



Challenges for grassroots tennis development in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Success at the very beginner level of tennis is very important for increasing and maintaining the number of children involved in sports practice. To ensure success, it is imperative that the programs are structured in the right way to provide a positive environment of practice, and that the coaches involved are qualified and aware of their role working with children. Well organised programs offer quality access points and pathways to continued tennis practice, and effectively contribute to the growth and development of tennis in general.

Key words: tennis, sport initiation, Tennis10s

Received: 13 January 2019

Accepted: 22 February 2019

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INTRODUCTION

As described in the article "Assessing the potential of the 'introduction to tennis' landscape in Brazil", the situation in Brazil displays several strengths in the development of the practice, such as the use of suitable materials, the use of the Tennis10s program, training of national coaches, and greater access to information. On the other hand, it is necessary to overcome some challenges in order for the introduction to tennis process to advance. In this sense, this article aims to describe the challenges to, and opportunities for, the advancement of Brazil's 'introduction to tennis' level.

METHODS

The methods applied are the same ones described in the previous article, and they are presented here again in summary form. We interviewed 14 coordinators of Brazilian clubs in which grassroots tennis (introductory tennis) makes up a significant amount of the capacity. A thematic analysis was conducted (Sparkes and Smith, 2014), which culminated in three main categories, divided into two axis: (I) Challenges of (a) coaches and (b) getting more children to lay tennis; and, (II) How to move forward (c) by getting support for clubs and foundation-level projects.

AXIS I - Challenges: Brazilian grassroots tennis	
Coordinators	Category
(S2; S5; S9; S12; S13)	Coaches
(S2; S4; S13)	Getting more children to play tennis

Figure 1. Challenges encountered in the national initiation process.

AXIS II - How to move forward: Brazilian grassroots tennis	
Coordinators	Category
(S4; S5; S9; S12; S14)	Support for clubs and base projects

Figure 2. Proposal to advance the national initiation process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges

Whilst the training of coaches appeared in the previous article as one of the strengths of the Brazilian introductory/grassroots tennis, other aspects related to coaches are presented as challenges for its advancement. The shortage of qualified coaches was cited as a point of focus that could impact the growth of the sport.



[...] we do not have a very large number of teachers here in Rio Grande do Sul and I don't know exactly why. I think it has several explanations. For example, the ball boy who can no longer be a coach, he needs to (not completed...). There used to be many people [Ball boys] who were perhaps better trained than [coaches] now, that didn't have the physiological knowledge but had good technical knowledge because they were on court with a professional since then age of 10. As time went on they absorbed the knowledge and eventually became teachers or player. This type of coach no longer exists, so now we have many academic teachers, who come with very strong academic knowledge but a lower level of practical experience. So, regarding the coaches, that's what has happened, there aren't a lot of coaches. (S12– 15'03").

This problem seems to be associated with the pre-professional socialization of a significant portion of Brazilian coaches, linked to the ball boy job, which is declining in the country. As well as this aspect, the difficulties in incorporating tennis into Brazilian universities, and the requirement of a basic training in Physical Education in order to act legally as a coach in Brazil, contribute to this situation.

One of the coordinators (S2) cited another two points related to coaches that deserve to be highlighted. The first refers to the secondary role often given to the introductory sport or the early stages of long-term sports development. In these cases, it can clearly be seen that the coaches with greater experience train the elite players, whilst those with less experience work with the younger age groups at the foundational level (RAMA, 2016):

[...] I think we need to put our best coaches to work with the foundational level. What I see a lot is that our best coaches are never actually working at the foundation level of development, they are always working a little further along. Hence, I think there is something to be desired at the foundational level. (S2 – 7'14").

The second point raised by the same coordinator can be seen as either a result of the situation described beforehand, or as one of the factors responsible for its occurrence:

[...] the coaches who work at the beginner level do not have a good income (financially). At least from what I know. (S2 – 8'33").

In this case, the question that arises is: Do experienced coaches not coach at the foundation level because they would be paid less? Or, are coaches of beginner sports programs paid less since the most experienced professionals do not coach at this level? These two highlighted points seem relevant and deserve attention in future projects.

The second category of analysis regarding the challenges observed in the introduction to sport concerns the need to make more children play tennis. In this specific case, the elitist character of the sport and the cost of participating appear to be the main limiting factors to be overcome:

[...] I still think that tennis in Brazil is very expensive. Unless you have a structure within a club that enables you to play it. If you don't have this in a club it's difficult to go to a gym or somewhere else due to the cost. This is a challenge. Another challenge is to popularize tennis a bit more. Our tennis is still an elite sport. (S6 – 9'18").

Another factor that may have a negative impact on the increase in the number of children involved in tennis is related to the amount of activities they do and the ever-declining status that sports practice has in relation to them.

[...] I think that schools nowadays are taking up a lot of the child's time. So that's a very negative point for us. In the old days we could have activities starting at 2:00pm, but today this wouldn't work. The exceptions that we have are rare. (S1 – 16'21").

Finally, the motor difficulties demonstrated by children were cited by two coordinators (S1, S12) as a point to consider. The decline in outdoor play, purposeful games and the offer of motor experiences, resulting from the changes in the lifestyle of children in recent decades (Côté et al., 2007), point to a trend of reduction in the indices of motor performance demonstrated by Brazilian children and young people, which demands great reflection on the part of professionals involved in the work with this area (Ré et al., 2018).



How to move forward

When asked how the introduction to tennis element could advance, the coordinators expressed the need for greater support for clubs and foundation level projects. This is the only category found for this factor.

In this way, it is possible to identify the search for a close relationship with the Brazilian Tennis Confederation (CBT), where it can assist the clubs in this introductory work. This contribution ranges from the establishment of general guidelines for the introductory work to specific actions such as visits and trainings, carried out on site for the coaches of these clubs.

[...] it is fundamental that we have this work (referring to the visits), that there is someone, that the Brazilian Tennis Confederation is looking at the foundation level. Because in reality federations watched, the CBT watched, but never went deep into it. [...] what we need to know is exactly what the CBT is seeking now, referring to that training. (S4 – 13'25").

CONCLUSION

Based on the results observed in the study, it has been established that the scarcity of coaches and the number of children playing tennis are the main challenges to be overcome in the introduction to tennis work. In the first case, the university context approach seems to be inevitable considering the need for initial training in order to act as a coach in the country. In this sense, the promotion of internships and practical activities in clubs or gyms seems an important and feasible way for new professionals to gain access to the job market. To increase the number of people playing, and contribute to the development of children who are already playing, new development strategies must be implemented.

Note: The authors would like to thank Brazilian Tennis Confederation for their financial and logistical support in the development of this study

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