



Make it fun! A new proposal to organize tournaments for 12&U

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this article is to expose a comprehensive overview of mental health concerns in young athletes while playing in competitions and to provide a list of new different initiatives to organize tournaments for 12&U, with the aim of finding higher satisfaction and fewer levels of stress while performing.

Key words: tournaments, mental health, development, young athletes.

Received: 5 March 2022

Accepted: 10 April 2022

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INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, we have seen enormous achievements from the ITF and the different national tennis associations in the increase of the participation of youth and adult players. The launch of the Play and Stay campaign by the ITF in 2007 seeks to promote tennis as an easy, fun and healthy sport. The use of modified equipment makes tennis more accessible and keep the players more motivated due to the quicker achievement of positive results on the court. Evidence consistently supports colour balls, different rackets and tennis courts size as viable method to improve tennis performance (Farrow, Buszard, Reid, & Masters, 2016). Also, a positive association has been shown between regular tennis participation and positive health benefits. Playing tennis regularly will contribute to improve fitness level and mental health reducing symptoms like depression or anxiety (Pluim, Staal, Marks & Miller, 2007; WHO, 2020; Sciamanna et al., 2017).

While it seems obvious the efforts applied in the technical, tactical and physical aspects of tennis, we have to inquire whether the same efforts have been implemented in order to take care of the mental health of the tennis players. We will focus in this writing in the potential negative impact that the current format of tennis competitions might have in young tennis players and offer possible alternatives.

MENTAL HEALTH

Despite the benefits that can be gained through competition, concerns have been raised regarding potential negative consequences (Sagar & Lavalle, 2010). Different studies have already tested in the past that participation in competition is one of the main stressors for youth athletes (Nicholls, Holt, Polman, & Bloomfield, 2006). High performance sports not only demand an optimum physical attribute but also require optimum psychological factors to perform better in sports. The possible consequence is that children might experience high levels of stress and pre-competitive anxiety when they compete, and these feelings can negatively affect



Figure 1. *It is ok to not be ok. Naomi Osaka. Time.*

performance, participation, and health itself (Kowalski, Crocker, Hoar, & Niefer, 2005). High-levels of pre-competitive anxiety have been associated with avoidance of sport, reduced sport enjoyment, burnout, and sleep disruption (Gould, Udry, Tuffey, & Loehr, 1996). Even more, it has been repeatedly shown that athletes competing in individual sports were more prone to depressive symptoms than athletes competing in team sports (Beckmann, Nixdorf, & Frank, 2016).

Mental health concerns in tennis world have been recently spotted in a documentary shown in the popular platform Netflix about the life of Mardy Fish called "Untold. Breaking Point".

In this documentary the former Top 10 ATP player exposes his problems dealing with anxiety during his career.

Also, Naomi Osaka is one of the first female players to come out on the stage naming a series of problems that she has been dealing with for long time regarding mental health.

It is important to take into account that there is a good stress "eustress" (that have a positive impact on performance) and a bad one "distress" (that have a negative impact on performance) (Hackfort & Spielberger, 1990). It is the latter that is problematic and which can have negative repercussions on the mental health of the players if it is systematic before and during events. For many years, sport psychologists have been concerned with the study of the deleterious effects of stress and anxiety purported to the main factors in the failure of performers to fully and effectively use their skills (Robazza, 2006). Identifying the problems that competition might create in young athletes can help not to develop undesirable mental conditions. The solution shall not be to avoid competitions but to create a healthy environment. Through competition, children not only test and develop their physical skills and fitness but also have an opportunity to develop their psychological and social qualities (Grossbard, Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2009). Sports competition during youth gives an opportunity for the athletes to learn and develop skills that will be beneficial in the future (Macnamara, Button, & Collins, 2010).

PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

If we attend to the different phases of development presented by the majority of the different tennis associations we can observe that the phase of competition starts only after the age of 12 years old. The ages between 6 and 12 years old are reserved for the phases of discovering, learning, play and learning to train. It is only after 12 years old where most of the associations recommend to start the phase of competition (or learn how to compete).



Figure 2. Tenisxetapas by Spanish Tennis Association (2019).

The Spanish Tennis Association divides the pathway of a tennis player in 7 different stages: Discovering (4-6 years old); Development (6-8); Consolidation (8-10); Specialization (10-12); Pre-competition (12-14); Competition (14-16); Performance (16-18).

So the question to ask to the federations, tournament directors, coaches and tennis community in general is: why all the tournaments follow the same format in all the phases of development? Is this not a contradiction with the pathways recommended by the majority of the tennis associations in the world?

While it seems obvious that we have achieved good results adapting the game of tennis to the age and level of the player with modified equipment, not many adaptations have been applied in the organisation of national tournaments at young ages.

PROPOSAL

The main goal of this article is to propose some initiatives to open a debate in the tennis community to make tennis competitions for 12&U more fun, attractive and beneficial for the kids, but also more competitive.



Figure 3. 12&U Tournament. *Take note that this proposal is not recommended for important or prestigious tournaments like the Nationals where the regular format shall be still applied.

- **EFICIENT:** The tournaments shall be squeezed to play in only 2 days.
- **SUSTAINABLE:** Less number of trips since tournaments are concentrated in fewer days.
- **COST-EFFECTIVE:** Reducing potential nights of hotels and traveling spends.
- **FAMILY-FRIENDLY:** It will help families to organise themselves better: time frame instead of a match scheduled (e.g. the event shall be hosted Saturday and Sunday from 9am to 5pm).

- **SOCIAL:** The tournaments shall organise only 1 or 2 categories maximum (e.g. 10&U and 12&U) avoiding organising tournaments with a wide range of different ages. Same range of age promotes more interaction among the kids.
- **MORE MATCHES:**
 - o Different score format (shorter) but guarantee at least few matches per day and per event.
 - o Different formats: singles, doubles and mixed doubles.
 - o Ranking system instead of a knock out tournament. National points given according to the final ranking in the event. (This format is already applying in some international competitions).
- **FUN:** The goal of the following measures is giving the option to the players to have some fun while waiting for their next match. These activities should be run by a coach of the venue hosting the tournament:
 - o Provide a “friendly games tennis court” where one of the coaches of the club/academy runs a number of different fun games. This could also be used as a warm up court.
 - o Service competition (Speed and precision challenge).
 - o Digi -Tennis 2.0 competition (or balle au mur 2.0)
 - o Other different activities (e.g. touch tennis, padel, ping pong, squash, or even other non-racket sports like football, basketball, etc.).

- **EDUCATIONAL:** workshop for players and parents run by a certified coach at the club that hosts the event.
- **POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT:** organise a tournament party for all players and parents with food, music, lucky draw and some prizes, rewards and certificates (e.g. sportsmanship of the event, fastest server, funniest double team, trophy for the best ping pong player, touch tennis, etc.).

CONCLUSION

We still assist to tournaments or competitions where we can see a variety of different negative situations: kids leaving the clubs crying, parents getting angry at their own children, families making long trips to play a non-quality match that lasts less than an hour (or even worst, having a walk over), exhausted coaches watching unfinishable matches, endless waiting time until the match starts... and many other situations that makes the event very frustrating. Let’s face it: for the majority of the kids, tournaments are not a good experience.

All the measures proposed above have the purpose to promote that the kids end the event without much frustration but good memories, keeping their motivation up with the game of tennis and encouraging them to repeat again in the next event. But also, to force clubs and organisations to see who will hold the best event (valued by the players and regional or national associations).

To conclude, it is worth of mentioning that tennis is facing a tough reality in some countries. The decrease of number of licenses.

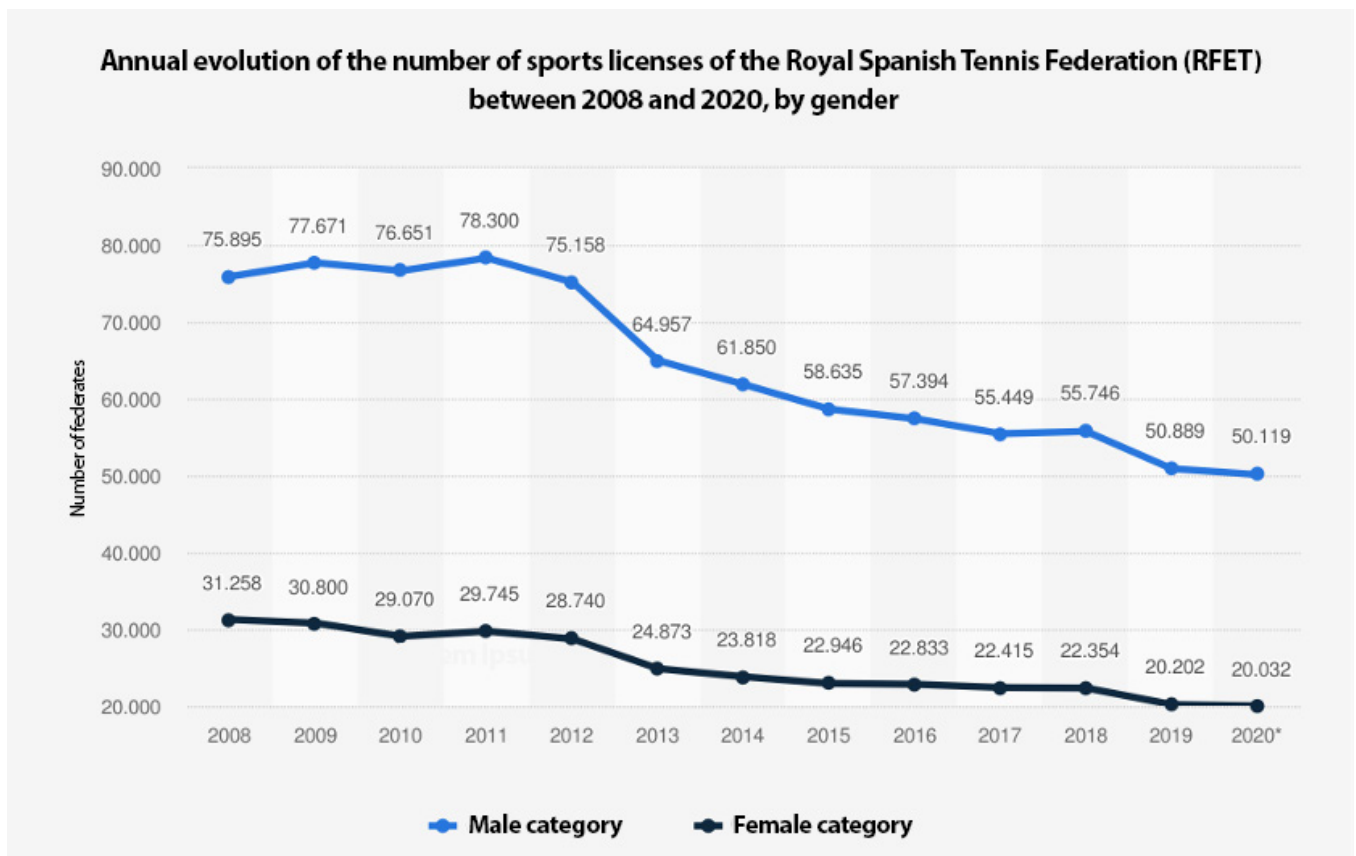


Figure 4. Number of licenses for females (black) and males (blue) provided by Spanish Tennis Association from 2008 to 2020.

This could be explained due to the emergence of other racket sports like padel or beach tennis. However, a quick response is needed from the tennis community if we want to keep tennis as one of the leading sports. I believe a new format of competitions in young ages can have a positive effect in the continuity of people playing tennis in the future, but also in the development of professional athletes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The author declares that he does not have any conflict of interest and that he did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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