



Developing a career strategy for tennis talents

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ABSTRACT

In the business industry strategic planning is vital in reaching objectives and experiencing success. Tools to create a successful management strategy in the business field can be applied to sports and hence to tennis. This article provides coaches with practical tools to formulate a career strategy for tennis talents.

Key words: strategic planning, SWOT-analysis, SMART-goals
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INTRODUCTION

Strategic planning is a systematic process of envisioning a desired future, and translating this vision into broadly defined goals or objectives and a sequence of steps to achieve them (Business Dictionary, 2015). The process is common practice in the business industry and can be easily translated and applied to the sports industry. Hence, the tools (e.g. SWOT-analysis) entrepreneurs utilise to establish a strategic plan for businesses, are similarly applicable to the career planning of talented athletes.

Why do tennis talents need a strategic plan?

Strategic planning produces a holistic plan for the development of talents. Since long-term success is not exclusively the result of on-court development of technical and tactical skills, one has to assess other catalysts in the development process as well. These catalysts can be intrapersonal (i.e. rate of learning, training and maturation of anthropometric, physiological, technical, tactical and psychological skills) and environmental (i.e. opportunities created by parents, trainers, coaches, talent development programmes and the competition structure) along with a component of chance (Elferink-Gemser, Jordet, Coelho-E-Silva & Visscher, 2011; Mills, Butt, Maynard & Harwood, 2012).

A strategic plan also provides an overview of long-term and short-term objectives. Long-term aims and methods are a key generic feature in the effective development of talent (Martindale, Collins & Daubney, 2005). According to Locke and Latham (1985) goals affect performance by affecting effort, persistence, and direction of attention, and by motivating strategy development. Moreover, goal setting gives an athlete a sense of control and self-direction.

Strategic planning requires identification and evaluation of the player's talent and environment. Ultimately this should provide talents, coaches and other individuals involved with a coherent report of the desired and attainable objectives. Which in turn serves as a guiding principle in reaching the elite or maximum potential. Martindale et al. (2005) point out that given the large number of key influences in our (i.e. athletes) lives, it is extremely important to understand how powerful the effects of coherent messages from these various influences can be.

Furthermore, having a strategic plan in place could prevent overachieving or mishaps. For example, it could stop coaches, players and parents from aiming for the world number one spot, when a careful analysis shows that a top 100 spot is a more realistic objective.

STEPS IN THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS

In business, strategic management consists of three basic elements: first, the formulation of the strategy; second, the implementation of the strategy; finally, the control and evaluation of the strategy (Houben, Lenie & Vanhoof, 1999). Similarly, coaches can develop a career plan by formulating a plan and consequently implementing it, before ultimately evaluating the process.

The steps in the strategic planning cycle form a continuous process. Foremost, because of the dynamic environment surrounding young tennis talents. Hence, a career plan should simply serve as a guiding principle in a talent's career and will require constant adaptation.

Formulation of a strategy

Formulating a strategy demands a comprehensive analysis of the athlete and its surroundings. Before establishing an ultimate goal, an assessment has to be made of the internal and external environment. Moreover, sub-goals need to be set. Where successful completion of the sub-goals must result in reaching the end-goal.

SWOT-analysis

The first step in the development of a strategic plan is the identification and evaluation of strategic factors, which assist or hinder the company (i.e. the athlete) in reaching its full potential (Houben et al., 1999). A frequently utilized tool in identifying these factors is the SWOT-analysis. Here SWOT stands for 'strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats'. The analysis identifies the internal – strengths and weaknesses – and external – opportunities and threats – environment (Houben et al., 1999; Kotler & Keller, 2009).

When analysing the internal environment, and thus formulating the strengths and weaknesses of a player, one should especially look at a player's on-court strengths and weaknesses. For coaches this is probably the easiest step, identifying the weapons of their players (e.g. service) and at the same time game-elements that make their players vulnerable (e.g. fear of failure). However, the internal environment also applies to the athlete's strengths and weaknesses off-court and these should therefore not be overlooked.

When analysing the external environment one has to look beyond the athlete. The literature points out that there are many factors (e.g. parents, peers, resources and culture) involved in the development and eventual success of talented athletes (Martindale, Collins & Abraham, 2007; Martindale et

al., 2005). These factors are each capable of driving (opportunities) or limiting (threats) an athletes' progress.

An example of a SWOT-analysis is given in the figure below:

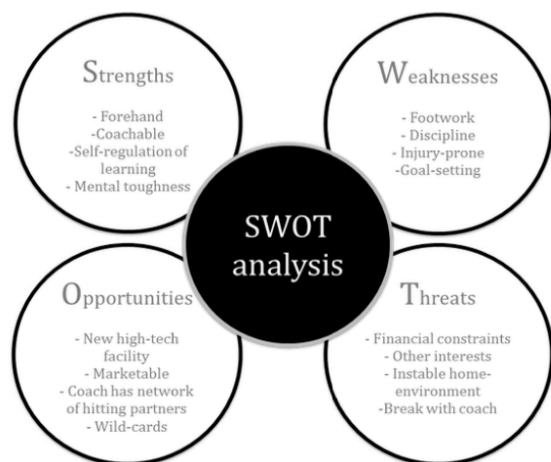


Figure 1. Example of a SWOT-analysis.

SMART-goals

The next step in formulating the strategic plan is defining the (business) mission and formulating goals (Kotler & Keller, 2009). After a SWOT-analysis has identified internal and external factors that might drive or limit an athlete's development, it will be easier to define a realistic final objective(s) (e.g. become a top 50 player, win a Grand Slam).

Long-term aims should subsequently be broken down in sub or short-term goals. Setting short-term goals can facilitate the achievement of long-term objectives. Furthermore, sub-goals prevent viewing the end-goals as beyond one's capability to attain or to take seriously (Locke & Latham, 1985).

Goals are frequently designed and/or tested with the principle of SMART-goals. Here SMART stands for 'specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time' (Olympic Movement, 2015). This principle requires goals, whether short-term or long-term, to have the following characteristics. First, goals need to be specific and thus clear and well defined. Research findings have repeatedly demonstrated that specific, difficult goals lead to better performance than vague or easy ones (Locke & Latham, 1985; Taylor & Wilson, 2005). Goals also need to be measurable. Adding a quantitative element will make them measurable and specific (Locke & Latham, 1985). This will not only show whether goals were achieved, but also whether they were too easy or too difficult. The latter touches upon the third element of the SMART-principle, that goals need to be attainable. However, since difficult or challenging goals produce better performance than easy ones, goals should be attainable but not too easy. In addition, goals have to be relevant to the ultimate career objective or to other short-term targets. Finally, the SMART-principle requires goals to be time-bound. Having a time frame assists in focus and provides a sense of urgency.

PRACTICAL

SMART-goal:

By the end of next month (time) my first-serve percentage (specific) has to improve from 60% to 65% (measurable).

A 5% higher first-serve percentage should be attainable and it seems a relevant objective to improve one's game.

Another example:

Move into the top 100 (measurable) on the world ranking (specific) by the end of next year (time).

Instead of: the ranking needs to be improved.

Table 1. Practical implementation of SMART.

Implementation of the strategy

The SWOT-analysis and SMART-principle have served as guide through the process of formulating the career strategy. Now it is time to implement the strategy. The strategic plan should be flexible, given that the lives of young individuals are highly susceptible to change. Hence, even after implementation it remains a permanent process to adjust and reformulate the plan.

It is vital that talents themselves play a key role in the whole process. Athletes must take responsibility for their career plan, goal setting and development. Studies have shown that future successful athletes take responsibility for the progress they make and that they score higher on aspects of self-regulation of learning, such as reflection and effort (Elferink-Gemser et al., 2011).

Evaluation of the strategy

The final step in the strategic planning cycle is evaluation of the strategy. Gathering feedback (e.g. from the player or parents) is part of this process (Kotler & Keller, 2009) and can be extremely beneficial when goals need to be adjusted. Due to the application of the SMART-principle, the set goals are measurable. This in turn makes it relatively easy to evaluate whether goals are reached or not. The assessment might suggest the need to redefine goals to make them more appropriate or realistic.

So despite the fact that evaluation forms the last important step of the strategic management process, it can also serve as a starting point for a new cycle by indicating weaknesses (of the company) in previously implemented strategic plans (Houben et al., 1999).

CONCLUSION

The process of developing a talent into world-class or simply reaching its full potential is an uncertain and no-guarantees one. Strategic planning can assist coaches in creating a coherent message for all parties involved. Moreover, it can serve as a guiding principle along the way.

Similar to managers in the business industry, coaches should utilize the SWOT-analysis and the SMART-principle to assess the environment, and identify and formulate goals. Setting specific goals affect performance by affecting effort and persistence among others.

When the strategic plan is implemented it will then remain a continuous process to adjust the goals and make them SMARTer. The final step, which serves as a starting point as well, is the evaluation of the process and progress.

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