Player Development–1993-2010 and Beyond.
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ABSTRACT
In this article, we will look at some of the player development strategies that have evolved over the last 17 years. More importantly, we will gaze into the crystal ball to see what will be necessary to succeed in the next 17 years.

INTRODUCTION
It gives me great pleasure to contribute to this 50th edition of “ITF Coaching and Sport Science Review.” The publication has grown and developed over the past 17 years. Obviously, the Internet has led to wide availability of coaching and sports science information. However, “ITF Coaching and Sports Science Review” was and remains a truly unique tennis publication. This is due to the excellent contributions from top experts in numerous fields from all over the world. Specific topics are presented in great detail for the coach that is a true student of the game. Congratulations to Miguel Crespo for his work in organizing and developing this fine educational tool since 1993. His own contributions, in terms of content, have also been outstanding. I look forward to the next 50 editions.

Successful player development is more of an art than an exact science, although sports science principles certainly apply to player development. There is no singular formula that guarantees success. Some programs seem to produce a long line of top players for a period of time, and then the production line can slow down or come to a complete stop.

Player development programs exist in many different formats that often overlap. A national association may have a reasonably well-funded and serious program for developing players. Players often move to private tennis academies once they have attained a certain level of proficiency. However, do not underestimate the role of clubs and individual coaches in getting players started and doing most of the formative work that ensures that they do not have weaknesses that will breakdown under the pressure of higher level competition later on.

INTERNATIONAL RESULTS AND INDIVIDUAL GREATNESS
The approach to player development in different countries around Europe is quite diverse. In spite of these various pathways, about 80% of the top 100 men and women have come from Europe over that last 17 years. European countries have won 13 of the last 17 Davis Cups and 14 of the last 17 Fed Cups.

Apart from the dominance of European players, we have also seen two additional trends. On the men’s side, many South American players such as Brazilian Gustavo Kuerten, Argentines David Nalbandian, Guillermo Coria, Gaston Gaudio, and Juan Martin del Potro, and Chileans Marcelo Rios, Fernando Gonzalez and Nicolas Massu, have made a significant impact on the men’s game in terms of both excellence and depth. In the women’s game, we are seeing more and more good players emerging from Asian countries, indicating a bit of a change in the world tennis order.
A few players have risen above the rest in terms of Grand Slam superiority since 1993. In men’s tennis Andre Agassi, Pete Sampras, Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal have won multiple Grand Slam titles. Among the women, the most prolific Grand Slam champions have been Steffi Graf, Martina Hingis, Venus Williams, Serena Williams and Justine Henin. I do not think that any particular conclusions related to player development can be drawn from looking at the careers of these spectacular players. The things that they seem to have in common are remarkable talent and the fact that all of them enjoyed success at the professional level at young ages. The player development pathways followed by these great players were quite varied. In the case of the Williams sisters, their pathway was very unique, and never duplicated. They simply did not play in any significant junior competition and went directly from the training court to the pro tour.

ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESSFUL PLAYER DEVELOPMENT

Having established that there is not one foolproof formula for developing elite players, and taking into consideration the vastly different environments from which outstanding players emerge, I will outline what I think will be the key elements for successful player development going forward.

1. You must have excellent athletic talent.

During the 2010 Australian Open, Roger Federer mentioned that the biggest change that he has seen in the men’s game during the past five years has been the overall quality of the athletes. He said that when he first began to reach his peak performance levels, most of the players had various weaknesses that he could exploit. He feels that the emerging players now have very few weaknesses and the only way to beat them is to get better yourself. Being a good tennis player without truly outstanding general athletic ability will not be good enough.

2. Planning will be essential.

Given the hundreds, if not thousands of young players that are now participating in good development programs, it will become more and more difficult to succeed if significant aspects of a player’s development are missing or done poorly. Principles of physical and psychological development need to be respected. The right work must be done at the right time.

3. The financial aspects of becoming an elite player will be a major challenge.

In many countries, the player’s family covers nearly all of the expenses for advanced training and competition. This is beyond the means of all except wealthy families. Wealthy families are often understandably very reluctant to gamble their child’s future on a career in tennis.

On the contrary, families from some countries and/or from less privileged backgrounds are willing to chase the dream of stardom without giving too much thought to the consequences if the tennis career does not work out.

Eventually, I feel that support from national associations, sponsors, private investors and/or management companies will be essential to fund serious tennis careers in all but a few exceptional cases.

4. Talent identification more widely practiced and more sophisticated.

Due to the costs involved in top player development, national associations or private investors will want to have as many assurances as possible that a player has genuine talent before beginning the process of spending on high-level coaching and international travel.
5. Physical fitness will become a given.

This means that virtually all players will be in superior physical condition as a prerequisite for success. We see top players such as Federer, Nadal, Murray, or Roddick competing in tough, long matches day after day. Their fitness levels are superb. Any player hoping to make a career in tennis will have to achieve the levels of fitness like players mentioned above.

6. Good coaching will be necessary at all levels.

This begins with coaches’ education. In order for players to receive good early training there is need for good coaches beginning at the starter level. There is crucial technical work to be completed by the age of 12. Coaches should be equipped to give large numbers of players a fine physical, technical and tactical foundation by the time the players reach their early teens. At that point, many players may need to move on to programs where there are better opportunities in terms of receiving daily high-level practice and ready access to good competition. An example of this already exists. Many Russian juniors receive a high quality introduction to the game in their home clubs, but many move to Spain where there is good daily training, including practice match play, as well as numerous competitions.

7. Belief and confidence are critical to the process of becoming a top player.

There are quite a few examples of countries that are continuously producing large numbers of good players. Current examples would be Russia in women’s tennis, and Spain and Argentina on the men’s side. Players from these hotbeds of talent seem to have a collective belief in their abilities, similar to Brazilian football players. They see so many of their peers succeeding that they adopt the philosophy that “if he/she can do it, so can I.”

In this regard, one of the most interesting statements that I have heard came from Sweden. In their golden period in the 1980’s, Sweden once had over half of the top 20 men in the world. One former player that had become a coach said that just about anybody could make the top 50, but reaching the top 20 is pretty good. Now, that’s belief and confidence!

Player development success should not be judged entirely by top international results. A country’s players may not feature on the world stage but may be recording outstanding success on regional basis, or simply performing much better than they had in the past. For example, in the 1990’s, a substantial number of players from Cote d’Ivoire were able to attain ATP rankings and win African championships. This success occurred in a country that had no history of tennis excellence. It happened because some talented athletes were given some good coaching and a bit better competitive opportunities.