



Ukrainian experience in the WISH programme as a tool for the development and professional growth of female tennis coaches

Maryna Ibraimova & Olha Khaniukova

Ukrainian Tennis Federation, Prydniprov's'k State Academy of Physical Culture and Sport, Ukraine

ABSTRACT

Development and training programmes for coaches of different qualifications have always been an integral and important part of the work of the International Tennis Federation (ITF). Most of them are aimed at improving the knowledge of coaches on training types, planning, and organising the practice process of tennis players of different qualifications, as well as tutors of ITF courses for different continents. It is important to note that in recent years, the trend towards gender equality has been growing around the world, in various industries and in sports. Moving in step with the modern demands of society, the ITF cares about the decent opportunities for female coaches, their realisation and achievements. Female coaches often face various challenges and difficulties that affect their growth and development as professionals. The WISH programme (Women in Sport High-Performance Pathway Programme), supported by the ITF and Olympic Solidarity, is a completely new and innovative approach to training and assisting female coaches, and is aimed specifically at their personal development. The given article focuses on the experience of a WISH Cohort 2 participant and her specific mentor.

Key words: WISH programme, female tennis coaches, career development, mentoring.

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Corresponding author: Olha Khaniukova. Email: Olha Khaniukova, khaniukova0703@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Tennis is one of the few sports that pioneered the preparation and participation of female athletes in the Olympic Games. Back in 1900, in Paris, women were able to take part in the competition officially for the first time. Only two game sports were presented that year, and tennis was one of them. However, since tennis became a professional sport in 1928, it was excluded from the Olympic Games programme by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). It was only in 1988 that tennis finally made it back into the Olympic programme. The champion was Jennifer Capriati, who had just turned 16. At such a young age, an athlete faces many challenges and temptations, and knowing how to act, who to turn to for help and how to help yourself is essential.

Nowadays, the International Olympic Committee is one of the most powerful organisations that supports National Olympic Committees through various programmes for athletes, coaches, officials, etc. These programmes can be educational (coaching, management, governance, etc.), financial, construction, etc. The National Olympic Committee, in turn, actively cooperates with regional federations of various sports, and tennis is no exception. Thus, the cooperation takes place through the cooperation of the Ukrainian Tennis Federation, the International Tennis Federation and the International Sports Committee Olympic Solidarity (Schaerer, 2023).

In the recent years, the issue of gender equality in society, as well as in sport, has become quite acute and requires the constant introduction of new measures to support and promote the career development of female athletes. Back in 2019, the International Tennis Federation included in the programme of the Worldwide coach conference the discussion regarding how to attract more women to sports. However, the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine only started active work in this area in the country in 2022. It has introduced several measures to support and inspire female athletes and coaches to continue and advance their sports careers. If we look at the data presented, which reflects the role and place of women in Ukrainian sport in general and in the administrative department, it is clear that not many female athletes remain in sport as coaches and managers of sports organisations and do not connect their lives with this field of activity. So, the statistics are as follows:

- Ukrainian Olympic medalists: Female – 102; male – 86
- Numbers of the sport federations in Ukraine – 44. Only 2 have female heads.
- National Olympic Committee in regions – 26. Only 1 is headed by female.
- According to the statistics, the share of female coaches in sports schools in Dnipro region is 20%.

Speaking about women's tennis, we can observe a completely different picture. Ukrainian female athletes are ranked much higher in the WTA rankings than men in the ATP rankings (Figure 1). Therefore, it is not surprising that Ukraine has a high percentage of female coaches who successfully work with both junior players and highly skilled athletes (F - 36%; M - 64%). For example, Olga Savchuk was ranked 78th in the WTA rankings and holds the WTA doubles title. Later, she worked as a coach with Karolina Pliskova (No. 1 in the WTA rankings as of 17.07.2017) and led the Ukrainian national team during the BJK Cup in 2022. Natalia Medvedeva was ranked 23rd in the WTA rankings, has 4 WTA singles titles and 12 doubles titles. Today, she continues to work with the junior national teams of Ukraine and in 2014-2015 she led the national team in the Fed Cup (BJK Cup today). However, this trend does not hold true in all regions of the country. For example, in the Dnipro region, this figure is only 11%.

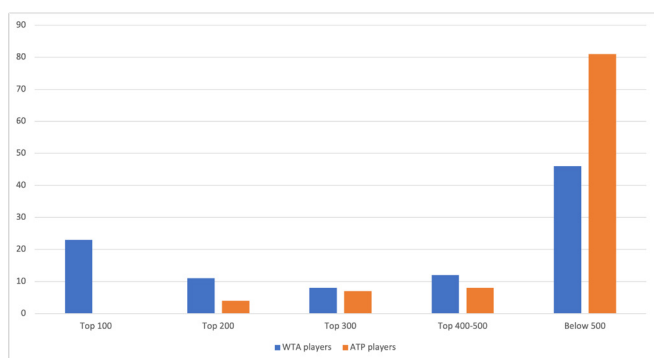


Figure 1. Total number of Ukrainian players in WTA and ATP tour

With the support of the University of Hertfordshire (UH), Olympic Solidarity (OS) and the participants' International Federations (IFs), the WISH (Women in Sport High-Performance Pathway Programme) programme was developed and presented to support and assist female coaches. The main goal of this programme is to increase the number of female coaches involved in the training process of high-performance athletes who are coaches of their country's Olympic team or coaches of national teams, such as the Billie Jean King Cup in tennis.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To define the content of the WISH programme as a tool for the development of professional growth of female coaches.
2. Identify the features and describe the methods used in the WISH programme that have had a positive impact on the career of the Ukrainian programme participant.
3. The effectiveness of the WISH training programme for the professional development of female tennis coaches in Ukraine.

Methods. To achieve our objectives, we used the following methods: analysis of scientific and methodological literature; theoretical analysis and synthesis; pedagogical observation; methods of determining the psychological state; methods of art therapy.

WISH

I would like to note that the WISH programme is the first programme that is not aimed at studying methods and techniques to improve players' training and achieve better results in their work and thus move up the career ladder, but rather at developing and helping the coach. This is extremely important and timely. Modern coaches are required to manage the tennis player's training process through communication, presentation of theoretical and practical knowledge and psychological skills. To be effective, a coach needs to maintain their psychological health to be able to notice and respond appropriately to the peculiarities of the game and the players' behaviour. Problems that can affect a coach's psychological well-being will affect their communication style, motivation, relationship with the player and self-esteem (Gowling, 2019). All these aspects of effective coaching are fully addressed in the WISH programme, with special attention paid to the individual needs of each coach.

According to Cahill (2023), interest in developing the leadership skills of coaches has increased significantly in recent years, as there is a correlation between these skills and team success. After all, being a leader is not just about responsibility. A good leader can inspire and motivate and know how to adapt different leadership styles to meet the needs of the people around them.

The WISH programme is based on leadership competencies, which include Self Develop; Empower others; Drive Performance. It was based on these indicators that colleagues who know the programme participant well enough and work closely with them evaluated them and filled in the 360-degree feedback form. The programme participant answered questions and completed the WISH competencies Self-assessment form. The ITF was asked to provide a set of sport-specific competencies or behaviours and surveys were set up for each coach with a personalised link to it. The sport-specific competencies or behaviours have been designed specifically for the WISH programme and go beyond the criteria that might be in a tennis top coaching qualification. The criteria are as follows: Understands people and environment; Facilitates practice; Emphasises improvement; Builds networks. This self-assessment demonstrated that being a coach is not only about having good knowledge of training athletes of different qualifications, but also about the ability to communicate with others, continue to work on yourself, take care of yourself and help others. It also helps to determine what kind of leader you are for yourself, your athlete and your team.

The WISH programme includes a variety of learning approaches:

- Independent work of the coach with the materials.
- Online session with facilitators and psychologists (work in big and small groups);
- Communication between participants is obligatory (no meeting without communication).
- Residential week in UK University of Hertfordshire (lectures, workshops, teamwork).
- Mentoring (online sessions with leadership and specific Mentors).
- Projects, Individual reflective report, goals and action plan.

This enables coaches to take a comprehensive approach to analysing and determining where you are now, what you want to achieve, where and how to move forward. You get a complete picture and vision of your own capabilities and prospects. This approach affects self-esteem and self-confidence and helps the coach to calmly overcome life and professional difficulties and develop their career.

KHANIUKOVA OLHA (participant of the WISH programme, PhD, captain for junior Ukrainian National Teams, mom of two boys).

When I received the invitation to participate in the WISH programme, it was a difficult time for me, not only because of the everyday problems we face in life. I must say that the role and importance of WISH in my personal life cannot be overstated. When I was invited, my country had been at war for some time and the problems we were facing were not the kind of things people think about in their daily lives, but rather how to survive until tomorrow, how to protect your children, how to live a normal life under constant bombardment, etc. You can imagine the psychological state I was in. And it was the WISH programme that became a breath of fresh air for me, allowing me to find the motivation to leave, to work and to get rid of the stress.

Since each country has its own system of qualification, selection and teaching, as well as a different mentality and way of life, this programme helps to try, learn and live an experience that may not be found in other countries. Some aspects of the programme were already familiar to me, but many of them were new, interesting and opened up the world of coaching to me from a completely different perspective, which helped me to understand that there are different individual characteristics that a person can demonstrate depending on the situation they find themselves in. And in the world of coaching, a person is always in a variety of situations because the roles of a coach are very diverse: coach, referee, friend, organiser and motivator. This is the reason why coaching is a very difficult profession, especially for women who still have a family and children to take care of. All this makes it clear that we need the help of leading experts in the field, so it was great to be involved in the WISH programme and become part of the WISH team.

Prior to the residential week, as I have already mentioned, participants in the programme completed the Wish Competencies self-assessment form and were also assessed by their fellow coaches using the 360-degree feedback form, which for me was a new and interesting approach to the learning process and self-discovery. It helps to evaluate oneself on indicators that may not seem important before, and some of them were previously treated as unimportant, but working with a mentor helped to highlight the problems that are not visible before. To agree on these positions and to identify the areas where we have worked and will continue to work. In particular, I would like to emphasise the importance of both leadership and specific mentoring, which really helps me a lot, and I will go into this in more detail below.

In terms of issues that the WISH programme has helped me with, the first one is "Awareness of my achievements". I realised that not all players are destined to be in the top 10 or top 50 with a certain amount of effort. I decided that it was really cool that I was able to reach that level (top 150 WTA)

and learned not to focus on the fact that I wasn't able to get into the top 100. I realised that a lot of other players have worked even harder and still have not managed to at least qualify for the Grand Slams or win titles at different levels. My self-esteem has improved enough. Being a perfectionist, I used to underestimate my results, I couldn't look at the situation in a positive way and enjoy it, but now I see that I have reached heights, and this has given me the push to develop in another area. Our sport offers opportunities not only to achieve success through personal results in games, but also to become a qualified coach, a mentor and to help children learn and develop in their own way.

As a shy person, lacking in self-confidence and constantly in doubt, I really appreciate the knowledge I received as it helped me to deal with myself, to increase my confidence in my abilities without external motivation and evaluation, to stop depending on other people's opinions and to stop seeking the opinion of others in my relationships with players. Now I'm able to critically evaluate my actions and honestly determine whether they are right, and it turns out that I rarely make mistakes or do anything wrong.

I developed a tolerant position when dealing with people who tend to show aggressive behaviour and with whom I still have to communicate, as they are managers or parents of the players. I found an independent position and began to defend my own opinion competently, to disagree, I was able to work with aggressive parents, to promote my concept, to say no and refuse to compromise, which is completely incompatible with my concept of teaching, learning and communication.

Coaching is physically and mentally demanding. Therefore, every coach faces their own challenges and difficulties. It is necessary to stay in good physical shape, to take care of one's own emotional state and mental health, as in addition to working with the players on and off the court, the coach must communicate with the players' parents, teammates, managers, organisers and solve various problems. Young coaches working with elite junior players have identified the following challenges: competitive environment between other coaches; communication with players' parents and their involvement in the training process; understanding the reality of coaching and the frustrations of it (Gowling, 2019).

In terms of my challenges, I can mention the following:

- Work and family balance, which is important for any working mother.
- Emotional tension, burnout, especially in our terrible situation in Ukraine (full-scale war).
- Physical fatigue.
- Lack of confidence.

So, I would like to share with you the techniques that have had the greatest impact on me. One of the most interesting and effective is the Belief Wall. Below is an example of how you can use this technique to identify your strengths, understand and realise the amount of work you have done and achieved. All this has a significant impact on the level of self-esteem and self-confidence.



Figure 2. My Belief Wall.

Everyone can add to this table what they consider necessary, important and essential. Seeing your own abilities, thoughts, wishes, position, achievements, etc. visually changes your attitude towards yourself. Your journey has been structured.

Another effective way to work with a positive attitude towards yourself and your actions is to write down 10 good events, actions, achievements, etc. every day (10 positive things). You don't have to write down only big and significant events. It is worth writing down all, even the smallest positive events in your life. This approach allows you to see your work, changes and daily achievements in their entirety. Very often we do not notice or give importance to small work, but it often happens that there is a lot of it.

After the residential week I realised how much I had improved my communication skills. After all, being a coach involves constant communication with players, parents, management, etc. The conflict resolution technique helped me to understand how to build a conversation, where to start, what to note and what to emphasise. How to ask the right questions and listen to the end. By starting a conversation not with a conflict issue, but with the good moments of your cooperation, you help the other person to relieve tension and be positive. Then, after listening, allow them to speak and ask questions to show that you are ready to hear their thoughts, concerns and experiences. Then, by presenting your own assessment and analysis of the situation, and importantly, without judgement, it is much easier to find a solution and a way out of a difficult situation.

Walk and talk. This technique is actively used in psychological practice by many specialists. On the one hand, the participant gets some physical activity, which has a positive effect on mental health, and on the other hand, there is no situation where you are sitting across from the person you are talking to and are forced to share and talk openly about something. From my own experience, I can say that I liked this approach to communication, especially because we always agreed on who we were going to talk to on the way from the hotel to the

university, changed the interlocutor every day and chose the topics of discussion ourselves. All the participants in the WISH programme are very experienced athletes or coaches, or both. It is therefore extremely valuable to hear the experiences, thoughts and impressions of such a person. It has become clear that everyone faces different and often very similar challenges, regardless of sport, country or status. It is worth noting that this approach contributes to the development of communication skills, allowing you to overcome the barrier



of approaching a stranger, to negotiate and, above all, to start a conversation with him or her quite easily. Walking helps to develop the ability to listen and hear, to ask questions and to express opinions. Today, I actively use this technique in my work with players of GSPDP ITF/TE Touring Team, Ukrainian National Team and others.

One of the most significant results of participation in the WISH programme and the work carried out is the performance of the Ukrainian national under-12 girls' team at the 2024 European Winter Cup. Where the girls became silver medalists. I can confidently say that the skills I acquired, self-confidence in myself and my own actions and knowledge helped to realise the potential of the girls, to create a very positive atmosphere within the team, where everyone supported each other and was ready to listen, hear, do and help.

IBRAIMOVA MARYNA (Olha's Wish specific mentor; PhD)

My whole life is connected with tennis. I'm a member of the board of the UTF, Head of Tennis Coaches Council UTF, Director of Coach Education, Junior Tennis Programme Manager UTF, Ukrainian Junior Tennis Teams Captain U12, U14, U16 (2009-2020), Ukrainian Tennis Students Teams Captain at the 25 Summer Universiade 2009, Belgrade, Serbia; at the 26 Summer Universiade, Shenzhen, China, 2011.

I had been assistant professor of the sports National University of Physical Education and Sport of Ukraine (2000-2015), PhD (1986), the author of over 70 scientific and methodical works on physical education and sports.

Since 2009 I have been cooperating with the International Federation in the field of education of tennis coaches. First as a tutor assistant-translator, then as Tutor on the Levels 1-2 the cooperation was very fruitful and about 400 coaches in Ukraine had been upgraded their education according to the Level 1-2 ITF program.

I'm a member of Tennis Europe Development Committee (2017-2027). I have a rich experience of cooperation with ITF at the Coaching Education and implementation new programme for the development and popularization of tennis. I have some objectives to develop Junior Development programmes: Tennis 10s within Primary School, Tennis Xpress for beginner adult players, Junior Performance Tennis to most talented Ukrainian players. Also, I want to promote advanced technologies for teaching tennis and pay attention of forming a healthy lifestyle. I hope for fruitful cooperation and successful implementation of all projects.

In my work, I use many modern psychological techniques, especially art therapy (Tararina, 2019, 2022, 2023). These methods help determine the psychological state of players and coaches, adjust the training process and regulate the psycho-emotional state during difficult periods of participation in competitions.

I have known Olha for many years, both as a coach and as a person. Together we identified areas of work and development. One of the first tasks was to stabilise Olha's emotional state, because since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Olha had been facing not only difficulties in terms of professional growth and development or solving everyday problems, but also feelings of anxiety, fear, uncertainty and



injustice. To continue living, working as a coach and moving on, she needed to accept the situation, calm down and adopt a positive attitude. That's where art therapy and specific psychological techniques came in.

Art therapy is a form of psychological correction and psychotherapy based on art and creativity. It helps to relieve mental tension and stress, overcome anxiety and fear, aggression and impulsivity, and harmonise the inner state of a person. Art therapy is attractive because it uses mainly non-verbal forms of self-expression and communication. The process of drawing coordinates imaginative thinking, which is mainly related to the work of the right hemisphere of the brain, and abstract and logical thinking, which is the responsibility of the left hemisphere. Through drawing we project our feelings, desires and dreams, rebuild our relationships in different situations and face unpleasant and traumatic images in a painless way. That's why this technique has had such a positive effect on Olha and we have been able to move forward in her development as a highly qualified tennis coach.

CONCLUSIONS

The WISH programme is one of those programmes that allow you to unlock the potential of each participant and promote personal development. In this article, we have presented the characteristics of the programme, as well as our own experience of participation, the coach's own experience and the specifics of the mentor. The methods used during the programme, which had a positive impact on emotional state, level of communication skills, self-esteem, self-confidence and contributed to professional growth, have been revealed.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING.

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest and that they did not receive any funding to conduct the research.

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