



# Talent identification and development – The important links between research, systems, parents and coaches.

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the great opportunity of American collegiate tennis; it provides all the necessary information to understand the American system and the process to follow in order to get a tennis scholarship. Beginning with the requirements a player must comply with, in order to compete in university tennis, and then the different options throughout the different organizations, this article includes all you need to know in order to apply for a scholarship and how to study and play at an American university. It also includes a list of ATP players who have played American university tennis before becoming professional players, since there are an increasing number of players that experience NCAA tennis.

**Key words:** Talent Identification, Development, Coach education.

**Received:** 8 January 2013

**Accepted:** 26 February 2013

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## INTRODUCTION

In many sports talent identification (TI) and talent development (TD) of young athletes has become important. Tennis is no exception with many tennis federations, academies, clubs and management agents assuming TI to be a necessary aspect of their role. Large sums of money are invested in trying to identify and then develop talent in young players. The process involves increasingly younger children, some as young as 6, 7 or 8 who are part of Tennis10's programmes.

At the same time, several authors (Coyle, 2009; Gladwell, 2008; Syed, 2010) have published popular 'science' books that indicate TI to be a simple process. They suggest it consists of finding the right players and then training them hard (up to 10,000 hours) over many years (at least 10) so that they become successful adult performers. However, in tennis, as in other sports, many players selected at a young age do not achieve adult success. The reason could be that the 'wrong' players are identified or that the development process is inappropriate for different reasons. We know many tennis organizations and systems try to identify talent in young players through tests or rankings – and then develop that 'talent' through intensive (deliberate) practice and frequent competition with rankings determining progress even before puberty. Furthermore, these TD processes often make other activities, including other sports and education, secondary in importance.

## TALENT IDENTIFICATION RESEARCH



As this simple two step approach to TI gains credibility and momentum, a vast amount of academic research has collectively shown that, far from being a simple process, TI is a highly complex one (Pankhurst & Collins, 2013). As an example, research indicates that the wide range of inter-related issues involved in player development are such that no young player develops at the same time or in the same way as another. Research indicates that neither testing nor rankings are able to identify talent in young players and hard work, while important, is only one part of multiple TD processes. In addition, increasing evidence shows that many athletes develop and

achieve success in ways other than TI. For example, talent transfer programmes (where skills learned in one sport are transferred to another) are proving to be successful. High quality programmes that involve many players steadily developing skills over several years before being identified as talented at 13 or 14 years of age are also possible. While tennis remains a late performance sport with peak performance in the early to mid-twenties, the need to try and find 'talent' at 6, 7 or 8 years of age must be questionable.

Research suggests that a high quality relationship between research, TI processes and the system (federations, clubs, and academies) is very important for a successful TI programme. It also indicates that this is not the case. The three elements need to complement each other with research contributing to the knowledge base of the system that then constructs effective practice in the field. In reality, it appears that many tennis systems either ignore or are so unaware of the research that they are delivering ultimately ineffective and inefficient programs, where very few players actually achieve the adult success for which they were identified.

There is more research that shows there are three key groups of people who contribute in almost equal measure to the successful development of a young athlete in any sport: the system, coaches and parents. An excellent relationship between these three is known to contribute to athlete success (Gould et al, 2004). For a sound working relationship each group must first respect each other's role and then understand the complexity of TI. Parents and coaches are essential to the TI process organised by the system, but research shows that relationships are often fractured.

As a coach it can, of course, be difficult to access the vast amount of TI research. The simple two step TI process adopted by many tennis federations and academies is appealing, perhaps because it is easy to follow. The outcome of both these factors means coaches assume current TI practice is the right practice. However, in order to help coaches find relevant information, it is necessary to split the TI research into different topics, and give each a number of sub topics. Approached in this way, the complex issues become more straightforward.

#### TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

The first major research topic is talent identification. Coaches know from experience that TI means selection but big questions arise. Is there a right age to select and how should selections be made? From these two questions come others: Is it a good idea to use tests and do tests work for young children (Lidor & Ziv, 2013)? What tests are valid because they link to tennis performance as an adult? Do rankings before 14 or 15 years of age mean anything? What are the outcomes of selecting from rankings that coaches should know? Often selection in any form leads to early specialisation in tennis. Is

that a good idea? There is a great deal of research on just that topic (Pediatrics, 2000).

Understanding the research on selection and early specialisation, leads the coach to the second major topic of athlete development. This topic crosses into both TI and TD. Much of the information comes from the extensive child development research in the sport environment (Beunen & Malina, 2008). A sound knowledge of the complexities and of growth, development and maturation helps coaches understand that athlete development impacts both their coaching practice and the young player's performance while moving from childhood to becoming an adult.

Talent development has two major research topics. One that strongly impacts the coach is the research on practice (types and volume at different ages) and the use of deliberate practice in TD. The other is the research on junior competition (its role and again type and volume at different ages) and the relationship of junior competitive success to adult success. Competitive stress in junior players and what causes it is another complexity of the junior competition research (Ecklund & Gould, 2008; Dweck, 2008).

#### Role of the Stakeholder

A fifth research topic cuts across TI and TD and concerns the role of the stakeholders: the system that sets policies and actions in TI and the parents and coaches who become part of the process. The research in this topic is much less than in the other topics, but still indicates the complex nature of its contribution to TI. It includes research on the role of coach education and development in coaching talented players. The research in each of these five topics can be broken down into sub topics that make it much easier for coaches to understand the research base that exists. The table below shows the five topics and their sub topics.



KEY TOPICS IN TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT				
Sport specialisation and selection	Practice	Athlete development	Junior and adult success	The role of the stakeholders (System, Coaches and Parents)
Sub Topics				
Early and late performance sports	Concepts/ understanding of deliberate practice	Long term development growth	Purpose of competition at different ages.	System policies and priorities (Federations, academies, management companies)
Early specialisation	Volume/type of practice at different ages/ stages	Chronological/ biological age	Chronological age based competition.	Resource management
Understanding talent and potential	Coach led practice vs self practice	Psycho-social and physio-mechanical development	Competitive success/ rankings.	Coach role, expertise and knowledge
Capacities of a sport	Game based coaching	Goal setting	Relative age effect.	Coach education
Selection and testing	Purpose of practice	Quality of coaching environment	Volume / type of competition,	Role of parents
The role of luck, place of birth and opportunity		Parent/player relationships	Competitive stress.	
Generalised or specific training				
TI processes				

**Table 1. Key topics in talent identification and development**

CONCLUSION

This article has shown that talent identification is a complicated and long process. There are many areas of interest to consider and identifying players at an early stage does not necessary guarantee success. However, in studying these major areas of TI research and their sub topics, coaches can begin to understand the complexity of TI and assess their knowledge of the different issues. In the end these knowledgeable coaches will be able to have an impact on the current thinking of talent identification and, in turn, be able to improve the development of young tennis players.

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