



State of play: evolving pathways and holistic approach to nurturing tennis talent

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the multifaceted talent development process in tennis, emphasising the need for a personalised, holistic approach. Traditional linear pathways give way to more diverse routes, accommodating each athlete's unique needs and circumstances. The article delves into the ecological talent development model, considering micro, meso, and macro-level influences on player growth. Globalisation has further expanded opportunities for young talents and coaches, facilitating international competition and advanced educational resources. The role of parents as primary decision-makers is highlighted, underscoring the importance of collaborative efforts between coaches and parents to ensure optimal development. By embracing the complexity and diversity of modern tennis pathways, coaches can better support athletes in achieving their full potential. This comprehensive review of the evolving landscape of tennis talent development may offer valuable insights for coaches and stakeholders invested in the sport's future.

Key words: tennis, talent development, pathway, coaching.

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INTRODUCTION

Tennis is a global sport; 87 million people play tennis worldwide, and there is a tennis court for every 151 people worldwide (I.T.F, 2021). Given the sport's popularity and the international competition for success, it is not surprising that there is growing interest among researchers and practitioners alike in methods for selecting and nurturing high-potential tennis players. Despite this interest and the substantial improvements in our understanding of talent development (TD) in tennis, there is not and cannot be a one-size-fits-all solution to producing tennis players. Perhaps there can never be a universal approach, as each country has its own cultural intricacies. However, a greater understanding of the diverse factors influencing player development and consideration of the ever-changing landscape of tennis TD can guide coaches in tailoring their approaches to suit individual athletes. This article provides a 'state of play' on TD in tennis. It explores critical considerations that may prompt coaches to reflect on their player development strategies. By synthesising current research and expert opinions, it aims to offer insights that can potentially inform effective coaching practices and enhance player development outcomes.

THE CONCEPT OF TALENT AND DEVELOPMENT

The study of exceptional abilities in sports has led to the emergence of two distinct but interconnected concepts: giftedness and talent. Giftedness pertains to the inherent natural abilities or potential of children to pursue careers as professional athletes (Gagné, 1995; Gagné, 2011), while talent, though challenging to define precisely, refers to the

mastery of specific skills, also called competencies (Gagné, 1995; Gagné, 2011). The term 'talent development' refers to a set of practices, strategies, and programs designed to enhance and nurture the skills and abilities of these talents within a context. While the term implies a focus on identifying and nurturing innate abilities, the reality involves navigating a complex, non-linear pathway fraught with challenges and setbacks. This dynamic process challenges the simplistic notion of TD as a linear progression towards excellence, underscoring the need for nuanced approaches that consider individualised needs and contextual factors (Khasnis et al., 2021). Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of TD is essential, one that acknowledges the dynamic interplay of several factors and embraces a holistic approach. The reality of TD in tennis spans way beyond the athletes themselves and involves a multitude of stakeholders and factors that directly and indirectly influence their development.

THINKING OUTSIDE THE COURT TO GAIN A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Research now generally accepts that TD encompasses numerous factors beyond direct coaching (Martindale et al., 2005). This does not diminish the importance of coaching; on the other hand, it highlights the evolving role of TD coaches. Instead of coaches solely focusing on athletes themselves, Henriksen et al. (2010) proposed a holistic ecological approach to TD (Fig 1.), shifting the emphasis from the direct process around the athletes to the environment in which they develop. More specifically, the factors influencing athletes' development can be classified into three levels: the

micro-level, which is the individual athlete and their close environment (e.g., parents, tennis coach), and the Meso-level, factors, such as the school system and national governing body programs. At the macro level, factors such as the social and cultural context and economic welfare play crucial roles in TD. This expansion of literature by Henriksen was centred on seminal work by (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), who hypothesised that TD is profoundly affected by events occurring in settings where the talent itself is not even present. So practically what

does this mean for the evolution of developing talent in tennis? Firstly, when planning optimal strategies for developing tennis players, it is crucial to recognise the numerous factors and stakeholders that play a significant role in the athlete's development. Secondly, coaches must liaise and sometimes manage or lead the numerous stakeholders that contribute to the athlete's growth. In general, nowadays, effective TD in tennis requires coaches to plan and manage elements outside the court to ensure a holistic and supportive environment for the athlete's development.

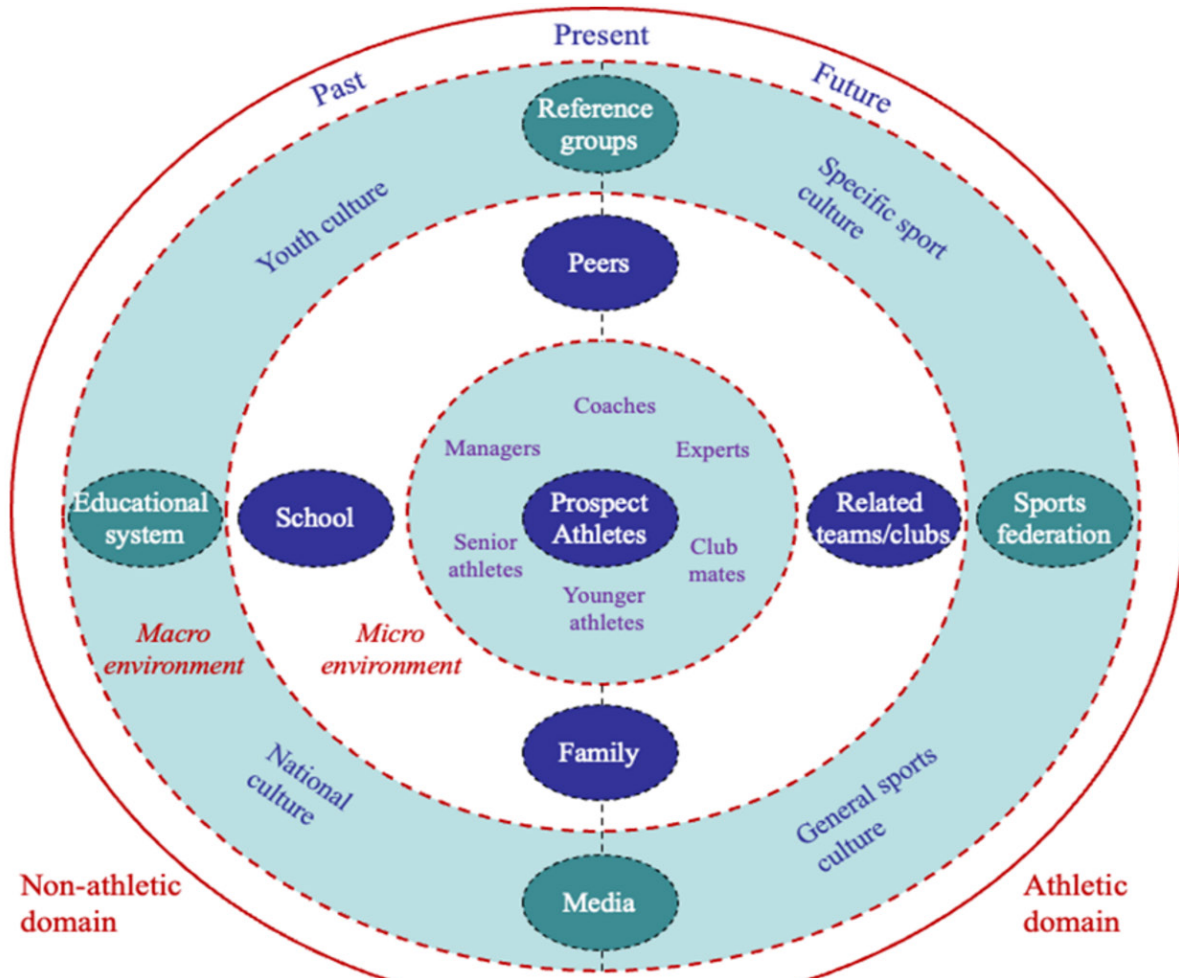


Figure 1. The ecological system in sport (Henriksen et al., 2010).

THE IMPACT OF GLOBALISATION ON TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Globalisation has had a profound impact on TD worldwide. As boundaries between nations blur and communication technologies advance, sports have transcended geographical and cultural barriers to become genuinely global phenomena. Young talents now begin their international journey as early as the under-10 age group, thanks to numerous competitive structures that provide early exposure to global competition. One such example is the Ten-Pro Global Junior Tour in Europe, which allows young athletes to compete internationally from a very young age. Coaches, too, are benefiting from this internationalisation of tennis; they have more opportunities than ever to travel and work across different countries, gaining exposure to various training methods and competitive environments. Additionally, the rise of online education platforms, such as the ITF Academy, has revolutionised

coach education and professional development. This blend of increased travel opportunities and accessible online education is helping to raise the standard of coaching globally, further enhancing the development pathways for young tennis players.

Furthermore, this globalisation effect is apparent as increasing numbers of young tennis players flee their home nests in search of improved training facilities, coaching, competition and, in many situations, academic support. Tennis, akin to golf, is experiencing a surge in private academies dedicated to training high-performance athletes (Grecic et al., 2017; Brouwers et al., 2015). Labelled as twenty-first-century talent tourists by Grecic and colleagues in 2017, they claim that decisions made by parents to transition to commercial academies are often based on professionally constructed marketing materials, testimonies, and well-publicised coaching biographies. However, the benefits of the increased

numbers of private academies cannot be ignored as a study in Flanders (the Northern part of Belgium), for instance, showed that tennis players training within the national governing body elite sport school system have similar chances to become successful as those players training privately in academies (De Bosscher & De Croock, 2011). Despite the surge in the private sector, there remains a widespread belief in the significance of personal coaches (Oršolić et al., 2023) and their substantial contributions to TD. Looking ahead, personal coaches can capitalise on the globalisation effect by enhancing their knowledge base, expanding travel opportunities, and collaborating with the private sector to potentially incorporate developmental elements they may not have the resources to provide, such as sparring partners, access to role models and sports science support. The future of TD in tennis may not need to be defined by a dichotomy of "them versus us" but rather by embracing a collaborative approach that leverages the strengths of both sectors for the benefit of player development.

THE MODERN-DAY TALENT DEVELOPMENT PATH: IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING

The pathway for tennis players is evolving. Previously, most players followed a more linear route, beginning in local clubs and progressing through the governing body's structured pathway to professional tennis (or not). However, this traditional linear style path is no longer the only option. Today, aspiring tennis players can choose from various development routes such as clubs, commercial academies, or US colleges that better suit their individual needs and circumstances. Consequently, according to a forthcoming study by Cahill and MacNamara (2024, in press), decision-making along the talent pathway emerges as a pivotal yet under-researched

factor with significant potential to influence talent TD. Based on this research of parents of top ten ranked national players in Ireland, Figure 2 provides a typical example of the TD pathway, highlighting the crucial decisions and potential options parents and athletes must navigate.

Initially, in local clubs, parks or schools' tennis players and parents start the shared journey along the talent pathway. Showing promise and typically as young as nine or ten, parents and athletes begin to take the sport more seriously, although, at this point, most are still involved in other sports (Oršolić et al., 2023). Parents are often faced with critical decisions concerning the choice of coaches, training environments and, typically, the choice of joining national governing body programs. Furthermore, it has become increasingly more popular for parents of tennis talents to choose home school options, with an interesting statistic from the IMG Future Stars U-12 event where only 20% of the 48 participants continue to attend regular school (Molle, 2023). As athletes progress, they now have more options beyond simply choosing between professional tennis or not. Pursuing a dual pathway that combines tennis with university studies is an attractive option. This pathway is gaining popularity, with over 1,700 teams across all three NCAA divisions in the United States (ITA, 2024); this investment may be seen as worthwhile for many as academies often offer the bonus of helping to support players on the track to US college systems which have an estimated value of \$50,000 per year (NCAA, 2015; Scholarship Statistics, 2015). Players can now continue their careers on various circuits in the performing stage, including college, UTR, national money events, national team events, and the ITF and ATP circuits. In sum, unlike in the past, where the pathway was more uniform, today's options are diverse and flexible, which coaches need to consider when designing long-term pathways for athletes.

Tennis TD road map

- Introduction to tennis**
Typically starting in clubs or parks around 7 years.
- Beginning to take it seriously**
Important decision point: choice of a performance coach, international academy or national governing body program. Tennis Europe circuit
- Taking it seriously**
Increased competition program, decision point regarding pursuing professional tennis, or US college system or national university. ITF circuit.
- Performing**
Pro tour (or post-US college), US college tennis or national competition.

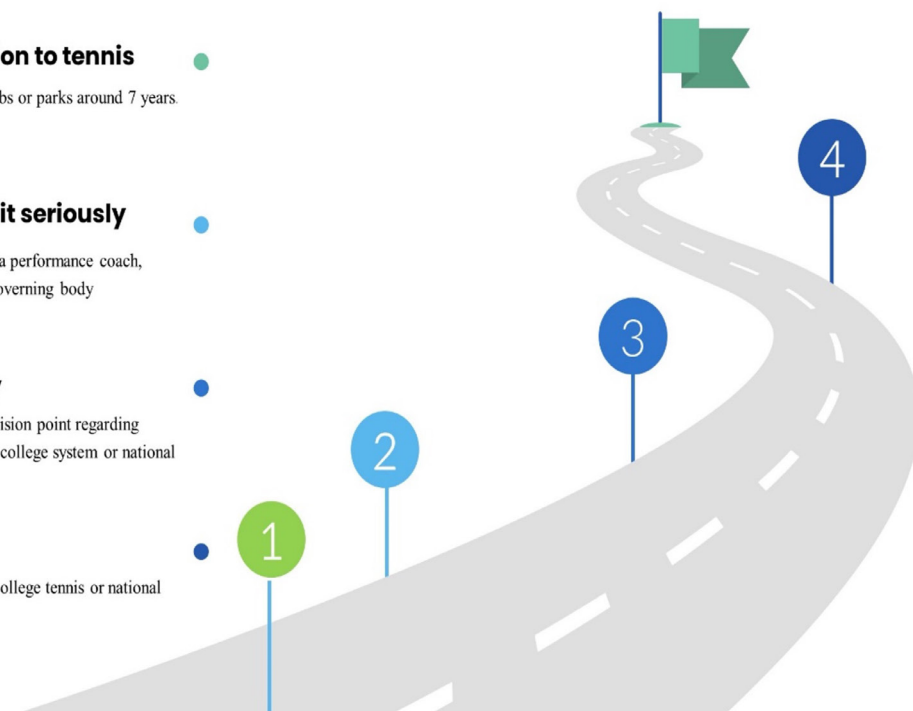


Figure 1. The modern-day talent development pathway in tennis.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS AS THE KEY DECISION-MAKER

Talented individuals inevitably undergo changes in coaching, training environments, and support personnel throughout their developmental journey. However, the one constant and pivotal decision-maker remains the parent. Tennis has been extensively studied in terms of parental involvement, making it one of the most researched sports regarding the role of parents (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2018; Harwood & Knight, 2015). These studies often highlight practical challenges such as the significant financial commitments, sacrifices, transportation logistics, and time demands placed on parents, exacerbated by the individualistic nature of the sport (Knight & Harwood, 2021; Gould et al., 2006).

However, arguably, research on the parents' role in tennis over the past two decades necessitates an evaluation of its alignment with the evolving TD landscape. For example, who supports parents when they go through critical decision points along the talent journey in tennis? Ultimately, many parents are confronted with these crucial decisions despite lacking prior coaching or playing experience, decisions that have the potential to either propel or hinder an athlete's career. Moving forward, coaches and parents must work harmoniously towards a common goal, as coaches are a primary source of information influencing parental decisions. Therefore, a crucial aspect of the contemporary coach's role is to educate, support, and evolve beyond the traditional athlete-coach dynamic to encompass a mentorship role within the parent-athlete-child relationship (PAC) (Harwood, 2023). By fostering a collaborative relationship and providing parents with the necessary knowledge and guidance, coaches can help ensure that the best or most informed decisions are made for the athlete's development and well-being.

CONCLUSION

How we develop talent in tennis is changing! Coaches must adapt and consider the diversity of factors outside their direct control that influence how tennis players develop. In many cases, micro, meso and macro factors, while often subtle, can significantly impact how athletes develop. Understanding the various pathways available allows coaches to create more personalised development plans that align with each athlete's goals and circumstances. By recognising the different routes to success through traditional club or national association programs, private academies, and collegiate tennis, coaches can better guide their players through the complex landscape of modern tennis development. In practical terms, the pathway is no longer linear; it is not one size fits all, and talents may need to ping-pong in and out of systems to gain some aspects at various stages (Webb et al., 2016). Clearly, there is no one pathway to producing tennis players. The future may be greater collaboration between the commercial sector, private coaches, and the governing body to provide what is needed for the individual at a point in time. Coaches may become the orchestrators of talent, providing the oversight to support and educate stakeholders, particularly parents, to make the best possible choices based on their circumstances and resources.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

- Coaches now more than ever bear the responsibility of managing a comprehensive ecosystem, which significantly impacts the specific roles they must fulfil in player development. Leadership has become essential in managing both players and systems. Therefore, coaches should consider a focus on developing the necessary skills to navigate and enhance their professional growth effectively.
- When designing TD programs, it is crucial to consider the external factors and stakeholders that can influence athletes beyond the immediate tennis environment. Coaches should consider these factors when designing annual plans, and therefore, coaches should contemplate a more nested approach to player planning (Abraham & Collins, 2011).
- Player development is not confined to the private sector, federations, or private coaches alone. Coaches can integrate various elements and stages of an athlete's career across different programs, tailoring their approach to meet the athlete's specific needs at any given time.
- Developing players is a joint venture involving the player, parent, and coach. Collaborating closely with parents is essential, as they ultimately make key decisions. Your support is critical, so take time to plan and review progress with them regularly.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FINANCING

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