



Training matches in women's tennis (Part 2)

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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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NOW, LET'S SEE WHAT COACHES HAVE TO SAY NOW

Testimony No. 1.

"They're not playful enough."

"They're not ready enough to take risks."

"Their judgement tends to be based on the win-lose paradigm."

"It is essential to explain, not judge. Learn how to find solutions, find the opponents' weaknesses. Understand the direction in which you want to go, make progress." That is all very well, but where does the notion of fear come into play?

"You need to suggest different game formats, matches based on specific themes so that the player does not feel she is playing a real match."

Comment from a coach who understands that the mind plays a big role, especially in an opposition sport like tennis.

"As a general rule, girls don't like to practice among themselves.

It is better to have them play with boys. This is especially true with top players, including foreign players!"

This makes the whole match play concept meaningless: you have players play matches, making sure they're not real matches.

This can be done, but you have to know what you're doing and when to do it.

Testimony No. 2

"Whether or not you give instructions during practice, there is nothing like competition, playing real matches. Let's not create training match experts."

"When I was the Fed Cup team captain, if I decided to have my two top players play a training match against each other and the best player lost, I had suddenly lost both the team's number 1 (loss of confidence) and number 2 (overconfidence) players."

Here, the issue is not the training match itself, but rather that you need to know when to use it and with whom.

Testimony No. 3

"Let's approach (training) matches as a starting point, an individual assessment."

"Using a well-thought-out assessment, you can teach a lot."



"They need to learn how to lose; it is part of group living."

"The match is an opportunity, it provides a framework that goes beyond the win-lose paradigm."

"Stepping out of the comfort zone is essential."

"It is important not to make comparisons, to maintain self-esteem without considering them as little girls."

"Players need to have fun trying to put into practice the things they worked on."

"Inner confidence is not related to performance. Some beliefs need to be broken down."

"Train each player as if she was the world number one."

Words you would expect from a coach.

Based on these testimonies, let's try and define methodological guidelines. Being objective, assessing, maintaining a positive attitude, developing self-esteem, acquiring new skills. Nothing compares to reality. The questions we need to ask ourselves are: "What are we trying to achieve with this simulation exercise?" "What effect (positive or negative) does the outcome of a training match have on the athlete and her coach?"

Overall, coaches and high-level players are in favour of playing matches in training; therefore, it is important to find the right balance.

What is particularly striking on reading the testimonials is that many players say that they find training matches stressful but that only official matches really matter. Quite odd, don't you think?

Some go even as far as saying, not always explicitly, that these matches don't serve any purpose because they are stressful. But that's the whole point, right? This is all very strange.

METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSALS

It is essential to approach match play for what it really is, an opportunity to confront your emotions.

We know that the pathways of neurotransmitters are different depending on the situation, i.e. whether the player is playing an official match or a training match. Therefore, it can be suggested that training matches only serve to train the neural pathways that are specific to... training matches! Thus, this means that the repetition of this situation might trivialise the player's confrontation with her emotions and, consequently, minimise the strategies used to manage emotions. Supposing that training matches are meaningless, as far as confronting your emotions goes, then playing these matches become useless.

Simulation remains an excellent way to prepare players for "official" performance, provided that stress is present or even artificially increased. However, players will be under stress only

if the situation, i.e. the training match, is exceptional. The danger with "ordinary routines" is that the result may not matter. Creating exceptional situations of high stress, allowing for preparation, review and feedback, making sure players don't suffer a narcissistic injury: focus needs to be on concrete things.

To simply decide that matches should be played every day or even twice a week because that is how it is done in "academies" seems to make no sense.

Our goal is to make sure that training matches don't turn into as many narcissistic injuries.

What is most striking from the testimonies collected is that the higher the level of the interviewed player on the pro tour, the less influence training matches had on their ego at the junior level as if inner confidence was not negatively affected by performance in training.

This is interesting because all too often we, as coaches, expect our players to display a feisty attitude on court in training matches. In such cases, we unconsciously view the training match not as a tool, but as a response (even a psychological profile)! Coaches who do not know wait for a response, while those who are in doubt look for a solution. One could argue that



future female top players possess, from a very early age, the ability to put things into perspective and make the difference between training and official competition. Should this type of nonchalant, detached attitude also be taken into consideration during talent identification? In contrast, according to her former coach, a recent world number one player refused to practice with an other female player and only wanted male sparring partners for her training matches...

All this to say that this issue is far more complex than it seems. Matches are not a response, but a tool that should not be overlooked and requires skills.

It is therefore necessary to differentiate the goals in order to be able to:

- 1- Set them;
- 2- Observe and quantify them;
- 3- Qualitatively and quantitatively review and analyse them.

Then, 5 different match categories need to be considered:

- Match to improve control of emotions (bad calls, hostile crowd, rewards/penalties system based on the result of the match)
- Match to improve clarity of mind (she's in a good position, I'm not, how can I turn the momentum; I cannot win, but can she lose?)
- Match to work on very specific aspects (1st serve percentage, recovery footwork, etc.)
- Match to work on tactical skills (taking the opponent into account)
- Match to work on strategies (identifying important points, decisive moments, etc.)

CONCLUSION

Match scheduling in training is not an easy task. It requires a lot of thinking and understanding the "why", "what", "who" and "how" in order for the session to transfer effectively to the "real" match. Thus, it needs to be seen as a session to assess technical and behavioural skills during which all kinds of emotions will arise, which in turn will trigger biochemical and environmental reactions. Confronted with this state of emotional awareness, the coach will make use of all the tools available to "sell the training match" as an exceptional and rare moment to experience. The goal of the session will need to be selected carefully in order for the coach to be able to observe and review the session in a constructive way and without being judgemental.

A match in training will never be the same as an official match. If that's the case, can the opposite be true? Is it possible to train neurotransmitters to follow one pathway only, one which leads to the quest for optimal performance whether it be in training or in official competition?

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