

The ITF Junior Boys' Circuit and its Role in Professional Player Development

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INTRODUCTION

In tennis, the ages of 15-18 are considered key from a player development perspective. It is here, where the best male and female players add physical power and tactical nous to their already well-honed technical games. These four years also represent a period where important decisions must be made with respect to a chosen competitive pathway.

Long considered one of the primary breeding grounds for budding professional players (MacCurdy, 2000), the International Tennis Federation Junior Circuit's (ITFJC) importance to player development is anecdotally, very



Roberto Bautista (ESP) helping Spain win the Junior Davis Cup 2004.

well recognised (van Fraayenhoven, 2004). However, only Miley and Nesbitt (1995) have attempted to link ranking achievement in the junior game to later, professional success. It is this article's intention to explore this relationship in the male game for all top 20 ITF-ranked juniors between 1992-98. A future paper will discuss the implications of the ITFJC for female player development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The seven year period from 1992-98 saw a total of 116 boys, from 40 countries, achieve a top 20 ITF junior ranking (JR). Twenty-four players were ranked inside the top 20 on more than one occasion. Argentina and the United States each had nine players with a top 20 JR, while 14 countries had three or more top 20-ranked juniors in this seven year stretch.

Table 1 illustrates that 91% (106 / 116) of these top 20 juniors went on to attain a professional men's ranking. Superficially, a comparison of the ranking highs within the junior top 20 suggests that higher ranked junior players tend to also achieve higher professional rankings. The mean age at which all top 20 juniors achieved their highest professional ranking was 23.5 ± 2 years.

The percentage of top ranked junior players to build on their U/18 successes and reach common ranking goals in the professional game is depicted in Table 2. Forty-five percent of all top 20-ranked junior players from 1992-98 broke into the professional top 100, while slightly more than one in every third went on to reach the top 50. These figures increase to 56% and 44% respectively when only top 5-ranked juniors are considered. Indeed, one in every four of this group of players reached a top 10 professional ranking. Some similarity exists between the professional ranking progression of the top 6-10

ITF Junior Ranking	Professional Ranking			
	Top 100	Top 50	Top 20	Top 10
1-5	56%	44%	34%	25%
6-10	42%	36%	16%	10%
11-15	48%	34%	19%	15%
16-20	31%	19%	19%	8%
All	45%	34%	22%	15%

Table 2. Likelihood (in percentage terms) of top 20-ranked juniors reaching a top 100, 50, 20 and/or 10 professional ranking.

and the top 11-15 ranked juniors, and although fewer top 16-20 juniors reached the professional top 100, their representation in the professional top 20 and 10 compares favorably.

ITF Junior Ranking	Total Junior Players	Players to be ranked professionally	Highest Ranking	Age at highest ranking	
				Mean	St Dev
1-5	32	31	89.2	23.5	1.9
6-10	31	29	142.9	22.8	1.5
11-15	27	24	168.5	23.6	2.1
16-20	26	22	175.3	24.2	2.4
All	116	106	139.7	23.5	2.0

Table 1. Mean highest professional ranking for top 20 junior boys and mean age at which it was achieved.

CONCLUSION

The selection of the appropriate means through which to develop the necessary personal, physical and game-based skills for successful, professional tennis performance is one that confronts all serious, competitive players. The achievement of a boys' top 20 junior world ranking would appear to be a reasonable yardstick of playing talent and a

worthwhile developmental goal for all aspiring male professionals. A comparison of the significance of the ITFJC with that of other developmental pathways such as the US College system is eagerly anticipated.

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