



# How can emerging tennis nations survive the tennis arms race? My thoughts through a strategic lens!

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an opinion of the current challenges and unique perspectives experienced by emerging tennis federations. It delves into a comprehensive analysis around strategic development derived from qualitative research involving esteemed individuals in the field, including senior leaders, national coaches, and board members from two distinct nations: Tennis Malaysia and Tennis Ireland. Through this investigative journey, numerous critical challenges have emerged, shedding light on the intricate landscape that smaller federations navigate. The article offers some practical applications for federations to consider when making strategic decisions.

**Key words:** tennis, talent, strategy.

**Received:** 26 October 2023

**Accepted:** 4 January 2024

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## INTRODUCTION

The world of professional tennis has become a fierce battleground for success, marked by a remarkable surge in financial investments from National Governing Bodies (NGBs) and National Governing Organizations (NGOs) striving for global recognition and triumph (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). In essence, sustaining competitiveness, let alone achieving success at the highest echelons, demands a substantial financial commitment. Considering the state of play in tennis, the top 100 rankings for both men and women come from a diverse array of countries (e.g., thirty-four countries in the men's top 100 and thirty-three countries in the women's top 100; ATP, 2022; WTA, 2022). However, when it comes to Grand Slam champions, a select group of countries, including Spain, the USA, and Russia, consistently dominates the scene. While emerging nations have made noteworthy strides in challenging the established order, these successes often hinge on micro-level decisions made by individuals rather than shifts in strategy by the NGB. For instance, Hyeon Chung moved from South Korea to the IMG Academy in Florida as South Korea is not traditionally known for producing top-tier tennis players. This summary article offers a collection of personal perspectives as a past performance director within an emerging nation, opinions on the present landscape and obstacles faced by emerging tennis NGBs. Additionally, it presents some of my recent findings derived from qualitative research (2023) involving prominent figures in the field, such as senior executive leaders, national coaches, and voluntary board members, representing two nations: Tennis Malaysia and Tennis Ireland. This investigation has unveiled a multitude of significant challenges.



## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

### Talent Development

Talent development (TD) has been defined as “a multi-faceted process of optimally nurturing athletes over time within a sport-system” (Cobley et al., 2021, p. 8). While the past two decades have witnessed a heightened emphasis on various elements of the TD process in academic discourse (e.g., talent identification, early specialisation vs sampling, coaching, physical conditioning), it can be contended that a substantial portion of this research has overlooked the application of a strategic perspective in shaping TD systems (Taylor, MacNamara, & Taylor, 2022). Put differently, we have accumulated substantial knowledge in specific domains like coaching, sports science and tennis specific training methods. However, there might be an underestimation of the critical importance of strategic planning and execution in the overall development of talent. Another crucial aspect to bear in

mind is that nurturing tennis talent is no longer the exclusive responsibility of NGB's, as private commercial academies are increasingly contributing to the development of the next wave of professional players. In sum, to enhance TD systems in tennis, it might be beneficial to step beyond the confines of the court and coaching methods. Adopting a strategic perspective to assess the overall landscape could provide valuable insights and improvements.

### Contextual Factors when developing talent

Strategically, surely emerging tennis nations (defined as nations with high performance systems that have not produced top one hundred ATP or WTA players in the modern era) should just employ coaches or performance directors from successful nations and copy this success? Actually, the process is not that simple, researchers have acknowledged the significance of the environment and the numerous external factors that have the potential to influence TD. For example, Henriksen et al. (2010) have put forth a comprehensive ecological approach to TD, shifting the focus from the athlete to the environment in which their development unfolds. At the core of this approach lies the recognition that macro-level elements such as national culture, the broader sporting culture, and the specific sport environment significantly contribute to athletic success (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Understanding the influence of contextual factors on TD strategy and practice, and how they do so, can be instrumental in shaping decisions when designing strategy. Systems or policies designed and implemented in one context cannot be simply transplanted to another without due consideration of the specific nuances of that environment (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Therefore, for tennis nations aspiring to enhance their performance programs, it's not as straightforward as mimicking the achievements of other countries. Rose (2005) contends that the importation of ideas from one context to another must consider the obstacles and challenges inherent to that particular setting. As a practical example, for a nation like Ireland, it would seem difficult if not impossible to implement a Spanish tennis training system. Clearly, the rain, lack of clay courts and culture of Gaelic sports (traditional Irish sport) would make this a daunting task.

### WHAT ARE THE MAIN CHALLENGES FOR EMERGING NATIONS?

In my exploration of the challenges in developing tennis talent in lower performing countries, I engaged in conversations with eleven key figures from Tennis Malaysia and Tennis Ireland. These discussions involved senior executives (including CEOs) national coaches, and voluntary board members, offering a varied perspective. Rather than a formal study paper, consider the following insights as a conversational sharing (combined with personal experience) of significant findings that may resonate with tennis coaches and administrators facing similar challenges.

#### Signing off the same hymn

Are we all singing on the same hymn sheet? Lack of coherence between the NGB and parents was noted. More specifically, it was regularly discussed how parents and the NGB were often not congruent in their thinking regarding the long-term objectives of TID athletes. This is an example from one national coach.

*I don't see any NGB strategy; parents are confused. They don't know what they should be doing, and there is much waste in terms of resources.*

The issue of coherence is frequently an issue within sport organisations particularly in the context of multiple coaches working with the same athlete in a single week. In my own observations, this can pose a significant challenge for countries lacking centralised systems. If we draw a parallel to education systems, consider the scenario where parents are told that their child will attend multiple schools or have different teachers within the same week. Such a situation would not be deemed acceptable, yet we often tolerate this when it comes to developing a child's tennis skills.

#### Coaching market forces

Despite quality coach education systems, many highly qualified, talented performance coaches remain working in recreational elements of the sport. Acquiring a higher-level coaching qualification doesn't necessarily dictate that one must exclusively engage in performance coaching. However, market forces (salary) often play a role in attracting coaches to positions within recreational contexts. It was pointed out that market forces, particularly the income potential for coaches in and recreational tennis (e.g., private recreational lessons, adult groups), resulted in high performance coaches not directing their attention toward coaching young talented players.

*The problem here is high-performance sports, especially tennis. We do not get money working for the association. It doesn't pay well, so it is better to work outside and do private coaching or groups.*

NGBs strategically positioning and making high performance coaching attractive for highly educated and skilled coaches is a critical aspect that demands thoughtful deliberation to optimize their impact on player development.

#### Money Money!

Currently, one of the investigated nations has a performance budget of 200K, yes, 200K for a full NGB performance program. In my experience and without access to the exact budgetary information, my estimation is that 200k would just about fund one performance player, coach and support team on tour for one full season. The connection between tennis success and financial resources appears consistent. Although, I would argue that finances are necessary but don't guarantee success. As one experienced executive pointed it out, it's how you spend money not how much you have. For lower performing NGBs such as Tennis Ireland and Tennis Malaysia a targeted approach to performance funding, with the more successful national sports receiving increased funding from the government, makes it increasingly challenging. This was described by one performance director as follows "*The national government only supports the elite sport; world-class tennis is challenging to get support cause of lack of achievement.*"

Seems obvious, but both nations reported a connection between parental wealth and success in tennis. In other words, families who can afford to invest in travel and coaching were perceived to have greater chances of success than children from less affluent backgrounds (cf. Bane et al., 2014).

### Does success breed success?

Both nations consistently spoke about “history of success” in a specific sport and in particular how role models could potentially influence the belief of young aspiring athletes about their ability to achieve in tennis. On the other hand, the lack of role models “compared to other countries like Switzerland who have Roger Federer” creates a sense of doubt regarding tennis as a career. Furthermore, the lack of role models was thought to influence parents' decisions regarding committing to performance tennis. More specifically, without an example of someone who had made it, parents are sceptical about the process and often did not commit to performance tennis. This is a quote from one national coach.

*Not many parents encourage them to join tennis because they don't see the future. Whereas in Thailand, they had Paradorn Srichaphan and were more likely to commit.*

Having developmental players train beside role models was seen as valuable because they tend to imitate what these role models: “I think it is important because the young players tend to emulate and find themselves experimenting, like fashion”. Indeed, countries with a consistent flow of skilled tennis players can create a positive domino effect, shaping future generations and potentially gaining a distinct advantage over lower performing nations.

### Strategic lens!

Strategy starts with a clearly defined vision! Interestingly, when discussing the strategic plan, no two stakeholders from either country were in agreement about the exact purpose of their high performance strategy. The main difference between board members, coaches and coach educators was whether the program was driven by a performance, participation or both agenda (cf. Collins, et al., 2012). The following are some quotes from the discussions with stakeholders.

*Top 100 ATP, so they are visible, and kids can see they are doing well; some person on TV doing well. I think we also need to widen the base significantly.*

*I think if we can grow the numbers of kids that can compete internationally, set a target that we want by having 10-20 playing ITF and able to compete internationally.*

Another crucial factor to note is the relatively short terms of board members. In Ireland and Malaysia, they were between three to five years. In a sport like tennis, where strategic planning takes a significant amount of time, the frequent turnover poses a challenge in maintaining a long-term approach to athlete development. One Malaysian executive described this as follows.

*In our country policy changes every two years, then three years, they change committee members, but then a new leader, the policy changes, and the previous team.*

Simultaneously, this lack of continuity was perceived to have a ripple effect on staff stability within the TD system. The transient nature of board members can contribute to challenges in maintaining consistent staffing, potentially affecting the overall stability and effectiveness of the system. Clearly, this lack of continuity makes it challenging to apply a long-term approach to athlete development especially in systems without a broader performance agenda.

### CONCLUSION

This article emphasises the critical importance of NGBs having a clear strategic understanding of their objectives in TD to ensure coherence throughout the TD system. The absence of a well-defined end product or long-term goals that consider the unique context hinders effective planning. On the other hand, a shared understanding of the overarching purpose enhances integration and resource utilisation (Taylor & Collins, 2021). TD is a strategic decision, for nations with limited resources and smaller talent pools, focusing resources strategically where they can have the most significant impact toward their defined purpose is a logical approach.

To gain an edge, emerging (financially restricted) tennis nations must gain a comprehensive grasp of their operational environment, coupled with well-structured policies and systems that permeate every facet of their TD system. Financial considerations are paramount, and it might be virtually unfeasible for emerging nations to emulate the extensive talent development programs seen in wealthier, more accomplished tennis nations (Seibold, 2010). As a result, nations facing budget limitations may need to prioritize their investments and perhaps cannot cater to all needs and demands. Therefore, rather than keeping as many in the system for as long as possible they may need to support individuals of high potential differentially rather than treating all talent equally in the hope of the cream coming to the top (Martindale et al., 2007).

Coaches play a pivotal role in translating strategy into action and are among the most crucial stakeholders, alongside parents. However, effective tennis coaching is just one (but critical) component of comprehensive player development. Coaches and NGBs must collaborate closely to align strategic elements and implementation programs. Furthermore, incentivising high-performance coaches to work within the system and rewarding their substantial contributions can enhance the overall effectiveness of the development process. Perhaps, in the relentless tennis arms race, strategic planning emerges as the ultimate game-changer for success on and off the court.

### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Certainly, each NGB is unique, and a one-size-fits-all strategy for strategic development is not feasible. Nevertheless, here are five practical recommendations on how emerging nations can enhance their TD systems.

Firstly, NGBs should establish and communicate a clear agreed upon purpose of the TD system. Stakeholders, specifically key NGB staff members and coaches, should be involved in the decision-making process of designing the purpose of the TD system.

Secondly, performance budgets should be tightly aligned with the purpose of the system. This may perhaps mean devising a less linear TD system where investment is focused on a smaller number of athletes and developing highly skilled coaches to work at specific stages of development.

Thirdly, coaches and NGBs need to consider how they can work closely with third parties such as schools and academies (home, abroad) to develop talented athletes. The private sector now offers highly professional training and is capable of providing elements of the pathway that private coaches currently cannot.

Fourthly, coaches play a critical role in TD and NGBs should offer incentives to retain coaches within the performance system. For example, provide flexible contracts, raise their profiles and provide opportunities for coaches to earn additional income. Also, NGBs should consider using technology to provide cost efficient methods of supporting coaches.

Fifth, every country has its own contextual strengths and weaknesses. Coaches and NGBs should consider devising a strategy that allows them to utilise their contextual strengths when developing talent.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors report no conflict of interest and received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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