



# The development of top women tennis players (1968 – 2012) and the importance of well-planned coaching.

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## ABSTRACT

The development of the best women tennis players who won 179 Grand Slam tournaments between 1968-2012 and fought their way to the top of the WTA rankings indicates that a progressive training process based on obtaining best results when the player matures is superior to an earlier over-intensive programme, which is characterized by unnatural acceleration in training and competing with the aim of achieving immediate success at the junior level, or even before.

**Key words:** Developing women tennis players, Developmental steps, Coaching.

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## INTRODUCTION

Women's tennis is developing in an exceptionally dynamic way, keeping pace with that of men's. This can be seen in the ever-growing pace of play, the increasing speed of balls in rallies as well as accuracy in shot placement on the tennis court and over the net. The number of shots in rallies has also dramatically increased. This is the result of consecutive generations of women players whose technical and tactical preparedness, physical fitness and efficiency are constantly growing and who have developed their tactical knowledge using the experience of preceding generations. Such dynamic change would not be possible without the knowledge and competence of training teams who have the ability to capitalize on achievements in other spheres that support development of the sport at the highest level. There is also technological advancements, particularly in tennis rackets with their exceptional stiffness and absorption of vibration, and tennis strings, which can absorb pressure and ensure greater ball speed whilst maintaining high precision.

### The path to women's sporting achievement

Tennis is a highly technical sport – and players must have a full understanding of it to develop tactics against an opponent. Acquiring good technical and tactical skills, gaining high levels of physical fitness, developing the personality and character to compete as well as training and playing experience all take a long time. The complex process of learning, developing, training and playing is divided into phases with particular goals,

all of which are essential (Bompa & Haff, 2009; Crespo & Miley, 2007; Krolak, 1998; Krolak, 2004; Martens & Maes, 2005; Reid, Quinlan & Morris, 2010; Sozaski, 1999; Veciana, 2012).

NAME	Age started playing tennis	Years of training preceding:			
		1st Grand Slam Win	Reached top 100 WTA	Reached top 10 WTA	Reached No. 1 WTA
V. AZARENKA	7	16	10	13	15
M. SHARAPOVA	4	14	12	13	14 (1)
S. WILLIAMS	5	13	11	13	16
A. RADWANSKA	4	-	13	15	-
A. KERBER	3	-	16	21	-
S. ERRANI	5	-	15	20	-
N. LI	9	20	12	20	-
P. KVITOVA	6	15	12	15	-
S. STOSUR	8	19	12	18	-
C. WOZNIACKI	7	-	10	12	13

*Tabla 1. Años que preceden al logro de los más grandes éxitos en la competición por parte de las tenistas clasificadas del 1 al 10 en la WTA en 2012.*

The best women tennis players, mostly at the age of 14 – 15 and after about ten years of tennis coaching, decide to sign a professional contract. For most of them, competing against older, more experienced, better known and better prepared professional players, tends to encourage their development of the techniques and tactics of tennis, so that they perform at a much higher mental and physical level. This is essential if success is to be achieved.

The first meaningful success of women tennis players following 10 – 15 years of training and competing. (table 1)

A promising young player must start to be prepared much earlier so that she is ready to move up to the higher level. The changes include:

- A considerable increase of the number of competitions she takes part in (even up to 35 and more annually),

- An increase in the number of singles matches (up to around 100) and doubles (to around 50) annually,

- A decisive increase in the scope and intensity of daily training that women competitors undergo with different competitors on varying surfaces and conditions,

- An increase in the number of trips and days spent away from home and family (up to 300 days annually).

The number of singles and doubles matches (table 2) and their results (table 3) and the players' rapid advancement up the WTA rankings, illustrate their successful training regime and growing maturity.

NO.	NAME	THE NUMBER OF SINGLES AND DOUBLE MATCHES WHEN THEY WERE AGE																	
		15			16			17			18			19			20		
		S	D	Σ	S	D	Σ	S	D	Σ	S	D	Σ	S	D	Σ	S	D	Σ
1	V. Azarenka	13	10	23	36	6	42	45	12	57	52	29	81	60	39	99	60	29	89
2	M. Sharapova	33	3	36	51	16	67	70	19	89	65	1	66	68	-	68	51	-	51
3	S. Williams	na	na	na	14	6	20	40	21	61	48	33	81	45	15	60	45	12	57
4	A. Radwanska	16	8	24	33	22	55	55	17	72	63	24	87	75	30	105	67	24	91
5	A. Kerber	16	-	16	30	4	34	34	7	41	45	6	51	76	23	99	61	15	76
6	S. Errani	13	8	21	17	9	26	22	7	29	46	24	70	68	31	99	69	27	96
7	N. Li	na	na	na	na	na	na	36	38	74	69	60	129	14	13	27	18	7	25
8	P. Kvitova	na	na	na	18	4	22	53	9	62	58	4	62	44	7	51	49	5	54
9	S. Stosur	4	1	5	13	5	18	47	38	85	51	68	119	44	41	85	69	41	110
10	C. Wozniacki	2	1	3	27	11	38	48	21	69	78	17	95	91	23	114	79	14	93

**Table 2: The number of singles and doubles matches of players in the WTA top 10 in 2012 when they were aged 15 – 20.**

		15		16		17		18		19		20		
			WTA		WTA		WTA		WTA		WTA		WTA	
1	V. Azarenka	S	8:5	506	27:9	146	30:15	92	34:18	30	40:20	15	45:15	7
		D	6:4	810	5:1	429	8:4	286	18:11	47	27:12	15	22:7	15
2	M. Sharapova	S	28:5	186	38:13	32	55:15	4	53:12	4	59:9	2	40:11	5
		D	1:2	-	11:5	79	11:8	83	0:1	-	-	-	-	-
3	S. Williams	S	-	-	9:5	96	29:11	20	41:7	4	37:8	6	38:7	6
		D	-	-	4:2	121	16:5	36	29:4	10	15:0	54	10:2	54
4	A. Radwanska	S	9:7	941	26:7	381	40:15	57	43:20	26	54:20	10	44:23	10
		D	3:5	879	17:5	293	7:10	176	12:12	75	12:18	53	14:10	37
5	A. Kerber	S	10:6	433	22:8	375	20:14	261	35:10	214	47:29	84	35:26	108
		D	-	-	3:1	-	2:5	429	3:3	-	12:11	205	10:5	190
6	S. Errani	S	6:7	742	9:8	569	11:11	521	29:17	359	42:26	171	41:28	70
		D	3:5	836	4:5	524	2:5	556	18:6	203	16:15	197	15:12	159
7	N. Li	S	-	-	-	-	29:7	363	56:13	134	11:6	303	15:3	277
		D	-	-	-	-	35:3	321	47:13	89	7:6	327	5:2	657
8	P. Kvitová	S	-	-	15:	773	41:12	157	37:21	44	23:21	62	25:24	34
		D	-	-	1:3	-	3:6	454	0:4	959	2:5	379	1:4	333
9	S. Stosur	S	-	-	6:7	682	36:11	276	24:27	265	20:24	153	41:28	65
		D	-	-	1:4	292	31:5	131	47:21	141	19:22	53	21:20	2
10	C. Wozniacki	S	-	-	17:10	237	31:17	64	58:20	12	67:24	4	62:17	1
		D	-	-	5:6	238	6:15	157	8:9	79	11:12	74	5:9	141

**Table 3: The results of singles and doubles matches of players in the WTA top 10 in 2012 when they were 15 to 20 years old.**

The need for higher levels of coaching and competitions – essential for the continuing development of the sport – is a considerable challenge for the young player. She must be resourceful enough to organize satisfactory training conditions, nourishing food and supplements, biological regeneration and good sparring partners during competitions. An individual training programme (content, scope, intensity and participation in competitions) must be individually optimized so that the biological and mental development of women players has priority over quick and early success. As a result, the first years of participation in WTA competitions (beginning with ITF Circuit Events tournaments ranked \$10 000 to \$100 000+, then International Events, Premier 600, 700, Premier and Premier Mandatory to Grand Slam) force young tennis players who, not long before, were outstanding amongst their junior peers, to raise their game significantly, essential to achieve success in professional tennis.

#### The essential conditions for women's tennis coaching

Tennis belongs to a highly dynamic group of sports with competitors going through many stages of learning, training and participation in competitions to allow them to master a

wide range of technical and tactical skills based on physical and mental fitness and strength of character.

A comparison of the age of women tennis players who won tennis competitions in the years 1968-2012 and the length of time between that and when they won their first Grand Slam title (table 4) illustrates for coaches and young players who enter professional tennis competitions the four basic requirements of effective coaching:

1. The coach's professionalism, knowledge, experience, common sense and foresight in planning each successive period of 3-4 years training based on professional experience and participation in international competitions. Those who do not learn should not teach others!
2. Constant patience from the player herself as well as her coaches, parents, guardians, sponsors and her milieu during the ever more demanding coaching sessions and competitions.
3. The intelligent use of data from previous matches with particular emphasis on match results which are a highly informative and objective indicator of playing potential, rather than comparisons based on the number of matches played.

4. The player and her coach's joint analysis of matches, especially against opponents of about the same level – 20-30 positions in the ITF/WTA rankings above and below her own position - with the aim of establishing a precise programme of coaching and competing.

During the long-term and professionally oriented progressive, but carefully staged, training which accompanies the transition from cadet to junior competition and then to senior and the highest level of experienced professional players, the basic task of a coach is to show the young players how to become independent in all aspects of their sporting activities.

NAME	Age of first junior Grand Slam title (ITF) and total number of titles (Σ)					Age of first Grand Slam title and total number of titles (Σ)				
	AU	RG	W	US	Σ	AU	RG	W	US	Σ
S. Graf	-	-	-	-	-	19	18	19	19	22
M. Navratilova	-	-	-	-	-	25	26	22	27	18
C. Evert	-	-	-	-	-	28	20	22	21	18
S. Williams	-	-	-	-	-	21	21	21	18	15
M. Court (2)	-	-	-	-	-	18	20	21	20	11
M. Seles	-	-	-	-	-	18	17	-	18	9
B. Jean King	-	-	-	-	-	25	29	23	24	8
V. Williams	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	20	20	7
E. Goolagong	18	-	-	-	1	23	20	20	-	7
J. Henin	-	15	-	-	1	22	21	-	21	7
M. Hingis	-	13	14	-	1	17	-	17	17	5
H. Mandlikova	-	16	-	-	-	18	19	-	23	4
K. Clijsters	-	-	-	-	-	28	-	-	22	4
A. Sanchez-V.	-	-	-	-	-	-	18	-	23	3
J. Capriati	-	17	-	13	2	25	25	-	-	3
L. Davenport	-	-	-	16	1	24	-	23	22	3
M. Sharapova	-	-	-	-	-	21	-	17	19	3
V. Wade	-	-	-	-	-	27	-	32	23	3
N. Richey	-	-	-	-	-	25	26	-	-	2
T. Austin	-	-	16	-	1	-	-	-	17	2
M. Pierce	-	-	-	-	-	20	25	-	-	2
A. Mauresmo	-	17	17	-	2	27	-	27	-	2
S. Kuznetsova	-	-	-	-	-	-	24	-	19	2
V. Azarenka	16	-	-	16	2	23	-	-	-	2
M. Jausovec	-	18	-	-	1	-	21	-	-	1
B. Jordan	-	-	-	-	-	22	-	-	-	1
S. Barker	18	-	-	-	-	-	20	-	-	1
K. Melville	18	-	-	-	-	29	-	-	-	1
C. O'Neil	17	-	-	-	-	22	-	-	-	1
V. Ruzici	-	-	-	-	-	-	23	-	-	1
G. Sabatini	-	16	-	-	-	-	-	-	20	1
C. Martinez	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	22	-	1
J. Novotna	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	30	-	1
I. Majoli	-	-	-	-	-	-	20	-	-	1
A. Myskina	-	-	-	-	-	-	23	-	-	1
A. Ivanovic	-	-	-	-	-	-	21	-	-	1
F. Schiavone	-	-	-	-	-	-	30	-	-	1
N. Li	-	-	-	-	-	-	29	-	-	1
P. Kvitova	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	21	-	1
S. Stosur	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	27	1

**Table 4. Period of time between winning a junior single Grand Slam (ITF) and the first victory in a Grand Slam tournament from 1968 to 2012.**

#### Factors which hold back a young player's development

Major factors that adversely affect the level of self-motivation in women tennis players after transition to a higher age group include:

1. Lack of success. The clear decrease in the ratio of victories to defeats.

2. A reduction in the effectiveness of tactics and technical skills in matches. A worsening of match statistics:

- Fewer aces (often accompanied by a decisive increase in ball speed).

- Fewer service games won.

- Fewer breaks of serve won.

- Lower ratio of winners to unforced errors.

- Fewer number of points won after long (>10) and very long rallies (>16).

3. Lower mental resistance to tiredness caused by external pressure to win put on a player.

4. Lowered physical resistance to tiredness caused by frequency of competitions, journeys, stays in hotels, changes in nutrition, separation from family and friends.

5. Doubts about whether the chosen way – “tennis above all” is right, whilst taking interest in new activities.

Unfortunately, the process of training young and even the youngest women tennis players is ever more frequently speeded up. The pressing need to do so goes against the needs and capabilities of biological and intellectual development, and the proper mastering of technical and tactical skills (which will stand the test of time).

It satisfies parents' and coaches' needs by meeting simple and primitive motivation based on peer group rivalry. On one hand there is an innovative and well developed project (Tennis10s) for progressive tennis character development in young children and teenagers with the prospect of further phases of development for achieving success in adulthood. On the other is an irrational rush to achieve the most as quickly as possible regardless of the price.

The lack of common sense and patience in coaches, and pressure exerted by parents, clubs and coaches in their desire

to achieve quick success is supported by the system of youth rivalry in many countries and as well as in the international arena. Besides, the International Olympic Committee has created the Youth Olympic Games. The first was held in Singapore in 2010 and consisted of 26 sports. The next summer Youth Games will be in Nanjing (China) 16 – 28 August 2014.



## SUMMARY

The sporting development of women tennis players is complex. Every individual has different abilities and a different personality so that each case must be separately dealt with.

It is worth looking at the varying paths taken to the top followed by the most outstanding female tennis players of the Open era. A large majority of them never won a junior Grand Slam – 23 in total (S. Graf, M. Navratilova, M. Smith, M. Seles, Serena and Venus Williams, A. Sanchez – Vicario, Kim Clijsters, M. Sharapova, P. Kvitova, S. Stosur and others). In comparison, the number of those who dominated as juniors is 17 in total (E. Goolagong, M. Hingis, J. Henin, J. Capriati, A. Mauresmo and others).

An even greater difference can be seen when one compares the number of the Grand Slam tournaments won by the players from the former group (146 victories in total) to the one won by the players from the latter group (75 victories in total).

It would seem that it is necessary to have reliable records of training regimes, to analyse them and make them available for consecutive generations of teachers, coaches and tennis instructors with the aim of implementing practical and long-

term coaching methods and to avoid steps that are aimed only at bringing short-term benefits.

## Notes

1. Maria Sharapova first advanced to number 1 on the WTA list 22 Aug 2005. In total she has topped the list for 17 weeks, the last time from 19 May to 8 June 2008.
2. M. Smith – Court won 24 Grand Slam single titles 1960 – 1973. The table shows the 11 victories 1968 – 1973 (MP'69, 70, 71, 73, RG'69, 70, 73, W'70, FM'69,70, 73).
3. B.-J. King won 12 singles Grand Slam titles 1966 – 1975. The table show the 9 victories 1968 – 1975 (RG'1972, W'68, 72, 73, 75 i FM' 71, 72, 74).

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