


Tennis development at the ground level: Coaches' perceptions of how incentive structures impact the development systems national tennis associations implement

Edward Horne 

University of New Mexico, USA.

ABSTRACT

National Tennis Associations operate within the confines of a market-driven environment. An environment creating incentive structures forcing NTAs to be cognizant of revenue generation, which may impact how tennis development systems are designed and implemented, affecting how tennis products and services are delivered at the micro-level. Therefore, the study sought to examine coaches' perspectives of how tennis delivery at the ground level is shaped by the incentive structures created by NTAs' implementation of tennis development systems. Findings from eight interviews with experienced coaches demonstrate how coaches feel compelled to compromise some of their ideals in their delivery of tennis services, feel the pressure of competitive youth tennis can be overwhelming for players, and believe a team-oriented tournament structure can alleviate some of the concerns arising from extant incentive structures. Findings show the need to consider how tennis's existence in a market-driven economy shapes how tennis is managed and delivered, and provide an initial foundation for future research.

Key words: Coaches, incentive structures, National Tennis Associations, tennis development

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Corresponding author: Edward Horne. Email: ehorne1@unm.edu

INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

National Tennis Associations (NTAs) govern the sport of tennis within their nation. In developed tennis nations, NTAs' primary objectives are to increase participation rates and develop elite athletes capable of winning major tennis tournaments (Green, 2007). Large portions of NTAs' budgets are dedicated to the pursuit of these objectives. Budgets which are funded by NTAs' central government and through NTAs' own revenue streams. Therefore, the more revenue NTAs can generate the more they can invest in increasing participation rates and athlete development, thus increasing their likelihood of experiencing desirable outcomes. NTAs then, are incentivized to prioritize revenue generation.

To prioritize revenue generation, NTAs adopt comparable business models to for-profit corporations. Like for-profit corporations NTAs are at the mercy of market forces. Whereby, revenue generation depends on their ability to offer in-demand products and services. In many ways then, NTAs practices mirror those of for-profit corporations. This is noteworthy, yet the environment, and therefore, incentive structures steering the governance of sport development systems are often ignored. In part, because the ethos of sport are assumed by most to supersede business ideals.



In a recent overview of the model of youth sports in the U.S., Bowers and Ozyurtcu (2018) explain how private sport organizations are focused on providing goods and services their consumers demand in their market-driven environment, leading to suboptimal sport delivery. Although Bowers and Ozyurtcu's (2018) article is U.S. centric, hypercompetitive private youth sport development practices in the U.S. are considered universal (Coakley, 2021). Ideally, sport delivery

is driven by supply-side factors (i.e., experts' knowledge and proven best practice), rather than by consumers (i.e., parents). Although scholars have highlighted the perils of sport development systems beholden to market forces, to date, little research has examined how market-driven incentive structures steer NTAs and sport delivery at the ground level. In one of the few studies accounting for the influence of external factors on sport delivery in tennis, Horne and colleagues (2022) found coaches engaged in "attraction" management, whereby coaches would tell parents what they thought they wanted to hear to appease the individual purchasing their coaching services. Conflicts of interest are known to arise in sport organizations grappling with business ideals (Sherry et al., 2007), and sport development systems will likely always preside in a market-driven space, to address concerns with suboptimal sport delivery it is necessary to examine how sport delivery is being impacted by policymaking decisions beholden to market forces.

Coaches are arguably the tennis stakeholders who feel and experience the incentive structure conflict facing NTAs and other tennis organizations the most as coaches are responsible for delivering tennis at the ground level. The systems and policies implemented by NTAs are delivered by coaches. For instance, coaches and directors of tennis deliver youth tennis tournaments sanctioned and structured by their NTA. Coaches are also trained through coaching education programs designed and implemented by NTAs. Further, coaches manage the facilities where efforts to maximize participation rates and develop elite athletes (i.e., college and/or professional players) who their NTA may identify as talented.

Coaches then are best placed to describe how NTA development systems created in a market-driven industry shape tennis at the ground level. To this end, the purpose of the current study was to examine coaches' perspectives of how tennis delivery at the ground level is shaped by the incentive structures created by NTAs' implementation of tennis development systems. This is important as tennis is, and will continue to be a sport pursued in private settings and governed by NTAs who must prioritize, if not heavily focused on, revenue generation. However, rarely is the reality of NTAs position in market-driven settings accounted for. By addressing this gap in our understanding, it is possible to highlight root causes of suboptimal sport delivery, thus informing viable solutions to such problems.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To examine coaches' perspectives of how tennis delivery at the ground level is shaped by the incentive structures created by NTAs' implementation of tennis development systems, the study was guided by a multi-level framework (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Multi-level frameworks provide a holistic depiction of systems, allowing researchers to examine how environmental factors shape and influence organizations management and governance (i.e., NTAs), and how management and governance then shape actors at the ground level (i.e., coaches). Studies that consider the influence of systems and studies adopting a multi-level framework to examine sport organizations have shown issues at the micro-level (i.e., ground level) are often linked to root causes at the organizational or environmental levels (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Horne & Brown, 2019). Guided by the extant literature and multi-level framework, the study sought to answer the following research question: how do coaches believe tennis

development at the micro-level is impacted by incentive structures created by NTAs' implementation of tennis development systems?

METHOD

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews lasting roughly an hour were conducted with eight coaches who met the inclusion criteria. To be eligible for participation in the study, coaches must have been coaching for at least five years, and regularly work with competitive youth tennis players. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were adopted to recruit eligible participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were used to ensure participant confidentiality.

As the study was underpinned by the ontological and epistemological assumptions of interpretivism (reality is subjective) and constructivism (knowledge is constructed according to individuals' perception of their reality, questions were designed to be participant driven (Patton, 2014). As an interpretivist approach was adopted, the researcher adopted an inductive coding strategy. First, open coding was conducted to summarize segments of data, with descriptive categories established with the intent to remain close to the text. Themes were then derived from the descriptive categories. Efforts to ensure reliability and validity in the data analysis process were guided by an evolving list of quality indicators (Tracy, 2010). Data was analyzed by the researcher, with interpretations discussed with a critical friend to reduce researcher bias (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). No software was used for the qualitative analysis of the content of the responses.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three broad themes were identified from the data: 'Compromising Between Coaching Objectives and Parents' Demands', 'The Pressures of Competitive Youth Tennis', 'Adapting Existing Practices to Make the Journey Better'. As participants shared their experiences of the major system-level factors influencing athlete development, they also drew from their extensive experiences to proffer potential solutions. What follows is a presentation of the three broad themes, each culminating in coaches' recommendations for addressing the issues they raise.

Compromising between coaching objectives and parents' demands

As coaches shared their experiences of managing their role within youth tennis's market-driven environment, participants described feeling compelled to compromise some of their own ideals to appease their clientele's demands. For instance, coaches described how "there are a lot of compromises to be made given that we are trying to run a successful business. It's something I struggle with every single day in my job" (Toni, Director of Tennis in the U.S.). In delineating the compromises coaches experience, John, a long-time tennis academy director and international traveling coach from the U.K. expounded:

The parents are in charge. They pay me and I provide advice from the knowledge I've developed over 25 years. Even with my experience, it is hard not to think 'well this parent is paying my wages, so I'll do what they tell me to do.'

As John explains, with his wages largely dependent on parents seeing value in the coaching service he delivers, he can feel pressure to compromise his coaching by acquiescing to parents' demands even though he is a highly experienced and qualified coaching professional who knows how to deliver appropriate coaching. But, given the service nature of private, market-driven youth tennis John must consider his consumers' preferences. This can be problematic, as coaches' and parents' preferences for youth sport programming are misaligned (Horne et al., 2023). John's sentiments towards his perceived pressure to compromise were echoed by Sam, an established manager of a reputable tennis program in the United States, who explains the dilemma of juggling clients' satisfaction and program objectives:

Parents can be a little short sighted. Like, 'my kid isn't winning.' It's really tough because the parent, what does the parent want? The best for their children. So, it's trying to juggle making sure the client is satisfied so that you can keep them coming back for more and more lessons. And then, obviously, keeping them within what you want to from a programming perspective.

When pressed to provide an example of when such instances arose, Sam shared: "We've had parents pull their kids out, but you have to let them go otherwise it's going to be a whole new train wreck a few months down the road. You can't just bend to what parents want." Participants also expressed their concern with how the compulsion to compromise to parents' demands is likely exacerbated for young coaches early in their career. Especially given how coaches with 25 years of experience still find themselves susceptible to compromise (i.e., John). As Carolyn, an experienced coach with international coaching experience and a leader in coach education suggested: "I'm sure the dynamic changes according to experience, doesn't it? Whether you're a young coach starting off and trying to make your way in the world. It's not easy for young coaches still building their reputation to say no."

Solutions

Carolyn elaborated on her previous statement by explaining potential coping mechanisms young coaches can adopt to reduce the compulsion to compromise, "My mantra would be honesty and professionalism matter more than anything." Carolyn also stated that coach education could help provide a solution, or at least generate greater awareness for coaches in training of the environment they're inheriting, and the short-term difficulties they may face as new coaches:

I do think coach education could help, not that young coaches will necessarily believe you, but by at least having the conversation. 'This is going to be hard to start with, but you have to be honest with yourself and your clients.'

James also presented a potential solution, by sharing a strategy he has adopted as a coach with over 20 years of experience and having worked with multiple ITF World Tennis Tour Juniors players and their parents: "To be successful within this system, I treat my coaching like a business. I set it up that way when I first work with a new player. I approach it very professionally in terms of what I can offer." By managing his coaching in a business-like manner, James felt capable of sticking to his coaching ideals and better positioned to resist pressure to conform to clients' demands.

Expert coaches clearly grapple with delivering the coaching informed by their own knowledge and expertise, and in appeasing the demands of their clients in an environment beholden to market forces. This finding is important, as it suggests coaching may be compromised by coaches' perceived need to deliver attractive coaching services to clientele in the market-driven setting. Findings also provide insight as to the root cause of well-documented tensions between tennis parents and coaches (e.g., Gould et al., 2006). Some of the frustrations coaches experience with parents, and vice versa may be caused in part by their market-driven environment. Tennis programs/clubs are businesses incentivized to maximize revenue. Losing clients has financial repercussions for coaches and their employers. Coaches need to be cognizant of their livelihood and that of their employers, thus elevating parents' power in private youth sport settings. Yet, current tennis coach education overlooks this, and fails to train coaches in how to develop a coaching business as an independent contractor or club manager/owner. Further, it has been suggested coach education programs often fail to adequately inform coaches of how to develop positive relationships with parents (Newman et al., 2016).

Findings do align with Horne et al. (2022), who found contingencies at both the personal and environmental levels contributed to parent-coach relationship dynamics that are failing youth athletes. Findings, therefore, highlight and reinforce the need for tennis policymakers to consider how the context of a market-driven setting pervades and impedes youth tennis development.

The pressures of competitive youth tennis

Coaches also expressed their frustration with the dominant performance ethic present in youth tennis development systems. A performance ethic that is not unique to tennis, but rather a feature of youth sport development systems in the western world, if not globally (Coakley, 2021).

Dropout as a consequence of NTA talent identification programs

Coaches' particular grievances with the performance drive relate to why they believe many youth tennis players dropout of the sport at increasingly young ages. As Jennifer, the director of a prominent tennis program in the Southwestern United States shared, "kids today are giving up at 10, 11, or 12 because they think they're not good enough. And that's so sad." Jennifer was not the only coach interviewed to blame the loss of junior players on the pressures of performance tennis. In fact, several coaches went one step further by pinpointing the widespread use of talent identification schemes. As did John, who explained, "I've had players told by the NTA's talent ID they'd never be any good, then go on to have a top collegiate career with a full-scholarship. Luckily, they stayed the course and weren't put off by the NTA. Diane also tied the pressures she has seen as a long-time director of junior tennis development programs to talent identification:

"We used to be a performance accredited club and get money from our NTA but we stopped doing it because I didn't want to give money to seven- and eight-year-olds. The system sets them up for when they're seven or eight and tells them how good they are. There are so many examples of when the NTA tells players they are rubbish at the age of 8/9 and now they're national tennis players. So, that kind of system and pressure is terrible."

The expense and lack of unstructured play of youth tennis

Coaches also demonstrated how the pressure within performance youth tennis manifests itself in forms not directly related to talent identification programs. Sam tied the pressures he'd witnessed in youth tennis development to the outcome-oriented outlook of youth tennis, he believed derived from tennis's expensive nature, "There is too much pressure on the kids and their parents. Tennis is a very very expensive sport compared to most other sports so it is easy to get caught up in short-term results." As Sam saw it, given the expense of supporting a child in youth tennis it is unrealistic to expect all parents to look beyond short-term outcomes. Sam's sentiments align with what we know to be true of many youth sport parents. By investing upwards of \$20,000 a year into their children's sport and athletic development, parents often expect to see a return on their investment (Hyman, 2012). While Sam appeared somewhat accepting, or understanding of a desire for short-term success, Manu was clearly more concerned with the pervasive short-term lens he has seen too often adopted in youth tennis, "Everything is short-term results focused today. And sport is horrible in that way. Tennis especially. The system in tennis really exaggerates all that pressure."

In delving into factors driving the results-oriented world of youth tennis, coaches pinpointed the intensely structured system of youth tournaments. As Greg, a former college tennis player now the director/head coach of a prominent youth tennis program in the U.K. put simply:

The system tells children and parents to play tournaments. You can't advance if you're not competing regularly. And you can't get into the top tournaments unless you're rating or ranking is good enough. And you can only get a good ranking or rating if you're playing tournaments.

As Greg delineates, the tournament system itself drives and incentivizes greater commitment to the system. But tournaments are not cheap. Tournament travel is one of the most expensive components of youth and athlete development and participation (Hyman, 2012). However, tournaments can be a revenue generator. Youth tennis tournaments can accommodate hundreds of athletes. Which is why, as Manu detailed, part of the reason why tournaments remain a critical cog in the youth tennis system machine, "The numbers make the money in the industry." As a result, some coaches felt the youth tennis system was becoming increasingly structured, "Everything is structured. You don't see a lot of these kids out of class playing as much as you used to" (Diane).

In relation to play, Toni explained how tournaments have contributed to dropout in her experience:

We've all seen the statistics of kids that play a handful of tournaments and then we never see them again. I mean, tennis is a lonely game especially for young kids also playing soccer or other team sports. In tennis they're out there alone. And everyone has to be quiet unlike any team sport. You're not allowed, for the most part, to cheer people on. It's a lonely game, it's tough for kids.

Solutions

In presenting potential solutions to the concerns of high pressure, expenses, and structure of youth tennis, six of the nine participants expressed a desire to see a shift to more team tennis formats in youth tennis. And of those six

coaches, a handful claimed to have independently designed and introduced team tennis competition for players within their programs. As Greg described, "I create teams of players that go on the journey together, because if you've got teams of players going together then parents can share rides. By taking groups you can share the cost." James compared tennis with the atmosphere of many team sports, in justifying why he'd like to see greater opportunity for team competition in tennis, "In the beginning especially, the kids enjoy it more. You go to soccer, and you've got 11 friends and 11 parents, and it just creates a bit more of an atmosphere, it's a bit nicer." As a former college player turned coach, Jennifer explained, "I think it's more fun as well, I really do think team tennis is more fun. My American college experience is probably my best tennis experience, playing in teams."

In addition to reducing costs and creating an atmosphere they saw as being more 'fun,' coaches believed a team format to be associated with other benefits. John believed, 'It is one way for me to talk to more parents. By creating teams and traveling together. With team tennis you can be with more parents and more children, so I think it's really important to do that.' Diane also explained how team tennis could reduce the inequity of athletes access to coaching at tournaments, and replicate the experience of college tennis which is a more realistic goal for youth tennis players than the professional game:

The team atmosphere is one area where you could address the issue of having everybody access to coaching. So, I think that's something that in tennis has to be done. Tennis is inherently so, so competitive. Of the kids that we work with, their ultimate goal is going to be to play college tennis. We just need to foster that. And then being proponents of a team. It doesn't necessarily have to be traveling but just within groups, within facilities. So, that's what I think is missing from our sport that could help it grow.

As both Diane and John mentioned, it could allow coaches to spend more time with parents and athletes in competitive spaces. As this point was raised in two of the earliest interviews conducted, the point of coaches access to competitive spaces was added to the interview protocol for participants yet to be interviewed. Sam responded to this point by stating, "I often get questions from newish parents like, 'Well why isn't there a coach at the tournament?' Well maybe the coach has another clinic at that time. Some parents understand, not that it is necessarily a good thing." As with most of the coaches, Jennifer had a similar response to Sam:

I think the competition system also makes it tough because I have a lot of kids of different levels, and on the weekends, I'm teaching them. So, I have kids who are playing tournaments, but I'm also teaching. I can't be at every tournament. And that's different because in other sports, the coach is at the game, right? I think that that's tough about tennis.

Implications

Tennis's place in the private, market-driven setting is unlikely to change. Therefore, studies identifying where and how tennis governance and delivery are shaped by market forces are important. Findings from the current study are indicative of a need for greater transparency between all tennis stakeholders in precisely how market forces impact tennis at all system levels. Through higher levels of communication and engagement within tennis development systems, stakeholders can establish a better understanding of how tennis is impacted by a need for most tennis organizations to

be market driven, increasing the likelihood of creating viable remedies for addressing identified concerns.

Looking specifically at practical solutions to issues the study's findings illumine, National Tennis Associations should consider developing more opportunities for competitive youth players to participate in team-oriented competitions. Such competition formats exist (e.g., USTA Adult League and LTA National Club League), therefore, allowing NTAs to model new or expand upon current youth team-oriented competition from existing templates. This can alleviate some of the pressure tournament competition creates, improve coach attendance, and lessen the financial burden associated with competitive youth tennis. NTAs should also expand upon extant parent-coach relationship training in their coach education systems. Specifically, training should inform young/less experienced coaches on the dynamics of the tennis service industry, and how this can contribute to coaches feeling compelled to compromise some of their ideals.

Policymakers could instruct coaches to adopt a business professional approach to their coaching, in a fashion similar to the approach coach James has adopted through his experiences. Establishment of a business-like approach, however, requires the design and implementation of a clear contracting process. Contractual agreements between parents and coaches, if they exist at all are often ad hoc and lack agreed upon timelines and expectations. This could create greater misalignment (Horne et al., 2023), and result in greater frustration for each stakeholder. By implementing these practical implications, NTAs can address coaches' concerns with current tournament and coach education systems.

Limitations and Future Research

As with most studies, findings are impacted by the study's limitations. First, only U.K and U.S. based coaches were included in the study. Therefore, coaches' interpretations of sport development systems may not reflect those of coaches from other nations. Second, the study was conducted by one researcher. Although a critical friend did assist in the data analysis process, qualitative data analysis conducted by two researchers is considered preferable for reducing researcher bias.

Although participants did have international experience, as some had coached in multiple countries, future research should include a more representative sample of tennis coaches. As an exploratory study, future research is needed to further examine the means by which NTA created development systems in the private sector influence tennis delivery at the ground level.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study provides a meaningful contribution to our understanding of how incentive structures shaped by a market-driven industry influence tennis delivery. The study also provides important practical solutions to address some of the micro-level issues tennis coaches experience without the need for systemic change. The study provides a foundation for future studies to pinpoint and explain how sport delivery is impacted by the private sector within which it presides.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no conflict of interests in the production of this article.

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