc.
- Logistical support: transport to training sessions and tournaments, family planning, etc.

PRACTICAL TIPS

In order to help parents fulfil their roles in a positive way, it is important to communicate with them and help them maintain an appropriate perspective.



- Focusing on the process rather than the result (Hatzigeorgiadis, 1999)

The dissimilarity of all aspects of a young player's development can have an influence upon short-term results. Also, progressive technical and tactical skills may not guarantee performance at this stage while they are essential in the long run. The coach will then have to propose developmental objectives that can be easily evaluated during lessons or matches (technical, tactical, physical and behavioural improvements) and the focus should not be solely about results right now.

- Placing tennis on an equal level with family and social activities

It can be interesting to establish a code whereby at home or during family time conversation topics should not be about tennis and to avoid playing during weekends, especially in the presence of siblings that aren't involved in tennis.

- Considering tennis as a lifestyle and not as an ultimate goal (attitude, moral values)

Through training sessions and tournaments, it is important to promote values of discipline, effort, self-respect and respect of others, which will later become transferable to other aspects of life even if the child doesn't continue playing.

It is also important to help parents improve their emotional control during competitions. For young players, competition is a factor of stress in itself that can be heightened by the presence and behaviour of parents (Bois, 2009). Displays of frustration, irritation and anxiety are negative signs sent out to the player, who at the time is seeking support as well as a reassuring presence. One useful but simple technique is to give parents the opportunity to fill in an observation sheet allowing for statistical analysis (Genevois, 2011), this way parents are more likely to maintain a certain level of neutrality in terms of body language while still being able to encourage their children verbally at key moments — since writing things down detaches them from their immediate emotions (Genevois, 2011). This observation sheet allows them to record the strokes performed by their child according to a predefined code. At the end of each rally the outcome is evaluated qualitatively or quantitatively (winner, point won, unforced error, forced error).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is difficult for talented children to develop their full potential unless they benefit from a huge parental support, particularly during the first stages of their participation in the sport (Monsaas, 1885). Furthermore, the quality of parental behaviour is also a priority as the child grows up, for it has proved to be a determining factor in the development of children towards the elite level. The above recommendations should therefore be considered in order to optimise the positive development of a child both on- and off- court.

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