



Motivation in competitive tennis: Is it different for girls and boys?

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ABSTRACT

In the exciting world of sport, tennis is a game that appeals equally to ladies and to gents. There's even a mixed doubles event with a tradition of over a hundred years, today carrying a prize cheque worth a hundred thousand pounds for the winning pair at Wimbledon. While Wimbledon doubles and singles draws are the same size for ladies and for gents (64 doubles and 128 singles), in the other competitive tennis events – be it pro, junior or veteran – the males competing outnumber dames competing by a sizable margin. The number of male events is higher and their qualification draws are bigger (ITF webpage). Could it be that girls don't fancy competitive tennis as much as the boys, or is there a different reason for this female underrepresentation? To answer this question, the researcher headed to the Swedish National Junior Championship and asked participants a few simple questions.

Key words: tournament, participation, cooperation, competition

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INTRODUCTION

Aussie legend Neale Fraser, three times Grand Slam winner, Davis Cup and Fed Cup captain, who led the Australian gents to four trophies and the Australian ladies to three respective finals, once reflected on the difference between his male and female charges.

I'll tell you one thing: the four girls were playing doubles, [Australian Fed Cup team members] Kerry Reid, Wendy Turnbull, Dianne Fromholtz, Evonne Goolagong, and they were playing away, playing away... After a few games I asked: "Girls what's the score?" "It's 4-1 I think" - said Wendy. I asked Kerry what was the score, "No, it's 3-2", then I asked Evonne: "No. it's 3-2 to us". They had no idea what the score was, they were just playing... I found that hard to accept. When you train, you train with a purpose -- but they were just going through the motions.

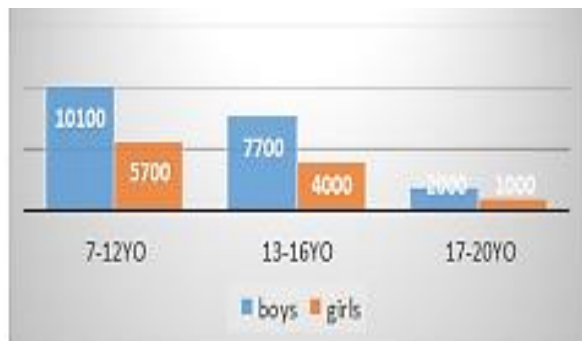
(Quote from an interview with Neale Fraser at Wimbledon 2007).

Does such a seemingly indifferent attitude towards the scoreline represent a lack of interest in competition among females? Or something else?

In their study on competitiveness in elite pro athletes, American John Houston and colleagues defined sports competitiveness as the "desire to enter, participate and win in competitive sports events" (Houston et al., 1997). Their research at the end of last century showed, somewhat unexpectedly, that "elite female tennis players scored higher on the sports specific measure of competitiveness than their male peers" (Houston et al., 1997). In all the other sports researched for competitiveness, it was the opposite.

More recent data has come from Sweden, another country rich in tennis traditions. Former Davis Cup captain Calle Hageskog and his associate Marie Hedberg studied participation in competitive tennis of boys and girls of different ages. Results showed that very few of Swedish girls who tried the game in younger age would still be playing matches by the time they reach adulthood. The number of competing tennis girls were declining faster than the number of competing boys even in this gender-equality role model state. Linneuniversitetet's study (Hageskog and Hedberg, 2015) found that the biggest drop happens in the 13-16yo age group.

Figure 1. Tournament participation in different age groups (Hageskog and Hedberg, 2015)



As seen in the chart above (Hageskog and Hedberg, 2015), the number of competing girls is almost half that of boys, and while 4000 girls aged 13-16yo were playing tournaments, only one in four pursued competitive tennis at 16.

Knowing what draws girls to competition could probably help us keep them there longer.

The participation motives of competitive junior tennis players, boys and girls, were at the centre of this research, conducted during the Swedish Indoor Junior Championships in April 2017.

METHOD

A questionnaire was assembled to target a tennis player's preferences in training and in competition. Questions and answers were designed so as to reflect three different aspects of sports – co-operation, competition and health. Participants were invited to choose one or more alternative answers to each question.

1. What do I like most at trainings?
2. What's the best part of playing tournaments?
3. What do I wish to have in my tennis life?
4. What's my perception of my tennis, what is my tennis for me?



The questionnaire was conducted among participants of the Junior Swedish Championship-2017 in the U14 and U16 categories. An equal amount of each gender (23 boys and 23 girls) was asked to complete the questionnaire, despite higher numbers of male participants in both age groups (207 boys to 121 girls in U14 draws, and 178 to 102 in U16 draws). Girls and boys were chosen at random.

The questionnaire took place at the tournament site, GLTK (Gothenburg Lawn Tennisklubb), and was conducted mostly after the matches.

RESULTS

Overall, competitive boys and competitive girls were similar in their preferences: the most popular choice with the girls was also most popular with the boys, on all four questions.

During training, boys and girls preferred to play singles points (12 boys and 11 girls).

At tournaments, the most fun for both genders was to play singles (20 boys and 19 girls).

The most popular wish was to have more tennis trips (13 girls and 9 boys).

On the question on motives the most popular answer was that it was "fun to play" (22 girls and 17).

Only on one occasion were the girls split equally between two alternatives. The question "what they liked most at trainings" saw 11 votes going to "playing singles points" and 11 going to "working on technique". Among boys, "working on technique" got the least enthusiastic response – only one among 23 participants favoured it.

Differences between genders however were found on the second most popular alternatives.

The second most popular alternative on the "wish list" for girls was "playing more team tournaments" (9), at the same time only three girls chose the general alternative "playing more tournaments". Boys gave 8 votes to the first and 7 votes to the second.

More girls than boys favoured doubles: 11 to 7.

Second best alternative for both genders was noticeably different on the question of motives: while 11 boys chose the "pro- or university- opportunity", girls were equally split between three choices: "pro- or university- opportunity", "best way to keep in shape" and "fun to follow and watch matches", where each got 5 votes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Primary school Similarity in answers was somewhat expected, as the research participants were contesters of the major junior tournament in Sweden. Their choice of tournament was in itself confirmation of their competitive side.

The similarities echo Alison Booth's behavioural research on competitiveness (Booth, A., & Nolen, P. 2012). Booth doesn't believe that an average woman avoids competitive behaviour more than an average man. Any difference which is observed there she puts down to social and historical influence. This research is not about "average" participant – we have a selective field of competitive junior tennis player, boys and girls, raised in a similar mixed-sex environment in Sweden, a country known for its excellent records on gender equality.

As answers to the questionnaire showed, what was most popular with competitive boys was also most popular with competitive girls. Why then are girl's participation numbers in tournaments are much lower, and why are they dropping faster than boy's?

At the 2017 Swedish Indoor Nationals, the participation difference was more than obvious. U/14 draw had 207 boy's and 121 girl's participants, which translates into the difference of over 71% in the boys' favour. In the U/16 class, boys outnumbered girls by an even bigger margin: 74% (178 boys and 102 girls participating). Moreover, consistent with Linnea university findings, the number of participants in the U/16 Nationals was lower by 17% than in the U/14.

These stats show that even though the answers to the questionnaire were similar from boys and girls, there may be something in competitive tennis that doesn't appeal to girls, or, it might be that they prioritize different things.

The father of Wimbledon champion Goran Ivanisevic, Serdjan, in an interview to the author in 2000, reflected on his own experience: "I was watching girls for over 50 years in my club in Split. Girls are more sensitive. I'm convinced and I always said that tennis is not a girl's sport, because tennis is a fight. It's not contact but it is fight. Mental fight as well. The nature of women is different. Girls are not meant to fight against each other. It's in man's nature to beat, to win, to conquer, but women are not physical aggressors by nature. For them to be a successful tennis pro they need to have strong personality, plus there have to be lots of parent help from the very beginning".

This goes somewhat in line with Robert Deaner, who suggests that the lower competitiveness of females is not a result of lower exposure to sport, but a mere reflection of their lesser interest in competitiveness as a whole. His research showed that it's mostly male, not female athletes, who endorse competition and winning as their motives for participating in sports (Deaner, 2016)

Booth and Deaner are two opposites on the same subject, but descending from theoretical clouds to practical reality, finding

reason behind low female competing numbers might help avoid unfortunate tendencies.

Withdrawal reasons in sports were examined by Butcher et al. (2002). Their research, spanning over 10 years, showed that females felt more strongly than men that they were not good enough and experienced more pressure to perform well (Butcher et al., 2002). We can look from an opposite angle and search for what the girls do enjoy most at training and in competition.



The "Me and my tennis" questionnaire revealed that apart from playing singles points (12 votes from boys and 11 from girls), which is a quintessential competitive way of training, girls equally favoured working on technique (11 votes). Working on technique in tennis is a pure cooperation drill, which includes lots of feedback from the coach, discussions and encouragement – and zero competition.

Among boys "working on technique" got the least enthusiastic response of all alternatives – only one among 23 participants favoured it. "Non-points" drills was no favourite either getting only 6 votes from the boys. By contrast they were very popular with the girls - 17 votes.

On the list of "tennis wishes" the most popular alternative for girls was "tennis trips": 13 have chosen it. Second favourite was a wish to play more "team tournaments" (9 votes). The general unspecified idea of playing "more tournaments" appealed only to 3 girls. Boys didn't differentiate how they compete: to them "team tournaments" were almost as important as "tournaments" (8 to 7). And they did like tennis trips too: 9 votes.

The questionnaire showed that tennis juniors have a clear need for team events, especially girls. Their aspiration is understandable knowing how challenging individual sport could: no team around to share the burden of defeat, no coach on the bench during the match.

Questions about views on their tennis, which is linked to motives, offered some variety as well. While most boys and girls are united that tennis is "fun to play", there are decidedly more boys than girls who also view their tennis as "a pro- or

university- opportunity" (11 boys to 5 girls). By the way, girls in their second preference were equally split between "pro- or university- opportunity" (5), "best way to keep in shape" (5) and "fun to follow and watch matches" (5).

Interesting as well was that girls chose more alternatives for every question. While boys ticked just one answer, girls were more generous. One explanation may be that for the girls competition is not the only attraction of the game. It could be that tennis girls love competing, but they love "competing plus" – and that "plus" could be equally important as the actual on-court battle.

Buunk and Massar (2014) made a point of the fact that for men, competition was a common fact of life since the time immemorial, while women were not as exposed to it. Evolutionarily, as the weaker species, they favoured cooperation.

The idea that greater exposure makes a difference in participation figures was confirmed by American experience. Sports participation statistics from the seventies showed that only, 4% of American high school athletes were females. Forty years later the figure grew to sizable 42% (Keilman, J., 2012). At the same time, big changes occurred in prize-money distribution: if in the seventies the Wimbledon prize cheque for a male winner was almost twice as heavy as lady's winning cheque, nowadays they get an equal share.

We can presume that modern tennis girls would have a better track of the score than their predecessors some forty years ago, as was observed by the Aussie legend Neal Frazer.

The questionnaire "Me and my tennis" showed that competitive girls are similar in their tennis preferences to competitive boys, but they do appreciate cooperative drills and team events more than boys. Adjusting training and tournament plans according to this knowledge might make competitive tennis more enjoyable for the girls and prevent the drastic decline in female tournament participation through adolescence which is witnessed today.

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