



Tennis and mental health: The role of national federations in the promotion and prevention of mental health and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Until just a few years ago, mental health has been a neglected - but ever-present - issue in the tennis world. In recent months, many tennis players have made their mental health difficulties public. Although it is becoming more and more commonplace, the consequences of common mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and sleep disorders are still unknown. For this reason, this article presents a series of strategies that could be carried out by federations, advocating the implementation of programmes focused on the prevention and promotion of mental health and well-being. Examples of initiatives developed in various countries are also given. Throughout the article, the importance of the involvement of federations in the development of prevention and promotion programmes for early detection and effective intervention is highlighted.

Key words: Mental health, prevention, promotion, anxiety, wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an invisible thing that touches all of us at one time or another. It is part of life.

(Kevin Love, NBA basketball player).

For many, the fact of participating in a sport such as tennis carries with it the transmission of certain values that can be very positive for the personal and professional growth of the present and the future of the athlete who plays it. (Barbosa & Urrea, 2018). However, sport itself does not transmit values, but rather it is the personal experience and the influence of the people around the athlete that truly leave their mark on the values that young people absorb. Similarly, some theories argue that the sporting context is not necessarily stressful in itself, but that stress levels have a fundamental personal and subjective, and therefore cognitive, component (Lazarus, 2000; Szeko, 2000; Szeko, 2000). (Lazarus, 2000; Szabo et al., 2014). Going further, although some research has shown that sport can be a very effective means for the prevention of various psychological problems such as depression or anxiety disorders (Barbosa & Urrea, 2018). (Barbosa & Urrea, 2018; Lawlor & Hopker, 2001; Petruzzello et al., 1991; Scully et al., 1998; Wipfli et al., 2008). There is a growing body of research that shows the strong impact of competitive sport on mental health issues, being common moments of pressure, stress, and numerous conditioning factors that a tennis player lives with on a daily basis.

In the last decade there has been a considerable increase in related research, such as specific studies on the symptomatology of depression and anxiety, and more and more athletes, including tennis players, are making public



some of the difficulties they are going through, with great repercussions in the media. An example of this is the case of Naomi Osaka, who spoke publicly about her anxiety and depression problems, and how exposure to the media placed her in such a stressful position that she was affected on a personal and professional level, hence her refusal to hold a press conference at Roland Garros (2021) after her first-round victory. Osaka was heavily criticised, yet she was giving a lesson in self-care and self-respect, given that, in mental health matters, not everything goes, and knowing how to set limits is an essential tool for prevention.

"I say put your mental health first because if you don't then you're not going to enjoy your sport and you're not going to be as successful as you want to be."

(Simon Bales, gold medallist and 5 times world gymnastics champion).

Other tennis players have spoken openly about it, such as Mardy Fish, Nick Kyrgios, Paula Badosa, Benoit Paire and Robin Soderling, among others, to which we can add the recent withdrawal of Anisimova at just 21 years of age, citing difficulties in her day-to-day life on court several months ago. Mental health has ceased to be a taboo relegated to the background and has become a subject of growing social and sporting interest, although there is still a long way to go.

A SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

"If someone wants to call me weak for asking for help, that's their problem. Because I'm saving my own life.

(Michael Phelps, 28-time Olympic medal-winning swimmer).

Although mental health is an increasingly recurrent topic of conversation, in most cases the actions deployed by representative sports bodies are still not commensurate with the significance of the situation.

Everyone who is involved in the sport to a greater or lesser degree knows how demanding it is. Tennis is inherently competitive, there is a score that puts you ahead or behind on the scoreboard with respect to another person against whom you are constantly measuring yourself. The scoring system itself, the fact of winning and losing -never drawing-, and the widespread and abundant ranking systems (e.g., WTA, ATP, ITF, WTN, UTR, TE, leagues, interclub, national ranking...) put the player in a position where the result, the ranking and winning take centre stage. If these external conditioning factors are not handled in an appropriate way, they can become a source of very high stress that for many people - adults, young people, and children - can be difficult to sustain. It is not only the ranking system, but the day-to-day life of a tennis player also requires a high level of personal and family involvement; from a very young age, those tennis players whose dream is to become a professional player organise their life around training and tournaments. Some change cities or even countries, others stop going to school and go online, there are those who stop studying when they are 17-18 years old because they consider it incompatible to combine both things, and simply because they want to devote all their time to tennis. In many cases, this type of situation means that the young person becomes progressively isolated from his/her group of friends at school and that this group is reduced to tennis, in the best of cases, because not everyone is able to make friends or create spaces of trust around the competition. On the other hand, there is the family involvement, the investment of time and money that tennis entails and that forces adjustments to be made in the family dynamic.

The hyper-competitiveness of western society is not widespread throughout the world, there are very constructive approaches to sport and competition, of oriental origin, which suggest understanding it as a form of personal improvement where the only possible reference of comparison is with oneself. This way of seeing the development of the tennis player places us in a much more friendly position both for the person who practices and for the environment that surrounds him/her. From a simple idea we can derive numerous fundamental actions for the prevention and promotion of mental health.

All the situations mentioned above do not necessarily have to become problems, we are simply raising a reality that often goes unnoticed and that has a direct influence on the mental health and well-being of the protagonists of the racket. And this is where the actions promoted by the institutions involved in the development of tennis players play a transcendental role.

THE ROLE OF NATIONAL FEDERATIONS IN MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION AND PREVENTION

"To show weakness, we are told, in so many ways, is to deserve contempt. But I am here to show weakness. And I am not ashamed".

Mardy Fish (professional tennis player).

As previously mentioned, until relatively recently, mental health has been an unknown topic in the world of tennis. Even today, the extent of what can happen if a psychological problem develops is still unknown, and this lack of information leads to concepts such as anxiety, stress or depression being used too lightly.

Research has shown that the most common psychological disorders in high-performance athletes are those related to anxiety, depression, eating behaviour, sleep, and substance abuse (Gouttebauge et al., 2019; Gulliver et al., 2015; Rice et al., 2016). Given the serious impact of any of these pathologies and the potential complexities that can arise during intervention, we advocate for prevention and mental health promotion strategies that serve to protect against the symptomatology presented by small-scale gamblers. To this end, the work of the federations is fundamental to achieve a greater and better reach of information and the most effective prevention strategies. These institutions are the main source of information for people linked to tennis, players, and their families; if national and regional federations develop prevention and promotion programmes on mental health, this will cease to be a taboo and we will all have a greater ability to detect cases that arise around us.

There are several programmes implemented in different sport contexts whose main purpose is prevention, some of them are aimed at coaches, such as the English Institute of Mental Health in Sport (Cumming & Ranson, 2021) or the "Read the Play" in Australia (Bapat et al., 2009), others are aimed at the whole athlete's environment, including families, such as the "Ahead of the Game" in Australia (Hurley et al., 2021), a very broad programme that includes athletes, families, coaches, referees and volunteers. The Canadian government has developed a comprehensive prevention and promotion strategy for high performance, the "Mental Health Strategy for High-Performance Sport" in Canada (Durand-Bush & van Slingerland, 2021).

Within the purely tennis context, we echo different proposals, such as the one implemented during the last Roland Garros or the one implemented during the last tournament in Toronto, both of which included a series of activities and resources provided to players for the promotion and care of their mental health and well-being. In particular, the Toronto tournament intervention is part of a broader initiative, "The Mental Time Out Initiative", which develops strategies around competitive and grassroots tennis, and involves high-level tennis players as ambassadors of the project (<https://www.tenniscanada.com/mental-timeout/the-project/>).

Organisations such as the ITF itself, the WTA and the ATP have become sensitive to the issue and in recent times have been developing strategies to provide care for players.

That said, here are some ideas that can be implemented by national and regional federations:

Intervention strategies for mental health prevention and promotion

- To develop training programmes for coaches, included in the level I, II and III certification courses themselves, in classroom or online mode.
- Promote and facilitate research studies that provide updated information on the situation of tennis players and their close environment in terms of Mental Health.
- Conduct promotion and prevention campaigns during national and international tournaments including information and activities.
- Draft a Handbook with basic information related to detection and possible consequences.
- Provide the tennis player's entourage with a contact line for information and help.
- To carry out informative talks with leading players.
- Conduct training workshops for families.
- To provide the workers of the federation with a helpdesk or a reference person.

CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this article, we mentioned how it is not the sport itself, but the experience you have around it, which provides essential values that will predominate for the rest of your life. Tennis is a wonderful sport with enormous physical and psychological benefits, and it is well documented how regular practice can be beneficial in reducing possible anxious and depressive symptoms and increasing levels of well-being (e.g., Pluim et al., 2007; Yazici, Gul, Yazici, & Gul, 2016).

While mental health affects individuals, it is a social responsibility to provide the necessary resources to detect and intervene early when symptoms begin to appear. In this way, we will continue to enjoy the sport and our involvement in it will continue to be an excellent form of personal and sporting growth. It is in our hands to continue building the history of this beautiful sport in a healthy way in body, mind, and heart.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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