



The “performance narrative” in junior tennis

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ABSTRACT

Narrative theory states that through creating personal stories people can make sense of their lives and create an identity. The “performance narrative” is a story of single-minded dedication to sport performance, where, winning, results, achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the athlete’s mental well-being. The “performance narrative” has received attention in professional sports settings, but research has yet to investigate the possible effects on junior tennis players. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of 4 UK, elite junior tennis players and describe what it is like to perform in the elite junior context. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of 4 elite junior tennis players describes their insights into elite junior tennis. This study found that (a) participants prioritise results at an early age (b) the “performance narrative” influenced participants attitudes to learning (c) the “performance narrative” reduced participants enjoyment of competition. The findings of this research contribute to an evolving, problematic epistemology of sports coaching and confirms that the performance narrative permeates junior tennis culture, interferes with attitude to learning, and reduces enjoyment of competition. The findings present governing bodies opportunities to inform player, parent, and coach education so the performance narrative does not negatively influence junior tennis players.

Key words: interpretative phenomenological analysis, performance narrative, positive youth development.

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THE “PERFORMANCE NARRATIVE” IN JUNIOR TENNIS.

Every young tennis player has the right to high quality, developmentally rich experiences from tennis. Therefore, it is incumbent on governing bodies, researchers, coaching practitioners, and parents to understand how implicit and explicit behaviours influence the young tennis players experience of our sport.

There are currently no studies which examine the potential impact of sustained participation, from an early age, in a competition system known to prioritise ranking / selection / representation (Lauer et al., 2010); rely on financial investment from parents (Dunn et al., 2016); contain high levels of interpersonal conflict (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Smoll, Cumming, & Smith, 2011, Gowling, 2019); display contradictory values associated with winning and learning (Gowling, 2019). Without careful monitoring and criticality of the conscious or sub-conscious messages that children see and hear, it is possible that flawed learning outcomes are absorbed.

Early talent development models prescribed the training of young people as a linear process. The beginnings of sport participation driven by love for the sport. As athletes develop their skills, linear models, prescribe disciplined practice to hone the sport specific skills and then applied in competition. This paper provides evidence that once players reach a high standard of play in competitive events, the “performance narrative” influences players attitudes at an early age, their attitude to learning, and enjoyment of competition.



The “performance narrative” is a story of single-minded dedication to sport performance, where, winning, results, achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to the athlete’s mental well-being (Douglas & Carless, 2012). Linear talent development models that contain the “performance narrative” yield tennis stakeholders who are reliant upon results to gauge the effectiveness of their efforts; sustain motivation to participate; and maintain enjoyment of competition. This paper highlights the “performance narrative” influencing the attitudes of tennis players aged between 11 and 13.

Greater awareness of the “performance narrative” amongst player, parents, and coaches would improve the support on offer to players struggling with motivation, confidence, or enjoyment. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of existing

narratives in junior tennis enables governing bodies, coach educators, coaches, and parents to prioritise “narratives” appropriate for long-term, positive emotional development of junior tennis players no matter what their aspirations in tennis are, for example, the “developmental narrative”. The developmental narrative tells the story of commitment to improvement and long-term personal development – often rewarding improvement over results (Douglas & Carless, 2012).

This article looks at the experiences of 4 UK elite junior tennis players and illustrates the “performance narrative” beginning to influence their attitude towards tennis. The responses show (a) participants prioritising results at an early age (b) the “performance narrative” influencing attitudes to learning (c) the “performance narrative” reducing enjoyment of competition.

METHOD

This study was an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of 4 elite junior tennis players in the UK. The participants included 2 males and 2 females aged between 11 and 13 years old. The participants trained in the following areas: Northern England (2) and Southern England (2). Participants were Junior elite, and this was defined as competing at national level competition and above (Rees et al., 2016). Interviews were semi-structured, and the aim was to understand what it was like for participants to play elite junior tennis. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes and were audio recorded. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim, printed out, and analysed following the IPA procedure.

RESULTS

The results show (a) participants prioritising results at an early age (b) the “performance narrative” influencing attitudes to learning (c) the “performance narrative” reducing enjoyment of competition.

Junior tennis players prioritise results at an early age

Junior tennis players are not non-thinking pawns, who blindly attend competition oblivious to the system in which they compete. The participants in this study were aged between 11 and 13 and all perceived that results were important so they could gain acceptance into the highest graded competitions. I asked the players what kind of goals they set for themselves in tournaments, James said: “I just want to win”. When I probed further and asked if there were any other performance goals for his competition, James replied “no just win”. Understandably, wanting to win comes high up the list of goals for an 11 year old, in a 1 v 1 sport like tennis. When I asked James if winning was a goal he had set with his coach, James answered “no but I have to win don’t I. If I want to get back into the nationals I have to keep winning”.

A similar pattern emerged in conversations with all 4 participants. Responses began by describing ‘wanting to win’ but as conversations progressed the message moved to ‘having’ or ‘needing’ to win. For example, Lucy said “yeah, obviously I want to win. That’s what tournaments are about aren’t they”. A positive and desirable learning outcome of competitive junior sport is a healthy attitude to competition that promotes trying your best, learning, performing well, and wanting to win. However, with each interview conducted it was clear that the participants were hyper-aware of perceived negative

outcomes from losing and their focus became rankings, selection, and acceptance into competitions. Lucy said: “I’ve done really well recently, but now I need to keep winning because I don’t want to go backwards”. Consistently, the participants associated their progress in tennis with ranking and acceptance into high graded competition rather than skill acquisition. All 4 respondents competed at top national and Tennis Europe level, and they were fluent in describing the competition structure and how each event affected their self-perceived standing in tennis. Sam explained his tournament schedule for the summer: “I played some grade 3’s at the start of the summer to get some wins and some confidence. Then I’ve got a couple of Tennis Europe events, so I can relax and enjoy them. Then I’m back for the nationals and I need to do really well there”. I asked Sam why he thought he ‘needed’ to do ‘really well’, he replied: “Everyone knows who should win, so if you lose to certain players, people will make fun of you”.

Sarah described similar attitudes to the other participants, saying: “Looking at all the rankings online and everyone’s points, I need to get to the semi-final of my next tournament to get into the top 20. That was my goal at the start of the year, so I really need to do it”.

The evidence strongly suggests the participants were overly results focussed for players so young. Social comparison based on internet research of other players and their own ranking strongly influenced the participants motivation to compete. In the junior context, competition must be a source of enjoyment, practical application of skills, and learning for personal development. However, the responses implied the main motivator to compete was ‘winning’.

The “performance narrative” influences attitudes to leaning

Skill acquisition is a key area of the coaching process and there will inevitably be occasions when coaches ask their players to perform new or challenging skills in competition. Applying new or refined skills in the pressure of competition is an important part of the development process because players gain valuable feedback from competition which informs their training.

Applying a new skill under pressure, whilst fearful of getting things wrong is challenging for most people. More specifically, asking an 11 year old tennis player who feels like they ‘need’ to win every match they play, can be an overwhelming prospect. James said: “My coach is telling me not to push the ball back and to be more aggressive, but I can’t do that against xxx (player). I can’t lose to him”. The participants were pre-occupied with the outcome of matches and if they believed following an instruction would increase the chance of losing, they admitted to not doing what their coach asked. Lucy shared a similar experience to James, saying: “There are some matches I’m happy to listen to my coach and come to the net, but not when I’m expected to win. I can’t do it in the early rounds because I can’t lose to the weaker players. James and Lucy both described picking and choosing when they would listen to their coaches. Only when James and Lucy perceived there was nothing to lose, would they feel free to do what their coach wanted. However, there were matches they chose not to listen because they were pre-occupied by ‘I can’t lose’.

Keeping youngsters focussed on their personal development through tennis is a challenging prospect. Players can easily check results and compare themselves with others on websites and social media. Sarah described the effect that comparison to others had on her in competition: “I tried too hard today

and I was so tight. I felt like I had to win no matter what. xxx (player) posted the other day she won a Tennis Europe. I guess I felt like I had to win to keep up with her. It's a good job my coach didn't watch because I didn't stick to my goals". I asked Sarah why she didn't stick to her goals, and she replied "I just wanted to win so much. I couldn't lose that match".

The participants all described struggling to follow coaches' instructions in competition in favour of doing whatever they could to win. Players who consistently play matches 'needing' to win and feeling scared of losing are less likely to try new things because they feel uncertain about the outcome. This can have a negative impact on their long-term development in tennis, due to a sustained unwillingness to try new things, gain feedback from new experiences, learn, and adapt.

The "performance narrative" reducing enjoyment of competition

Throughout the interviews, all 4 participants responses consistently referenced the theme of 'winning'. It must be acknowledged that 'wanting to win' is a healthy and desirable outcome of positive youth development, but there was a unanimous trend for the participants to shift from describing 'wanting' to win, to 'needing' to win. For example, Sam said: "I've got to win to stay on the pathway and get into all the big events". Sam's response summarises the pervading attitude throughout many of the responses.

The aim of this paper is not to denigrate 'wanting to win' and it is a shared belief that wanting to win is a positive trait. However, the attitudinal shift from 'wanting' to win to 'needing' to win must be acknowledged as a less desirable outcome of the competition system due to the potentially damaging affect it has on youngsters' attitudes to learning and enjoyment of competition.

I asked each participant during interviews if they enjoyed competitions. Sam said: "No not really. They are only fun if you win". Sarah said: "No they aren't fun. When you arrive, you feel the atmosphere". Lucy said: "I love tennis, I love training, tournaments aren't fun. But if I win, I'm happy". James said: "I like playing abroad. That's good fun because you don't really know anyone and it's quite exciting". I asked James if he enjoyed tournaments in the UK, he replied: "They are less fun because there is so much pressure to win". The evidence illustrates the performance narrative influencing the participants enjoyment of competition. An issue of continued concern must be the impact this may have on the long term development of the participants in this study.

DISCUSSION

The data in this study illustrates that junior tennis players are influenced by the "performance narrative". There are three main findings from this paper.

First, the findings of this study add to the work of Lauer et al., (2010) and Douglas and Carless (2009 & 2012). Early specialisation in tennis and sustained participation in a competition system increases the importance young tennis players place on winning. Without access to alternative narratives to understand their participation in tennis, young tennis players use the "performance narrative" to make sense of their world and focus heavily on winning as a source of confidence.

Second, the findings highlight the presence of contradictory values in junior tennis (Gowling, 2019 & 2021). The junior development context focusses on the long-term development of young tennis players. A desire to access funding, gain selection for training, and compete in the highest graded tournaments interferes with desirable developmental narratives. Excessive focus on winning reduces players willingness to apply new skills in competition because of a fear of losing.

Finally, the findings confirm that elite junior tennis is a competitive environment that places a high cognitive load on young people (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2014; Gowling, 2019). Excessive focus on winning creates pressure and therefore reduces the enjoyment experienced in competition. Junior tennis players require a cohesive support network to help them keep perspective on their tennis.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research contribute to an evolving, problematic epistemology of junior tennis coaching and confirms that young tennis players become overly focussed on winning (performance narrative) and this can influence their attitude to learning and reduce their enjoyment of competition. The findings present governing bodies opportunities to inform coach education literature, and player support systems. Failure to address the performance narrative in junior tennis and prioritise developmental narratives has the potential to damage the experiences of young people's experience of tennis. Further work must be done to monitor the influence of the performance "performance narrative" on positive youth development in tennis and more can be done to address the misuse / misapplication of tournament systems that places too much emphasis on winning and rankings in the eyes of players.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest and that he did not receive any funding to carry out the research.

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