



Developing tennis players for high performance – are we looking at the context?

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ABSTRACT

The development of tennis players with the expectation of success at the international level is a long and complex process, being influenced by several factors and actors, who play different roles and levels of influence over time. In this essay, we will reflect on the importance of a careful look at some contextual elements, which are within the scope of action of the National Associations, and which may contribute to the improvement of the local training scenario. In particular, we highlight the importance of parents, coaches and the quality of the relationships built by them. We also discussed the points of attention to be considered for the choice of training sites, presenting elements that can support decision-making and the construction of these social spaces for development.

Key words: development path, elite sport context, parents, coaches.

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INTRODUCTION

“Are elite athletes born talented or does practice lead to perfection? Is it nature or nurture that plays the predominant role in determining elite status in sport?” (Malhotra et al., 2022, pag. 1).

These questions, which are continuously present in the debates among professionals in the field and in the agenda of researchers from the international community, become even more interesting when we analyse modalities marked by the predominance of open skills, such as tennis, in which the ability to perceive relevant signals and make decisions under time pressure, responding satisfactorily, from the motor point of view, to the demands of a highly unpredictable and variable environment, are determinant for the results (Crespo & Reid, 2009).

Without a definitive answer that address all these questions and considering the multifactorial nature of sports success (Güllich et al., 2021; Malhotra et al., 2022), many researchers have dedicated efforts to seeking, holistically, controllable factors involved in the long-term sports development process, which can be associated with a greater probability of expressive results in the future (Till & Baker, 2020).

Since genetic factors are individual, in this essay we will focus on the aspects related to the context, reflecting on some elements inherent to the process of long-term sports development, with a view to high performance. More specifically, we will highlight the roles played by parents and coaches in this journey and the points of attention to be considered by these agents in the selection of the training site.

We hope that these reflections will contribute to the tennis community, bringing relevant information that can be converted into action plans by the responsible agents.

THE SETTING OR CONTEXT

Holistic understanding the ecosystem that permeates athletes and how it impacts, directly or indirectly, their development is fundamental (COB, 2022). When we analyse sport more broadly, we understand that the development of athletes with high performance expectations is context dependent, influenced by several factors and agents, as shown in Figure 1.

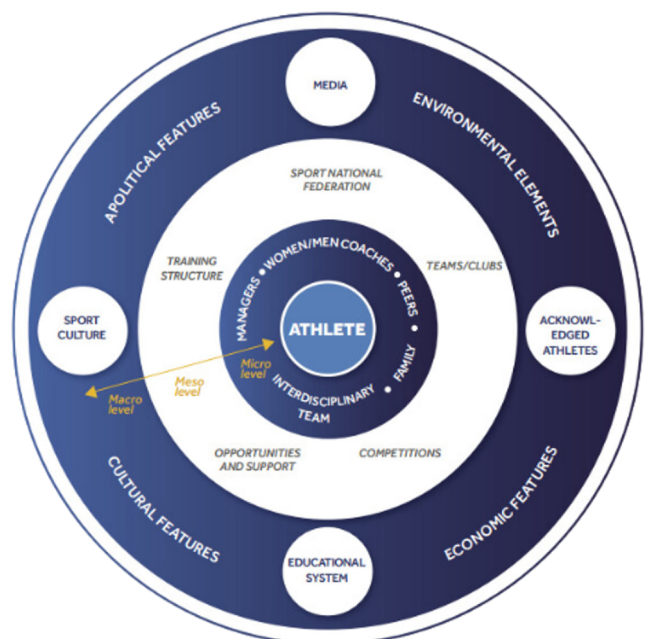


Figure 1. Premises based on the athletes' development bioecological model (COB, 2022).

Off-court factors, which seem distant from the central core of tennis players, such as Sports Culture, having Reference Athletes, Economic Characteristics of the country, among others (Brouwers et al., 2015a), gain representativeness in the process when we consider the international scenario and realize that the vast majority of elite athletes come from a few countries (ITF, 2021).

Data provided by the ITF Global Tennis Report (ITF, 2021), highlights that approximately half of the elite junior tennis players (Top 250) come from just 10 countries, with the European continent comprising most of these players (56%). This same scenario is observed on the WTA (♀=9) and ATP (♂=7) circuits, where more than 60% of the Top 250 tennis players in the rankings are European.

Without intending to discuss all the elements of the model previously presented (Figure 1), since doing so runs the risk of falling into the error of simplifying the complex interrelationships established between the levels, we will highlight, in the following sections, two important agents that are part of the primary nucleus of tennis players: parents and coaches.

PRIMARY CORE - PARENTS AND COACHES FOR ELITE ATHLETES

Parents and coaches are the main adults present in the central nucleus of tennis players, at different stages of their careers (Figure 2). It is no coincidence that researchers from all over the world have dedicated themselves to understanding the role played by these agents and the challenges present in the relationships established between them, so that children and youth people can develop their full potential (Harwood & Knight, 2015).

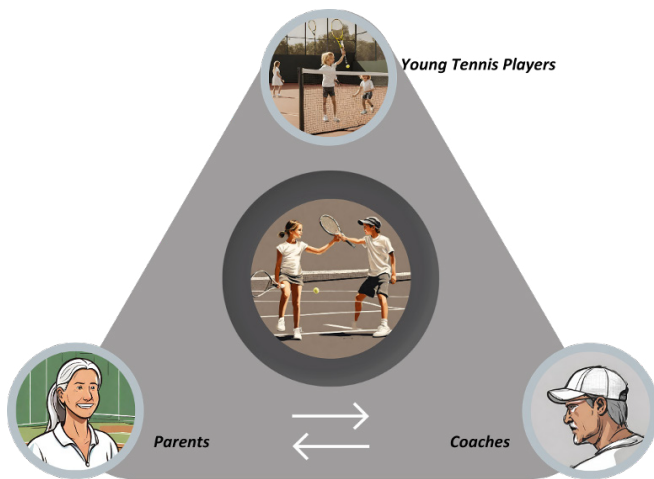


Figure 2. Primary Core Development, Athletes, Parents, and Coaches.

The challenges present in the context of tennis seem to make these relationships more challenging. Frequent competitions, which generate comparisons and opportunities for conflicting interactions, combined with the fact that parents are often the main or only source of financial support for the career, being responsible for hiring coaches, increase the number of stressors present, and may make the environment less favourable to the development of tennis players, if the roles and behaviours of both parties are not aligned (Lauer, et al., 2010).

Considering that youth people have little influence on the way adults conduct their interactions, parents and coaches need to be aware of behaviours commonly described in the literature and often present in these relationships, which do not contribute to the construction of a positive environment. Abusive relationships (verbal, emotional, and physical), low autonomy to perform the work, and lack of communication, of meaningful interactions, and of trust on the part of parents in the coaches' experience are some of the unfavourable behaviours present in this relationship (Santos et al., 2024).

Parents

Working on the court for more than two decades and talking to coaches from different locations, it is evident that the way of relating to the new generation of tennis players and their parents has changed significantly in recent years. These changes have been monitored and documented in the literature, with studies led by the United States Tennis Association (USTA) bringing valuable insights applied to tennis (Gould et al., 2016, 2019).

If the way of relating presents new dilemmas, the role to be played by parents and the importance of positive involvement throughout the journey has never been clearer. In the early stages, the tangible support offered by parents is crucial for children to get to know tennis and, from there, to develop a taste for the practice (Milan et al., 2021). The majority of the professional tennis players report having started practicing the sport by accompanying their family members to the courts (Oršolić et al., 2023).

In addition to these factors, at this stage, parents are seen by children as the main references, and their influence impact directly their self-perception of competence (Lauer et al., 2010). Perceiving oneself as competent, autonomous in one's journey and connected with people and with the context in which they are immersed are factors considered fundamental to satisfying each person's basic psychological needs, being associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation and, consequently, engagement with the practice (Gilbert, 2016, Malhotra et al., 2022).

Not surprisingly, professional tennis players of different performance levels recognize parents as the most important influencers in the initial phase of their journey (Oršolić et al., 2023), enabling access to practice and providing the necessary emotional support (Milan et al., 2021).

Jannik Sinner's statement on winning the Australian Open went around the world and illustrates the role and responsibilities of parents in the process:

I wish everyone could have parents like mine. They always let me choose what I wanted. Even when I was younger and practiced other sports... they never pressured me. I wish this freedom could be possible for as many children as possible. Thank you very much to my parents. (Jannik Sinner, 2024, <https://encr.pw/fonte-Sinner>).

The power attributed to parents, if well guided and conducted, can enhance the development of tennis players, on and off the court, increasing the chances of reaching their best version (Harwood & Knight, 2015). For this, first, parents need to

exercise their role as parents, offering the emotional, tangible and informative support that their children need at each time.

However, clearly defining roles, especially in a context with high emotional demands like tennis, is not a simple task, requiring parents to be open to developing themselves to offer the best support. According to Harwood & Knight (2015), to perform their role as parents of young athletes, these agents need to demonstrate high intra- and interpersonal knowledge and organizational skills, which are expressed by the ability to apply six postulates:

1. select appropriate sporting opportunities and provide the necessary support;
2. understand and apply appropriate parenting styles;
3. manage the emotional demands of competitions;
4. foster healthy relationships with significant others;
5. manage organisational and developmental demands associated with participation in sport;
6. tailor your involvement to the different phases of your children's athletic career.

As much as there may be misconceptions, parents, for the most part, make mistakes trying to provide what they believe is best for their children. Considering the whole scenario presented above, it is clear that nations and coaches interested in promoting an environment conducive to the development of tennis players for high performance cannot neglect the work with parents, dedicating time and efforts to education and building positive relationships (Milan et al., 2021).

Aware of this importance, the ITF and different National and Regional Associations have contributed to the production of educational support materials, short courses (face-to-face and online), and other strategies, which can support parents, federations, and coaches in order to improve this scenario.

On the ITF Academy platform (<https://www.itf-academy.com>), for example, there is a section entirely dedicated to this topic, and it is essential that coaches, as agents of change, can appropriate this knowledge, translating and disseminating it to families in a formal and/or informal way.

Coaches

Having qualified coaches in an adequate quantity to the demands required by the local sports system is a key element for countries that aim to achieve expressive results. For this reason, the 'Coaches' Pillar appears as one of the nine areas considered fundamental for international success, indicated by the Sport Policies Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS), (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

In the specific case of tennis, the availability and quality of these professionals were the contextual factors most cited by experts as determinants in the process (Brouwers et al., 2015). The study conducted by Cakravastia et al. (2023) pointed to a significant effect of the total number of coaches in a country and the total number of tennis players. This variable, in turn, was associated with having a greater number of junior and professional tennis players and representatives in Grand Slams.

However, we know that coach development is not a simple task. As observed for athletes, there are no shortcuts to becoming a professional of excellence (ICCE, 2012, Trudel et al., 2016). In fact, to act in a dynamic and complex context, such as high-performance sport, coaches need to be very clear about what really matters at each stage of the journey and about the purpose behind their practice (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024).

In addition to the specific demands presented by athletes, coaches are responsible for connecting and managing the entire ecosystem in which their tennis players are immersed, having to interact not only with their parents but also with different sports agents (multidisciplinary team, national associations, sponsors, press, club managers, among others) (COB, 2022, ICCE, 2012).

Effective coaches are professionals capable of consistently integrating Professional, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal knowledge, through the application of core competencies that form the essence of their work (Côté & Gilbert, 2009, ICCE, 2012).

The Figure 3, adapted from the COB (2022), illustrates how this process develops from the inside out, until integration with the stages of sports training.

As Lindsay & Spittle (2024) report, the approach taken by coaches on the court reflects their individual perceptions, their formal education process, and the experiences and learnings acquired informally.

Considering the range of scenarios to be contemplated and the level of specificity that high performance entails, it is evident that conventional certification courses have limitations in meeting all the demands and expectations presented by these professionals (COB, 2022).

For coaches who are more advanced in their development journey, other learning opportunities and strategies should receive greater attention (Trudel et al., 2016). To contribute specifically to these professionals, the approaches adopted need to be contextualized, working with everyday dilemmas, within the work environment itself or in social spaces with similar challenges (Crisfield & Bales, 2024).

In this scenario, mentoring and on-site professional development programs emerge as valuable strategies. When dealing with specific demands from professionals, these strategies are perceived as highly significant, fostering engagement and reflection on practice (COB, 2022). Since this essay does not aim to specifically discuss these strategies, We suggest readers interested in delving into specific cases in tennis to access the materials of Milistedt et al., (2018), on mentoring, and Cortela et al. (2020) on learning in the workplace.

Another special program that can assist countries in developing coaches for performance sports is the fast-track for former professional tennis players. This acceleration initiative can be done in the final years of the athlete's career or after its formal end (COB, 2022). We know that experience as a former professional athlete is very valuable for a career as a coach, developing knowledge and skills, a vast network

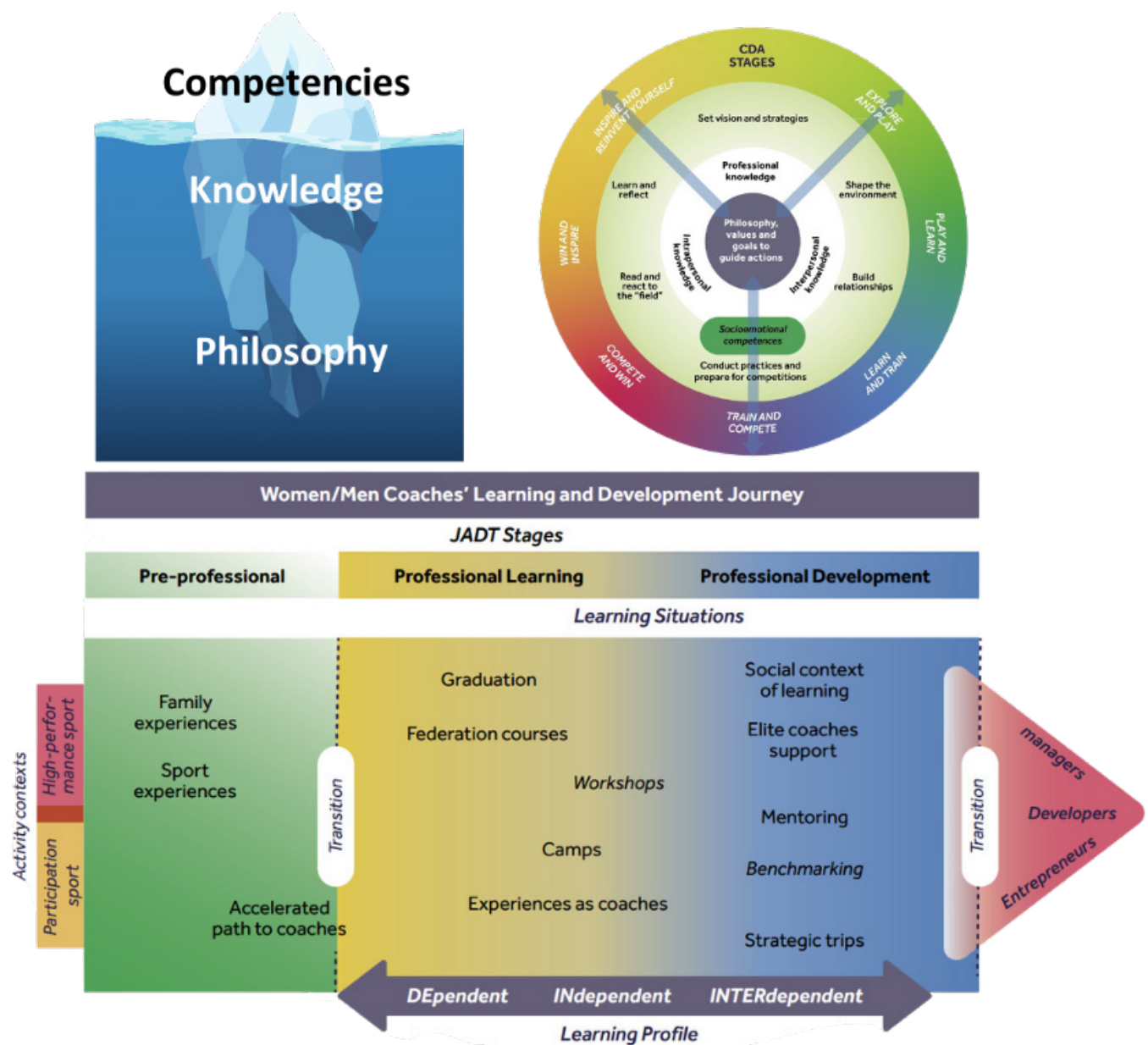


Figure 3. Development journey of sports coaches and its relationship with: the stages of long-term development of athletes, knowledge and core competencies for professional performance (COB, 2022).

of support and opportunities that only those who have experienced the circuit from the inside can witness (COB, 2022; Rynne, 2014).

The new version of the International Coach Developer Framework, a reference document in the field of coach professional development, published by the International Council for Coaching Excellence (ICCE), focuses its attention on these actors, presenting their responsibilities, knowledge and competences, as well as strategies for developing their role (Crisfield & Bales, 2024).

If having good coaches is essential for success at international levels, having a system capable of preparing these professionals is the key. For this reason, the most advanced countries have been heavily investing in structuring specific programs aimed at "coaches of coaches", referred to as Coach Developers (COB, 2022, Crisfield & Bales, 2024).

Coach Developers are professionals specialized in working with coaches to optimize their development and results, helping them achieve their goals. This work can take place in different contexts, going beyond formal education courses (Crisfield & Bales, 2024). In short, Coach Developers are responsible for facilitating and supporting coaches so that they can reach their full potential (COB, 2022, Crisfield & Bales, 2024).

Offering on-site support, designing and applying training programs, working on the development of specific knowledge and skills, are some of the attributions of these professionals, who must be carefully selected and prepared by national associations for the performance of the function (Crisfield & Bales, 2024).

We conclude this section by highlighting that great coaches are experts in simplification, making an extremely complex scenario appear common to those who observe their intervention from outside the court. In this context, nations committed to pursuing a high level of excellence, as previously emphasized for parents, should recognize the time and resources allocated to coaches and Coach Developers, understanding these elements as an investment rather than expenses, understanding that the observable results in this area are medium and long-term, requiring time until the first generation of players can be fully benefited.

SECONDARY CORE – CHOOSING "THE BEST" TRAINING CENTER FOR "YOUR" DEVELOPMENT

The learning and development process of tennis players is individual and context dependent, being influenced by individual (personal) characteristics, the quality of practices/training and the environment in which they are inserted (Malhotra et al., 2022, Parry & O'Rourke, 2023). In this sense, the largest and most complete training centers will not always be the best place for everyone (Oršolić et al., 2023). There is a combination of factors to be weighed by tennis players, who may have the option to choose where they want to be.

The characteristics of the Training Center (TC) will directly impact two of these points: the quality of training and the environment. Even though there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, understanding the key points to consider, as well as the pros and cons of each decision, serves as a starting point to make this choice more assertive (Stubbs 2023).

Figure 4 illustrates the main factors highlighted by Stubbs (2023) in the ITF - Choosing a Training Environment - courses for young tennis players.

Considering the different categories presented in the figure, it is evident the diversity of combinations presented in the choice of the TC, many of them related to infrastructure and facilities, fundamental to athletes who aim for international success. However, we know that the outcome of the process does not depend exclusively on any one aspect, but rather results from the interactions established between tennis players, with their potentialities, experiences and challenges, the training process, and the environment (Malhotra et al., 2022, Parry & O'Rourke, 2023), otherwise, only High-Performance Training Centers would train tennis players, which we know is not the case.

Having made these considerations, we will focus our attention on aspects that are less visible and tangible, yet no less important. For example, when we look at international success, we see that a large number of standout athletes are born and developed in small towns, where access to top-tier TC is limited. The quality of the environment, marked by the construction of meaningful relationships between athletes and coaches, by a training process centered on the person and their needs, and by the time and focus available for practice, in general, make these environments promising for the development of athletes, especially up to the specialization phase, around 14 years of age (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2010).

In tennis, the scenario has not been different. In the early stages of development, clubs and autonomous coaches have been presenting themselves with key stakeholders involved in the process (Brouwers et al., 2015b). Looking back at their careers, professional tennis players report that, if they could go back in time, many would have spent more time developing in smaller TC, closer to their families, and that going to large tennis center early is not always a good option, due to the characteristics of the context (Oršolić et al., 2023).

When discussing TC, it's important to understand that regardless of their size and the facilities they offer, these places are social spaces composed of different agents responsible for conducting training processes and building a positive development environment. Therefore, knowing who the professionals leading the project are and who will be directly involved in working with the tennis players is also important (Stubbs, 2023).

In general, TC have a Head Coach, responsible for establishing the philosophy of work and long-term sports development, which should be shared in an integrated manner by all members of the team (Stubbs, 2023). When we look at successful coaches, winners with different athletes/teams, we see that they have common characteristics in their philosophy, among which we highlight (Mallett & Lara-Bercial, 2023):

- Genuine care for your athletes on and off the "courts".
- Creation of a sense of belonging, cohesion and "Team".
- Clear definition of roles among team members.
- Deep passion for the sport and search for knowledge and achievements.
- Adoption of leadership styles that are in line with personal values and characteristics.
- Work-life balance.

To increase the chances of success, it's crucial to be associated with places that have a track record of producing high-performance athletes. Therefore, the choice of the TC should consider its history of training over the years and the development of tennis players with results, in the desired competition scope. The recurrence of good results is an indirect indicator that the long-term sports development philosophy and the professionals leading its implementation have been consistent and aligned with the changes in the landscape (Stubbs, 2023).

Finally, we would like to emphasize the importance of TC location from two perspectives: ease of access and contextual perspective. Regarding the first point, its location can facilitate the daily life of tennis players, spending fewer hours in transit to comply with routines such as school and/or extra activities, related or not to training. This is one of the important characteristics, present in small towns, that facilitate the development process of players, who often depend on their family to move around (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2010). Another important point regarding geographical location concerns the distance and ease of access of these venues to national and international competitions. This significantly reduces the costs, time, and the inherent stresses of long journeys and periods away from home (Stubbs, 2023).

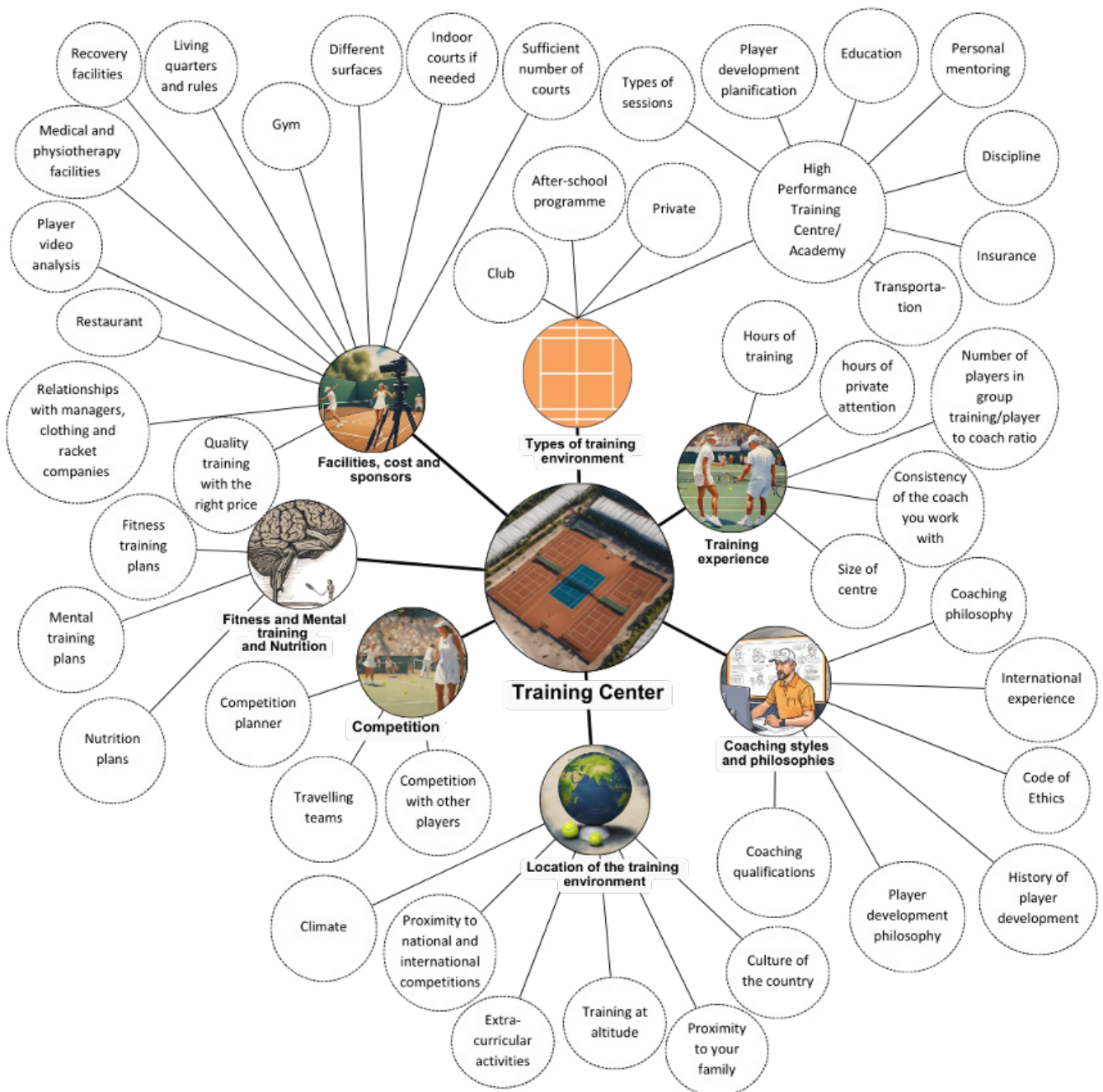


Figure 4. Elaborated by the author, based on the principles presented by Stubbs (2023).

Regarding the context of the location, the culture of the country and the distance from the family are points that deserve attention in the decision-making process. Cultures that are very different from those experienced by tennis players in their daily lives can become a barrier, generating social impacts that affect the well-being of players and, consequently, their development process (Stubbs, 2023). In the same sense, the geographical distance of the families, especially in the early stages of the journey, should be evaluated with caution, considering the importance of these agents in the integral development of tennis players. In general, the decision to move to TC that are far from their families should only be made when athletes have already exhausted the resources available locally and require better conditions and infrastructure. Changes before the age of 14 should be carefully considered by the families and coaches involved in the decision (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2010).

CONCLUSION

The long-term sports development process carries with it a series of particularities that make each tennis player's journey unique. Along this path, a series of challenges and elements considered "invisible" at first glance, due to their indirect impact, may go unnoticed, but their contributions are highly significant.

In view of the objectives of the essay, we highlight some points that deserve attention and that may contribute to the National Associations, coaches and the entire tennis community for the promotion of tennis players for high performance. Develop information campaigns and explicit educational actions to support parents, develop a national system of coach education that acts consistently and is able to contribute to the training of qualified coaches to meet

local needs for high performance and, have TC with human resources and infrastructure, close to the players, are some elements to be adopted in order to move forward.

Changes in peripheral elements take time and require consistency in the use of resources and efforts so that the results can be seen!

CONFLICT OF INTEREST AND FUNDING

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