Talent Identification and Development in Tennis

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INTRODUCTION

Almost everybody involved in tennis - players, coaches, parents, officials, media, fans - would like to see themselves, their players, children or compatriots experience success in the game at the professional level. However, only an exclusive group of players that have a numerous set of specific features required by the game and can display them at their best in competition achieve this. These players are called "talents".

Due to the "open-skill" nature of tennis, the process of detecting, identifying, selecting and then developing "talents" is an enormous and difficult challenge that has long been discussed by National Associations, coaches and sport science experts among others (Schönborn, 1984; Stojan, 1984).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The search for "talents" is as old as life itself. In sport, systematic talent identification (TI) programmes started in the former Eastern block countries around the 1960's and 1970's and were responsible for a great part of their Olympic success. These programmes have been adapted in countries such as China and Cuba with the results also being good (Malina, 1997).

Traditionally tennis has used process of natural selection, however in recent years sport science based tennis TI projects have seen researchers trying to determine the specific characteristics that tennis demands for young talents to become top players (Müller, 1990).

Currently, the majority of the highly developed tennis nations have TI programmes in place, with all having several similar fundamental characteristics and a varying input from sport science. However, it seems difficult to differentiate the success of these programmes from the overall effectiveness of their player development programmes (training and competitive system).

With regard to identifying "talents" in tennis, one of the key issues to consider is the degree to which tennis performance can be measured. Physical and physiological features seem much easier to evaluate than mental or technical-tactical features. And, since in tennis, skill and decision-making components have a substantial influence on high level performance, the predictive power of the different tests is relatively low and it is more complicated to predict future performance.

MODELS

Principally two TI models can be identified; a natural selection/performance model (in which players are introduced to tennis, develop their skills, progress, become more involved, practice everyday, compete gradually in higher level events and end up becoming a professional) or scientifically based models (in which sport science tennis principles are used to help in the process). Within the scientific model, the emphasis is generally on several specific sport science areas such as anthropometry, physiology, or psychology. Although historically the 2 methods have been considered as opposites, recent trends both in research and practice tend to suggest that a combination of both models works best with respect to identifying and developing talented players.

ADVANTAGES

The implementation of TI programmes can provide many benefits (Hoare, 2001; Stojanovic, 2006):

• In **general**, TI programmes provide talented players with the opportunity to develop their tennis skills, enhance their performance in the most receptive periods, and help them achieve tennis success thus stimulating participation, enjoyment, well-being and self-confidence. TI programmes can also attract players to tennis further broadening the participation base.

• **Natural selection** models use the participation base of current tennis players and emphasise a "winning spirit" from early on. In these models, the input from coaches is taken into account since criteria are mostly based on the "eye of the coach" and the results of the players.

• **Scientific-based** models use research results to produce batteries of tennis-specific tests. The results from these tests have a high level of reliability and validity and can help reduce the time taken to find talented players.

DISADVANTAGES

• In **general**, several problems with TI programmes have been identified (Malina, 2003). These include the **adaptations** of the talented player to the physical, social and emotional demands of the coaches, training programmes, and competitions, the degree of **decision making** from players and parents in the process, the **elimination** of players (survival of the fittest), the possible **economic discrimination** (resource allocation), and the discrimination according to **maturation** stages (influence of the month of birth).

• **Natural selection** models rely on the coincidence that the talented player may begin to play tennis. Therefore, the selection base may be reduced and some important years for talent development may be missed.

• **Scientific models** may not take into account the "intangible" elements that influence talent as well as the social implications needed for developing talented tennis players.
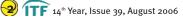
• Research tends to indicate that individual features (e.g. genes) and environmental conditions (e.g. parents, training) closely interact in the player development process and even though genetic determinants play their role, the context of player development seems to have a higher relevance.

• Studies have concluded that skills and aptitudes shown at a young age do not automatically translate into talent development and performance, and that talent is not always apparent by observation alone.

FACTORS TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN CREATING A TI PROGRAMME

We strongly recommend that all national associations (NA) should have in place a TI programme as part of their general player development programme. Countries that have a "small" tennis playing population (reduced base of the pyramid of opportunity) in which the "talent pool" or participation base is quite reduced need to identify talents in an efficient manner (LTA, 1996). Those countries with a large playing base need to implement talent selection programmes to select the correct talents from their "large pool". In general, talent programmes have a faster and more substantial impact on countries with reduced participation base (Hoare, 2001). To organise such a TI programme several factors need to be considered:

• **NA situation**: A SWOT analysis will help if it includes, among others, the following elements: **Rankings** (How many professional

male and female players do you have with ATP/WTA rankings? How many juniors with ITF JWR?), **population** (How many people live in your country? How many of them play tennis regularly…and competitively?), **culture** (Do sport and tennis play a significant role in the culture and society of your country?), **history** (Does your country have a successful tennis history?), **participation and retention** (What is the tennis participation level in your country? Is tennis part of the school curriculum? Do many players drop-out of tennis each year?), **resources** (Do your players have access to enough facilities, financial help, etc.?), **competition** (Does your country provide the necessary competition level and variation for players to develop?), **training** (Does your country provide the necessary training resources -coaches and sport science- for players to develop?).

- **NA goals:** The NA has to indicate the path the TI programme has to follow: **Direction** (Where do we want to go?), **players** (Who are we looking for? Males and / or females? Which ages?), **international trends** (Where is the game heading to? Experts participating in the TI programme should have a good knowledge and understanding of the demands of modern international tennis), **model** (How are we going to set up the TI programme? It is recommended to use a combination of natural selection and sport-science based models), **financial and staff implications** (How much is going to cost? Who can conduct it?).

- **TI programme:** Some features of a possible TI programme are: **Combination and flexibility** (use a holistic approach considering performance criteria, data provided by sport sciences, learning and skill development features, and social background), **joint venture** (involve schools, public facilities, private clubs, etc.), **share best practice** (use information available from other NAs and in sport science tennis specific literature), **adaptation** (adapt the TI programme to the needs and characteristics

of the NA), **records** (keep a database record of all participants), **linking** (relate the TI programme to the player development programme in order to conduct TI at the different stages of the player development), **participation** (do not forget about players that drop-out early from the performance strand, and provide opportunities for them to re-join or continue playing tennis at a participation level), **education** (consider that coaches may need better education and training to identify talents).

- **Follow up of the TI programme:** The NA should have a clear picture in mind of what will be the future development of the talented players identified and selected. Enough resources need to be allocated to ensure that these players will be provided with adequate opportunities for their talent not to be wasted. This should be part of the player development programme of the NA.

CONCLUSION

Identifying talent in tennis is more of an art than science and therefore a flexible approach is recommended (LTA, 1996). The fact is that the long-term player development path is a complex process that should continuously involve some degree of identification and selection (natural or formal) of talented players at virtually all stages. This process should be a joint venture that will facilitate the combined work of coaches and sport scientists in order to fully benefit from the experience and knowledge accumulated in tennis.

In closing, due to the inherent difficulties of the TI process with beginner level players and the fact that the testing of these players does not ensure very accurate results, recent research on the development of expertise in young players and the years of practical on-court dedication required suggest that the terms talent identification, detection and selection are surpassed by the principle of long-term player development. This broader concept includes the nurturing of tennis

expertise by creating the necessary conditions for talent development in all stages of the process. Several models of talent development have been presented in the sports literature (Balyi & Hamilton, 2003; Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). These models consider different stages of development from the initial exposure of the child to the sport to the retirement of the player, and are being applied by National Tennis Associations with the intention of providing talented players the best opportunities possible to develop their potential.

TI should not be used to discriminate against the less able but should assist coaches and NAs to design training and competition programmes to maximise potential and participation of all players (Rowley, 1993).

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