

Enjoyment: Fresh clues for coaches

Janet Young (AUS)

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ABSTRACT

"I was never pushed, mum didn't know anything about tennis so when I went off to a tournament she'd say 'Bye, have a lovely day', and when I came back she'd say 'Hi, did you have a lovely day?' Having fun was the one thing that helped me most (to be a champion)." (Evonne Goolagong Cawley). This paper reviews Csikszentmihalyi's conceptualisation of enjoyment as a process that occurs when high challenges and skills are matched. Implications for coaches are explored together with the benefits that can arise when tennis is fun.

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Corresponding author:

Janet Young

Email:

janet_young7@yahoo.com.au

INTRODUCTION

The above quote from the legend Evonne Goolagong Cawley was recently reported when Cawley conducted a training camp for indigenous Australian junior players and was asked what advice she had for aspiring players. Quite simply, her advice was 'have fun and enjoy your tennis'. Well, we all know what fun and enjoyment are, right? Interestingly, the answer is likely to vary quite considerably across players. Fun and enjoyment are likely to mean different things to different individuals. This is really no great surprise given the various definitions of 'fun' and 'enjoyment' to be found in the sport literature. What is however agreed is that the two words are generally considered to be synonymous and, as such, have been used interchangeably in the sport literature (Berger et al. 2006). Given the critical significance of fun and enjoyment for understanding why so many of us play tennis, this paper addresses these key concepts and presents a new perspective on viewing enjoyment. This should be of particular interest to coaches who are frequently searching for clues to make lessons enjoyable. Let's first look at defining fun and enjoyment.

Definitions

Typically, fun is defined as "what provides amusement and enjoyment" (Berger et al. 2006). With many definitions to be found in the sport literature, a popular definition of enjoyment is "a positive affective response to the sport experience that reflects feelings and/or perceptions such as pleasure, liking and experiencing fun" (Scanlan, 1989). From these definitions it is easy to see why fun and enjoyment tend to be used synonymously - the word enjoyment is used to define the word fun and vice versa! Accordingly, fun and enjoyment will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Sources of Enjoyment

Research has identified a range of sources of enjoyment for participants in sport, including juniors, adults and elite performers (Scanlan, Simons 1992; Scanlan et al. 1989). Notwithstanding individual differences, the main sources of enjoyment for participants include competitive achievement, developing good family/coach relationships, the excitement of the game, personal accomplishment, the kinaesthetic movement/feeling of playing, social recognition from significant others, forming friendships, having the opportunity to travel and gaining feelings of competency.

Benefits of Enjoyment in Sport

There is strong research support for the critical importance of enjoyment in sport (Scanlan, Simons 1992; Scanlan et al. 1989). Firstly, individuals are more likely to participate in sport if it is fun and enjoyable and will drop out of sport when it is no longer fun or enjoyable. Further, individuals who enjoy their sport are more likely to exert more effort, give greater commitment, participate longer and perform well. When sport is enjoyable, individuals are also more likely to experience feelings of accomplishment, euphoria and happiness that, in turn, may add meaning and 'zip' to an individual's daily life (Berger, Weinberg, 2006). As such, there are many good reasons for us to enjoy our sport!



A couple of quotes from champion tennis players illustrate the importance of enjoyment in tennis. Prior to the French Open this year

Serena Williams said "I am having so much fun (playing)". This sentiment has been previously echoed by a number of players including the former Spanish champion Arantxa Sanchez-Vicario, "I loved to play ... tennis was my passion and I enjoyed myself on the court". When former World Number 1 Jim Courier announced his retirement from the game he said, "It was a gradual feeling where my enthusiasm to train and prepare started to wane. I was not enjoying getting ready to play matches. I was at a point where I was almost going to go through the motions of playing". Similar sentiments were echoed by Steffi Graf when she retired from the game. "I no longer felt like playing ... For quite a while I had been asking myself if I was going out there for the right reasons, which were to give myself to the game completely and have fun".

A New Approach to Enjoyment

Traditionally enjoyment has been thought of as a positive affective state that reflects feelings of pleasure, liking and fun as described above. A different and thought-provoking approach to enjoyment has been recently proposed by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). This approach will now be described as it presents an alternative perspective on enjoyment that may be of value to coaches in developing lessons and training sessions.

According to (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) enjoyment is an experience or process (versus a positive affective state) that occurs "when a person has not only met some prior expectation or satisfied a need or a desire but also gone beyond what he/she has been programmed to do and achieved something unexpected, perhaps something even unimagined before". As such, enjoyment is characterised by a sense of effort, novelty and accomplishment. An enjoyable activity becomes intrinsically rewarding and is done not with the expectation of some future benefit but simply because doing it is the reward. Enjoyable activities are pursued for their own sake. Individuals experience positive feelings after completing such activities and generally not during the activity.

The Elements of Enjoyment

As suggested by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) the core of conceptualisation is the notion that enjoyment is a balance between a high level of challenges and skills. This conceptualisation is depicted in the following diagram.

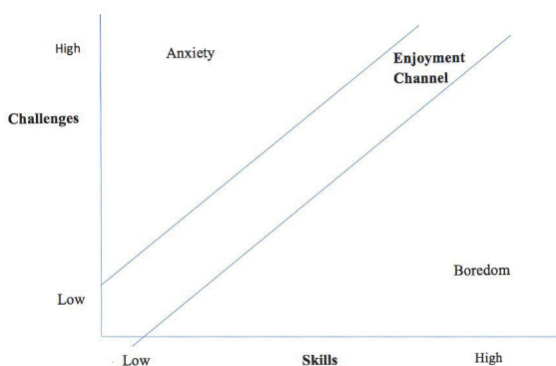


Figure 1. The balance between a high level of challenges and skills.

Figure 1 shows that anxiety will occur when an individual perceives the challenges faced outweigh his/her skills. Similarly, when an individual perceives his/her skills to be greater than the challenges presented the result is boredom. A 'channel' of enjoyment, as depicted in Figure 1, occurs when there is a balance between a high level of perceived challenges and skills. This is however not a static situation - individuals cannot enjoy doing the same thing at the same level because they grow either bored or frustrated. To continue to enjoy, individuals need to stretch their skills or discover new opportunities for using them.

Other elements of enjoyment include clear goals and unambiguous feedback, that is, individuals are clear about what they are to do and receive feedback about the success of their actions. The feedback in turn provides a clear idea of the next action and the cycle of specific goals and clear feedback continues. Further, there is complete and effortless concentration on the task at hand.

How to Find Enjoyment

(Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) proposes that enjoyment is achievable for all individuals. To this end he proposes individuals adopt the following steps:

- Set clear goals to strive for and develop appropriate skills
- Become immersed in the activity and keep concentrating on what they are doing
- Monitor progress in terms of the goals chosen
- Keep raising the stakes if the activity becomes boring

Readers who are interested in more detail and discussion on the steps to enjoyment may wish to refer to Csikszentmihalyi's publication on Flow: The psychology of optimal experience (p. 208- 213).

CSIKSZENTMIHALYI'S APPROACH TO ENJOYMENT: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR COACHES

If coaches adopt the approach to enjoyment by (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), then they have a role to play to guide players to enjoy their lessons, training and competition. It is a role that is somewhat different to that implied under the traditional conceptualisation of enjoyment as simply a positive affect or feeling. When enjoyment is simply a positive effect coaches may not fully appreciate the critical element of uniquely tailoring high challenges in lessons, training and competition to a player's perception of his/her abilities.

In brief, key considerations for coaches who adopt (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) approach include:

- Enjoyment is attainable and dynamic (not static). It does not generally just happen by chance although it can.
- Main predictor of enjoyment is a player's perception of a balance between a high level of challenges faced and his/her skills - unless challenges stretch a player then that player is likely to be bored or alternatively too demanding challenges can be confronting for a player and cause anxiety.
- An individual approach is required when working with players. Every player is different and it is important to understand how each player views the challenges faced and his/her abilities to respond.
- A player must invest effort and concentration in playing the game for it to be enjoyable.
- Goal setting with a player is an important activity as is monitoring a player's progress towards achieving his/her goals in conjunction with giving regular and constructive feedback.
- Enjoyment is an on-going process. Players must continue to be challenged, and continue to develop their skills. Enjoyment is not a life- or career-long 'given'.

CONCLUSIONS

Let's return to Evonne Goolagong Cawley's advice to players to 'have fun and enjoy your tennis' (cited in the Introduction). Such advice has the advantage of directing a player's attention away from the often debilitating and burdensome concern with 'winning'. Rather, a player who is having fun plays tends to play instinctively, freely, effortless and fearlessly. This was certainly how Cawley herself played! It is only when players are experiencing fulfilment and enjoyment in their play that they can achieve peak performances (Heathcote, 1996). Paradoxically, 'winning' is closer at hand when a player lets go of the notion of 'winning' and simply has fun on the court.

This paper provides some novel clues to coaches about enhancing a player's enjoyment of the game. Based on a conceptually different view of enjoyment to the traditional notion of enjoyment as simply a feeling or affect, (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) directs a coach to a process-orientated approach. His framework of enjoyment is intuitively appealing and alerts coaches to the critical elements of challenges, skills, goals and concentration. Csikszentmihalyi never suggests that the pursuit of enjoyment is an easy one but

he clearly advocates that it is a most worthwhile and achievable pursuit. All this makes sense when we remember that tennis is a game and games are fun and to be enjoyed (rather than endured and suffered). There is nothing better than to enjoy our tennis. It is such good fun! To this end, let's remember to follow Cawley's advice that was passed on to her by her wise mother.

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