



Training matches in women's tennis (Part 1)

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ABSTRACT

From experience, I know that setting up "confrontation" sessions with a potentially high emotional charge with very young girls requires fine pedagogical skills; using various testimonies from both players and coaches, my goal in this article is to provide an objective assessment of match play in training.

Key words: Women's tennis, skills, tennis match, training.

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INTRODUCTION

The goal of training is to improve. Improving means understanding a situation in order to move to a more advanced stage. Improving is about developing one's abilities, acquiring new skills.

This positive evolution can only happen if the learning environment is driven exclusively by the absolute quest for improvement. The main obstacle is the feeling of "being judged". It is this negative feeling that must be neutralised so that the training match, as a simulation of real match play, is constructive.

For the purpose of this study, the questions that were asked to female players were quite simple:

- What were your goals and feelings during training matches played between the ages of 10 and 14?
- Same question at the neo-pro and pro levels
- For Fed Cup players: Were training matches scheduled during the week of the tie?

As for coaches, only their observations and suggestions were taken into account.

Let's take a look at their testimonies.

Testimony No. 1.

"A lot of players are like me: we don't like training matches very much. When I was younger, I very quickly had the feeling of being evaluated, judged and the whole thing became a real test, but not in a very constructive way, because deep down, I

knew this was not a real match. Ironically though, if I lost matches in training, it would hurt my confidence."

"In training matches, I was playing to win, not to experiment new things or improve. I was not taking the chance to do things differently, to practice aspects we had been working on."

Winning without taking risks?

"In Fed Cup, I remember that we played sets, but not matches."

"What I particularly liked was to play series of points with specific themes in mind. During the post-session review, I could see what was working even when I thought it was not possible to do these things."

"When I played with male sparring partners, I was focused on my level of play. I was not comparing myself to them."



Testimony No. 2.

"Girls don't play enough matches."

"Practice new things but don't apply them enough in matches."

"Don't like confrontation."

How is it possible to make good use of matches (practice or play?); it is surprising to see such a dichotomy.

"When I was very young, I used to play a lot of matches at weekends with ladies from my club. I was not put in situations where I was being compared."

"When I was at the National Training Centre, I was not very comfortable with the idea of comparison."

"On the pro tour, I preferred to play points with foreign players."

"I remember this French player, a Grand Slam finalist, who did not really attach much importance to the outcome of training matches. She would come and play with us, the younger players at the French Open, to work on her game and her training goals."

"In Fed Cup, we played no more than one set at a time."

"The real comparison point is the official match."

Testimony No. 3.

"Often, at a young age, we did not play full matches, but rather sets, or even short sets or series of points."

"At this age, during league gatherings, we all had to play against each other, so we didn't have time to play matches with all participants. At the same time, it did not feel like competition; I remember that I preferred to hang around with a good friend rather than with the best player. Clearly, competition was not the first thing on our minds!"

Too much match play defeats the purpose of match play.

"It is true that competition is tough when you're young. But it is also true that it is at a young age that you realise if you have a competitive spirit or not."

"What I do remember is that, as these days drew closer, I felt under stress."

Why?

"Because all the league executives were there and, sometimes, even certain people from the federation. They would watch us, but you felt more judged than observed to tell you the truth."

Focus on external factors prevails over self-focus.
Concentration problem.

About organisation in Fed Cup

"We never play entire matches. Maybe two sets during the week at the most."

"When you play points, there's always a bit of tension, especially when you don't know who will make the team because we all want to earn our spot. But, whatever the outcome, we all give our best for the good of the team. No matter who plays during the weekend or the week, we all push each other." The team aspect solves the issue with the focus on external factors. The avoidance strategy is evident as in many matches.

Testimony No. 4.

"When I was young, I approached training matches as a game."

"I enjoyed playing those matches, which I often planned myself with friends."

"When I was a pro, I took training matches very seriously and it was hard to experiment and try new things."

Consistent feedback from the player: the training match is used for what it brings, i.e. being confronted with the stress of the match.



Testimony No. 5.

"I loved competition, it was in my DNA."

"Playing training matches was not an issue for me. I did not mind being compared to others."

"As soon as the coach gave the instruction to play, we were ready. Each of us had to deal with it..."

"Training matches are a good way to see if they have guts."

Good understanding of the goal.

"On the pro tour, during Fed Cup, it's not easy to schedule matches with the other girls. More often than not, we play 1 set or series of points."

"To be honest, I was not playing training sets or matches to try out new patterns of play, my only goal was to win."

Once again, the training match is correctly used for what it brings.

"Real match play remains the most reliable reference."

"With all players, it is essential to keep a positive attitude at all times. No judgement. Commitment and intensity are essential. The most important aspect is to stay positive, always."

Could it be that the problem is not the match itself, but how you sell it?

Testimony No. 6.

"When I was 8 years old, playing training matches against girls of my age was a source of stress."

"By the age of 12, I was able to deal with this better, but it was more the questions I got from boys at the National Training Centre about results that bothered me."

The issue here is still how you manage match play and what is at stake.

Testimony No. 7.

"During training matches, I always find it difficult to put the result into perspective."

"What I look for are the same emotional conditions as in a real match, but the priority is not to try new things."

Conflicting goals; some things need to be clarified.

"Now, I try to assess what I was able to accomplish. In the heat of the moment, I am affected by the outcome, but I try to think in terms of the feedback I can get."

"My parents' opinion after a performance still matters to me."

"When I experiment things in a training match, I have the impression that I lack discipline."

"When I practice with a better player, I allow myself to have self-improvement goals. But when the opponent's level is similar to mine, losing is not an option."

Testimony No. 8.

"I approached training matches the same way as real matches. The pressure was not the same, but almost."

"Depending on the result, my confidence level increased or decreased. I was not able to be objective."

"As major events drew closer, I would practice my 'operational' game patterns. At other times, I would try new things in training."

"Before turning pro, I remember that we used to play full 5-set matches during the winter. There were no clearly defined goals other than trying to sustain the effort needed to play 5 sets in training so as to be able to play 3 in official competition."

"When I was in Fed Cup, I gave my best in training matches, without any pressure, because I was primarily in the team as a doubles player with no real chance of being selected for singles play."

Quite a boring approach.

Testimony No. 9

"During the gathering events organised by the federation, of course, I felt judged. I wanted to show what I was capable of and these gatherings were the perfect opportunity to do so, which was quite stressful!"

"I never play full matches during the preparation week before Fed Cup. I play enough matches as it is during the year. For me, what is most important during this week is to know where I stand as much as possible in preparation for the weekend, while keeping as much energy as I can."

An overall consistent testimony.

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