



Analysis of tennis training opportunities in the system of Latvian sport education

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ABSTRACT

Tennis, a sport that can be played at any age, has become very popular in Latvia, and its prestige and commercialization have promoted the development of the sport in Latvia as well. However, taking into consideration that the tennis infrastructure is still not sufficient in quantity, there are not many opportunities to play it in sports schools. The study's authors wanted to find out why public sports schools do not choose to include tennis in their range of sports sections. Currently, most young tennis players train in private tennis clubs. To clarify the situation, quantitative data surveys were conducted with representatives of sports schools, as well as qualitative interviews with specialists in the field of tennis. The results showed the impact of different aspects - the competence of coaches in the regions, infrastructure availability, and the funding model specifics. Based on the study's results, the authors develop recommendations that should be followed so that tennis is more present in state sports schools. In this way, the mass formation of the sport would be promoted. Thus, there is a higher probability of tending to a sport of increased achievement.

Key words: Tennis, sports schools, tennis coach, sports system.

Received: 24 March 2023

Accepted: 30 April 2023

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INTRODUCTION

The history of modern Latvian tennis began in 1988 when about 50 tennis players established the tennis department of the Latvian People's Front under coach A. Mellups. The department worked until the end of the LTF. At that time, G. Dzelze, a member of the ATP, was the first professional tennis player in Latvia (Mellups, 2005).

From a global perspective, sport plays an increasingly important role in society. This is evidenced by one of the primary messages of the Olympic Charter, where it is stated that an individual can fully develop if he develops both the physical and mental spheres evenly (Olympic Charter, 2004). As the field of sport develops and becomes more commercial, the representative function of athletes has not changed, and the individuals in question still inspire the younger generation to become talented professionals in their field.

Nowadays, the term "sport" is associated with various fields or contexts - school sports, professional sports, and grassroots sports. In connection with public educational institutions, the first evidence was already mentioned in 1860, when sports activities were used as an instrument for developing morality and work ethics in New Zealand. This process was experimental and optional. The changes followed in 1877 when it was recommended to make sports mandatory by alternating the education system, linking it to the military direction (Pope, 2011). At that time, representatives of the field of education wanted to use sports as the primary tool to promote the personal development of young people.

From an economical and financial standpoint, sports, including tennis, have become an important sector of the economy of many countries, and it involves considerable financial resources and workforce. There is continuous improvement in the sports industry, such as its management, financing, and the management of this financing. The increasing tendency to commercialise and professionalise sports, on the one hand, as well as the fierce competition for budget funds, on the other hand, shows how sports must learn to profit independently from the resources it owns.

In terms of national governance, the national federation or association plays an essential role in developing sports. Federations are competent in the development of youth sports, as well as the attraction of financial resources through various support measures. It depends on the federation's activities - which high-level annual tournaments, games, or competitions will occur. In addition, the financial aspect should be noted. In many cases, each federation receives state funding, which is allocated considering various factors - such as achievements. However, state grants are not enough for faster sports development. Thus, one of the primary tasks of national federations is to attract additional funding, which can contribute to the overall development of the sport.

The role of sports in the nation's society is generally clear for many countries. However, for the national tennis federation, the development of the game of tennis is its essential goal. From a pure skill perspective, tennis develops coordination, a sense of balance, and overall physical fitness, and contributes to the well-being and the acquisition of healthy habits by

the participants. Depending on the skills and experience, tennis can be played at different levels - from an amateur to a professional level and at different ages (Pluim et al., 2007).

In the national sport and coaching educational context, the Latvian sports education system is primarily based on professional sports education institutions or sports schools. Their task is to prepare students to the appropriate level to comply with the relevant regulations of the Cabinet of Ministers. Now, the number of students is 305, whereas the number of tennis coaches is 16. For example, the available data point to very different statistics in athletics, which is also an individual sport. It is implemented in 50 sports schools, the total number of students is 6609, and the number of coaches is 280 (Professionally sport, 2021). Unfortunately, to the authors' views, these numbers seem to be quite low.

Therefore, the goal of the present study is to understand the reasons why sports schools have shown some reluctance or lack of capability to include tennis in the range of sports they offer, as according to the statistics, the availability of this sport is low.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS

The Latvian Tennis Union (LTS) is a national tennis organization that has the right to represent Latvia at the international level and in international tennis organizations: the International Tennis Federation (ITF) and Tennis Europe (TE). LTS ensures the participation of Latvian national teams in international tournaments, takes care of the growth of athletes, raises the qualification of judges and coaches, and works on tennis promotion projects.

According to Article 10 of the Sports Law of the Republic of Latvia, sports organizations are sports clubs, sports federations, and other institutions. A sports federation is an association of sports clubs and other legal entities whose activities are related to a specific sport or field of activity and the purpose of which is to direct and coordinate the work of the sport or field of activity in question, as well as to represent that sport or activity relevant to international sports organizations. A sports federation can represent several sports or fields of activity. In this context, LTS goals and objectives are as follows:

- To manage and coordinate the activities of the persons related to tennis in Latvia, to represent and implement their common interests.
- To develop international relations and take care of increasing the level of tennis players.
- To carry out the promotion of tennis at public activities and events.
- To promote tennis in Latvia as a healthy form of recreation and sports, especially among children and youth, to prevent the involvement of children and youth in activities harmful to their physical and mental health.
- To ensure and support the development of tennis in Latvia and the achievement of high sports results in tennis, as well as to promote the growth of high-level athletes.
- To provide training for children and young people in tennis and provide methodological and material support for such training.

- To organize and support competitions in tennis.
- To study, compile and publish the history of tennis.
- To implement other activities that significantly benefit public tennis and health promotion (Sports Law, 2002).

The role of a coach in the development of sports and the overall process is critical. For instance, among many competences and skills, the coach must be competent in choosing the appropriate methods and evaluating the training process to ensure the player's long-term development (Athanaïlidis et al., 2015). Apart from the technical, tactical and physical elements, the psychological factors should also be considered, especially in top-level tennis. The role of a coach is to stimulate and motivate players to play the game. Players will be stimulated by sessions containing enjoyment, activity, a variety of practices, a feeling of improvement, and the ability to succeed. The game-based approach means that a tennis coach sets up realistic tennis game situations, in either singles or doubles, so that beginner players can learn to play the game. It also allows a tennis coach to give relative technical information so that players can put it into practice immediately (Crespo et al., 2006).

The Latvian sports education system, which has already been mentioned above, is based on sports schools. Government-supported sports schools must meet the relevant criteria to move training groups from a lower level to a higher one (Sports schools financial...2022). By fulfilling these criteria, sports schools receive appropriate financial support to be able to pay the coaches under statutory remuneration. After analyzing the tennis criteria, the authors point out that they are not considered to be of a very high level and are unattainable. For example, only 5-8 athletes are needed in the training group MT-7. Their task is to get ranked between the 1st and the 60th in the Latvian tennis rankings and to fulfill the control standards so that the student, a candidate, could participate in the Latvian national team in a respective age group.

In the case of Latvia, the primary functions related to the development and organization of youth sports are delegated to educational institutions of professional orientation or sports schools. The education to be acquired is not defined as mandatory, and children and young people choose it based on their interests and wishes. The state or municipalities can fund sports schools, but the tasks to be performed should not differ. In order to coordinate and organize the activity of sports schools, in 2015, the Council of Directors of Sports Education Institutions of Latvia (LSIIDP) was established. The primary tasks of the association are as follows:

- To coordinate and manage the implementation of professional sports education programs in the country
- To solve issues related to the operation of Latvian sports schools and sports clubs, to represent their interests in state institutions and other organizations.
- To promote the development of youth sports and improve the sports system in Latvia.
- To promote youth sports in the country.
- To promote the development of sports in Latvia, the implementation of sports programs, the continuity of the learning process, and methodical work in sports institutions.

The selection criteria referred to above concerning the criteria for the fulfillment of athletes do not apply to private sports schools or clubs. However, these organs shall be subject to other provisions relating to the various fields, such as the adequate provision of a ventilation system for sports halls or other safety-related aspects.

There is a different sports education system in countries where tennis is more developed, similar to other sports. In some of these nations a great emphasis is placed on academies. Their primary task is to promote the creation of professionals in the relevant sport. Academies, depending on their goals and capabilities, conduct the selection of young athletes. Two training sessions a day are often carried out in the daily process, while the rest of the time is devoted to rehabilitation and training. One of the most developed systems of sports education is in England. The researchers have pointed out, however, that an athlete is at a relatively high risk of not becoming a professional athlete even if one of the programs offered by the academies is studied daily. Thus, in theory, an athlete may lose his level of education and not become a professional athlete (Pummell & Lavalley, 2019).

The development of the sport is the education and competence of coaches in the respective sport. In order to achieve systematic training of coaches, cooperation with high courts and federations is necessary, which can mutually agree on the necessary competencies that should be acquired by the coaches of the sport in question. Although each country has its educational specifics and differences, some trends are unifying. A system has been set up in Germany, Italy, Spain, and France where the parties - federation, universities, and tennis clubs - will cooperate. The main idea is related to the formation of uniform guidelines and the attraction of former athletes to continue their careers as coaches (Athanaïlidis et al., 2015).

Federations are competent in the development of youth sports, as well as the attraction of financial resources through various support measures. It depends on the federation's activities - what high-level annual tournaments, games, or competitions to organize. In addition, the financial aspect should be noted. Each federation receives state funding, which is allocated considering various factors - such as achievement or scale. However, state grants are not enough for the faster development of the sport. Thus, one of the primary tasks of federations is to attract additional funding, which can contribute to the overall development of the sport. An essential role in developing sports and the overall governance system relates to professionally oriented sports schools. They form the basis for the further development of athletes. Therefore, the sports school must be able to provide students with everything they need - transport to competitions, tournaments, specialists, and relevant medicine.

Considering different management models existing in the Latvian sports system, the primary tasks of sports organizations, which should be performed to develop their activities successfully, have been generated and shown in Figure 1.

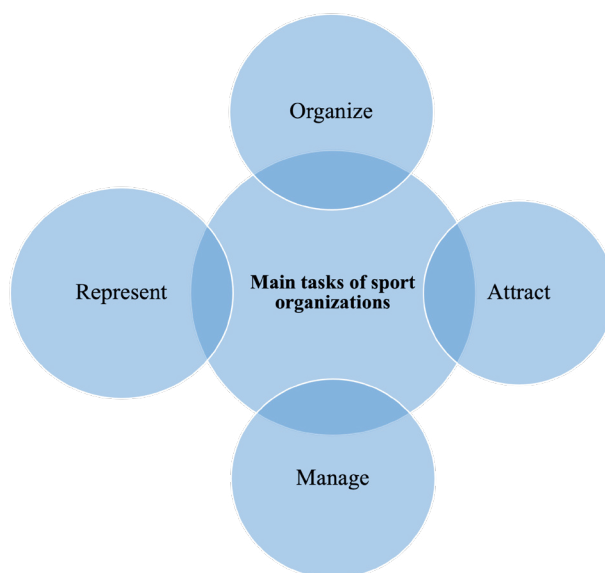


Figure 1. Basic functions of sports organizations (created by authors).

One of the primary tasks of the organization relates to the management function. In sports, education, and other structures, a vital aspect is the successful supervision of employees and the organization's development. Employees should be aware of their roles in the organization and understand their assigned tasks.

On the other hand, the demographics of the organizations are crucial. Table 1 summarises the main data from Latvian tennis.

Table 1
Data about Latvian tennis.

Items	Count
Members of the federation	42
Coaches	90
Clubs	38
Referees	27
Players	789

This study used a quantitative survey method since it provides advantages that contribute to the quality of the study such as the efficiency in the use of resources (time and financial), the anonymity, and the fact that more respondents can be included (Geske & Grinfelds, 2020). Possible challenges of the survey method were related to the passivity of respondents, the possibility of obtaining spontaneous responses, the possible communication or cooperation between respondents, and motivation to delve into the answers. Also, this method offers no possibility and low probability of establishing personal contact with the respondents (Nind & Lewthwaite, 2018).

The purpose of the study was to identify the reasons why national sports schools did not include tennis in their sports offer. This is motivated because in the current situation tennis has become one of the most popular sports in Latvia. It can be played at different ages, starting from 4 years, but the possibility of learning the game in sports schools is minimal.

The overall tasks carried out in the study consisted of the analysis of the development of the Latvian Tennis Union (LTS), the process and interpretation of the research results, and the elaboration of recommendations based on the conclusions of the research.

The sample of schools that participated in the research consisted of 21 National Sports Schools where tennis was not included in their program and 15 private sports clubs which included tennis programs.

RESULTS

Initially, the authors surveyed State sports schools to clarify the most critical aspects related to the offer of tennis training and education opportunities. First of all, in order to be able to implement specialized tennis training, the relevant infrastructure is required. The authors asked for the opinion of sports school managers regarding the tennis infrastructure offered by their cities.

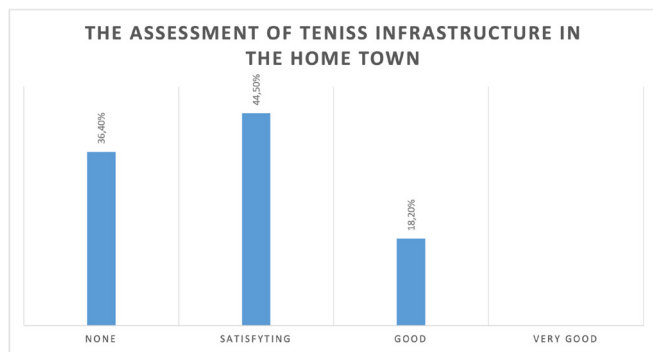


Figure 2. Infrastructure situation - the opinion of state sports schools.

Data in Figure 2 allow to conclude that the overall situation is relatively good. Almost half of the respondents - 44.5% - mentioned that the tennis infrastructure in the city could be considered as satisfactory. However, unfortunately, about over one third of the respondents mentioned that the relevant infrastructure is not there at all.

The authors point out that this is an essential factor in actualizing the insufficient educational opportunities in tennis. The reason for this is the specific infrastructure - tennis courts. The basic of tennis can also be learned in multisport or basketball courts or facilities for other sports. However, the special tennis skills such as the serve, the return of serve, the approach to the net or playing at the net, can only be acquired on the tennis courts. The data shown in our study indicated that the situation is generally satisfactory, but it should be improved if tennis is integrated at the level of sports schools.

For any sport to develop and move forward, the city in question should also have a strong sport tradition. Therefore, in our study the management of sports schools were asked about the tennis tradition in the region they represent.

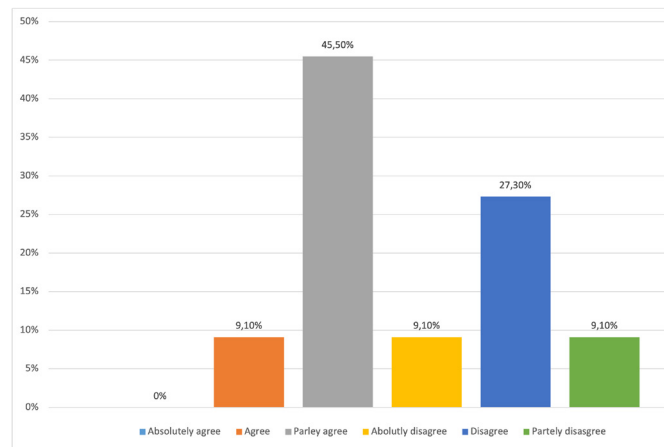


Figure 3. Statement - our city has good tennis traditions.

Sports schools' views on tennis tradition in their city are not rated at a very high level. Most respondents rated their town's tennis tradition as weak or non-existent. However, it's important to understand that this aspect cannot be solved quickly. Several prerequisites are necessary to establish the sustainability and tradition of a sport in a city. For example, high-level athletes, coaches, infrastructure, the "pyramid" of athletes, and the public's tennis knowledge are some of the key aspects to this end. In the authors' view, in order to build a strong tennis tradition, the fundamental aspect is to develop tennis at the level of sports schools.

Considering that it is possible to learn tennis in only five sports schools in Latvia, the aim of this study was to find out the main reasons why sports schools are unable or not willing to include tennis in their institutions. From the overall sample, 36% of respondents mentioned that the main reason was infrastructure problems, while 27% stated that the problem was the absence of specialists or coaches. Finally, 10% stated that there was ignorance or fear about the possible response from young athletes.

At the end of the survey, the respondents were asked to express their opinions or recommendations regarding the tennis education system. The authors collected the most relevant of them:

"Tennis is a relatively expensive sport and including it in the program of a sports school is an additional expense for the municipality. Likely, the coaches' salaries in the country are also not competitive. Our sports school already has a wide range of sports on offer. In the winter period, no infrastructure is available, only a private indoor court close to the city area, which is fully occupied".

"There's an insufficient support in providing funding from the State. Every year, State funding for the salaries of teachers of existing sports decreases for the sports school, and municipal funding increases, even though the number of students is increasing".

"There's also not enough provision of infrastructure. There is an outdoor tennis court, but there is a lack of gymnasiums to ensure the training process (the existing ones are full)".

"In our city, seven sports are already available in the sports school, let's introduce one more in the sports school! There is a group of tennis enthusiasts in the city."

When analysing the comments of the representatives of sports schools, several valid reasons for not including tennis in the structure of sports schools can be found out. Considering that relatively many sports disciplines are developed in Latvia, the system of sports schools also includes many types of them. The financing of sports schools, especially in the youngest groups of athletes, is limited in quantity. Therefore, the management of sports schools has logical doubts as to whether, by adding a new sport, there will be enough young athletes for all sports.

The financial aspect is additionally mentioned. In the views of the authors, however, point out that it can be partially considered a myth. Tennis is expensive at the professional level, but initially, at the national level, it can be implemented similarly to other individual sports.

Since tennis education is primarily based on developing private schools or clubs, the authors of the work would also like to find out the reasons that prevent clubs from merging with sports schools.

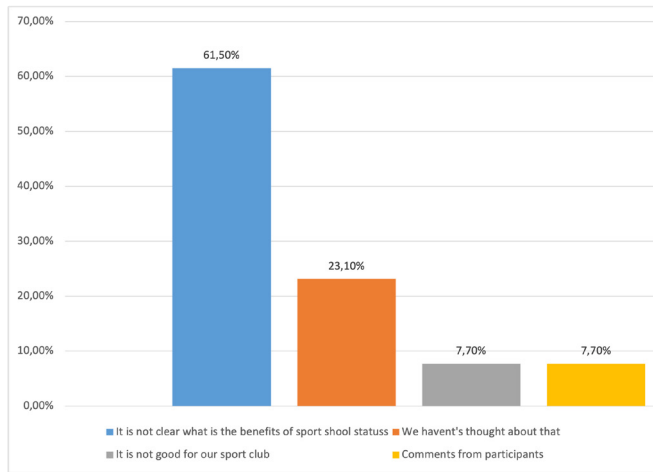


Figure 4. Reasons for sports clubs not to create a state sports school system.

It has been found that sports clubs seem not to be clear about the additional positive factors associated with joining the sports school system. Also, in this quantitative survey, respondents had the opportunity to express other opinions or influences related to tennis development in the final stage.

Representatives of tennis sports clubs understand that the merging with sports schools would contribute to the financial stability of coaches. However, too significant an administrative burden is mentioned as a possible threat. As a result, the process may not be profitable. In turn, almost every fourth respondent has not thought about this possibility.

At this point, it is important to clarify how tennis sports clubs evaluate the available infrastructure.

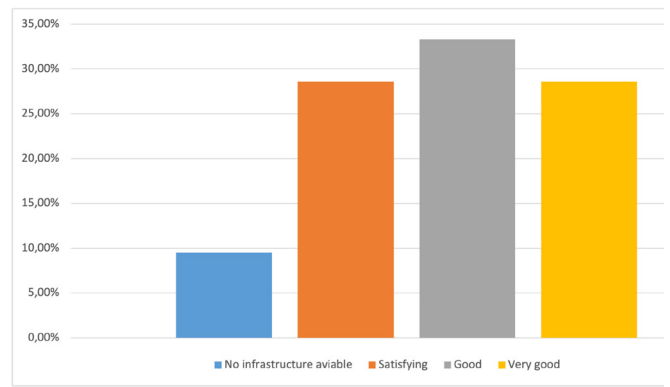


Figure 5. Tennis infrastructure according to sports clubs.

Compared to the respondents' answers about state sports schools, the available infrastructure of sports clubs is higher. In general, the majority of respondents rate the infrastructure available to them as good or satisfactory. The authors point out that a large part of the tennis sports clubs is based within a radius of 50 km around Riga. Therefore, it would be possible for state sports schools located in the vicinity of Riga to cooperate with sports clubs, as the overall infrastructure can be assessed as suitable.

CONCLUSIONS

The main conclusions of this paper are the following:

- The situation of tennis infrastructure in Latvia can be assessed as satisfactory. It was not defined as the main problem for not including tennis in the system of sports schools. The most significant misunderstanding of sports schools is related to the responsiveness of tennis integration on the part of athletes. Sports schools are not sure there will be a great response when introducing a tennis department.
- Private sports clubs are not interested in merging with sports schools. Although mergers would mean excellent financial stability, private tennis sports clubs point to an overly bureaucratic side.
- Tennis should be integrated into the schools' programs. Firstly, public awareness of tennis traditions should be raised. Afterward, any sports coach or teacher can be educated and get access to the knowledge about setting up the classes without any infrastructure, whether in a city school or a town. Then, the salaries should be competitive enough for the tennis coaches to feel appreciated and valued. Moreover, it is necessary to convey the importance of having tennis in schools to the principals and explain what they will benefit from such classes.
- The LTS should undertake the mutual communication function. The authors of the study indicate that, in some cases, sports clubs should merge with sports schools. This would contribute to a greater possibility of building an internal pyramid of athletes, as well as the stability of the sport.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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