



Women's tennis: Past, present and future.

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ABSTRACT

Taking his experience in the women's professional tour, the author, former coach of Justine Henin-Hardenne, one of the great champions in female tennis history, analyses the international tennis background of professional women after the 90s. In this article the author also explains the characteristics of tennis at this stage and discusses the transition of women's tennis at the end of the 20th century and stresses the importance of speed and power in modern women's tennis. It also discusses those aspects that define professional women's tennis today and the need to pay special attention to the stage of a tennis player's development.

Key words: Tactics, Women, Top level, Evolution.

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INTRODUCTION: WOMEN'S TENNIS IN THE 90'S

This first part of the article analyses women's tennis throughout the 90's. The most striking tactical characteristic during these years among the top 10 women players was the variety of style and the different playing styles.

At that time, the tour was dominated by players like Steffi Graf, Gabriela Sabatini, Martina Navratilova, Monica Seles, Arantxa Sánchez, Jana Novotna, Mary Joe Fernandez, Conchita Martínez etc., all tennis players with different playing styles.

Most of these players, with just a few exceptions, could perform at a relatively great level in all surfaces. In the 90s, the speed of the game was a determining factor since each of these players could develop a tactical strength to apply a well defined game strategy. What was the consequence of these game patterns? Due to the diversity in the style of the different players, their level improved and evolved during many years.

At the same time, from the point of view of our sport as a popular entertainment, women's tennis was interesting and attractive for those who watched the matches not only because they identify names or nationalities but also because of the players' styles.

TRANSITION AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In the late 90's tennis began to develop physically and started to become underpinned by the strength and the speed of the game. This process was enormously influenced by the evolution of the equipment and materials available with

modern technology; faster and more elastic balls, lighter rackets that could provide more spin and speed to the ball, etc.

The main consequence of this evolution is that the new generations of players gradually began to develop a dominant playing pattern which was based more on the strength and speed of the strokes than on purely tactical aspects and understanding of the game (Van Aken, 2002).

Tennis players had to play all strokes much more quickly and with more strength, rather than thinking where to aim the ball and why. At the same time, this increased the importance of fitness and physical training. During the 2000's, it was difficult for players to end the season without injuries (Pluim, 1999). The explanation for this is relatively simple, the need to respond to the greater speed and power of the game was faster than the physical evolution of the players who had to adapt to these new demands. It was then clearly shown that a tennis player was forced to become a real athlete.

WOMEN'S TENNIS IN THE PRESENT DECADE

When we observe the playing patterns of the top tennis players after twenty years, we notice that many things have changed in women's tennis.

First, there is less tactical variety since there are less playing styles. How can we know this? If we analyse the matches, we can conclude that in "appearance" they are very similar to those of the previous period, but when we notice the violence and speed of the game, the difference between the two stages in women's tennis is huge (Morris, 2005).



The great improvement in physical quality of the players in the professional tour has transformed them into real and complete athletes. However, even though this is true, we also see that it is quite difficult for these great players to control the speed and power of the game. Why does this happen? Because today's women's professional tennis is gradually getting faster, points are shorter but at the same time, much more intense (Martens & Maes, 2005).

From the authors point of view as a professional touring coach, this process has its origin in the long-term tactical and technical training of the players. It is important to stress the fact that I believe that the best players in the world today are just as talented or even more talented than the tennis players 20 years ago.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRAINING STAGE: JUSTINE HENIN'S EXAMPLE

On the basis of work with Justine Henin and the experience as a top level coach specialized on women's tennis, the great difference I notice is that tennis players today have no time or are not given the time (during the most important part of their coaching between the ages of 7 and 14) (Kopsic & Segal, 1996) to develop.



This period is fundamental for tennis players. They must develop the three most important elements, which in my opinion, all players must strengthen during their preparation to reach their maximum tactical, technical and physical potential. They must be able to face all kinds of different playing styles and they need an adaptation skill that can only be learned during this period.

The three fundamental elements are:

- their eyes, which is necessary for perception, anticipation and understanding of the game, of utmost importance to read the game of the opponent more easily.
- their feet to move at a great speed always following the shortest trajectory of the ball between the player and the ball, so as to reach and take on the ball in the best way, and finally,
- the intelligence of the hand to materialize all the ideas of the genius that all these top level players have.

With the above principles in mind, we cannot neglect a fundamental aspect in tennis: it is a game in which technique and physical fitness are the means for a player to apply all ideas (i.e. tactics). Once these three elements have been developed during the player's coaching stage, the female player will continue her tactical, technical, physical and mental evolution the way Justine Henin did.

Justine started learning to play tennis with the mini-tennis method (also called "evolution tennis") until she was approximately 10, so she had time enough to build a good tactical and technical base thanks to the adapted material (balls, courts and rackets), and to grow physically, technically and tactically in harmony.

CONCLUSIONS: WOMEN'S TENNIS IN THE FUTURE

Finally, what we ask today is: What will women's tennis be like in the future?

Women's tennis is gradually beginning to find solutions and adaptations to play using different alternatives to strength and power, since extremes in either respect have never been and will never be good.

We all know that champions are not born, they are made. In view of this fact, the responsibility (as coaches and trainers) is to understand that whilst victory is important, it is not enough. If we want women's tennis to continue being attractive and to continue attracting collective interest, it must evolve the right way. The characteristics and processes for appropriate women's development are our responsibility and so, we must continue working with a clear understanding of the importance of the long term progressive development of the female tennis player.

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