



Junior Development –Current Status and Future.... Do We Need New Programmes?

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the development over the past years of junior tennis programmes. How the programmes have evolved and what should be present within a modernised player development training methodology.

Key words: Player development, Programmes, Periodisation.

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INTRODUCTION

Tennis has been changing a lot during the last 20 years, and, I believe, these changes accelerated in last decade. It is not only the game we watch during Grand Slams, but also junior development and training methodology have improved so much. Upcoming juniors are generally more creative than before, they are also fitter and better mentally prepared, as the result they play aggressive all round game from the beginning. My opinion is that it is mostly because many coaches (among others due to hard work of the ITF Development Department) understand better tennis specific periodisation and that the development of junior players to successful performer is a multiyear, step by step process. Progressive mini tennis system (red- orange - green) is widely accepted, even by parents and the game based/tactical approach is more and more in use.

So because modern coaching is more and more sport science, game based, player centred and individualised coaching (Crespo 2005, Unierzyski, Crespo 2007), nowadays young players learn earlier more competences.

Almost all tennis nations possess junior/players development programs and they often go together with talent identification systems. Unfortunately, there is still lack of globally accepted models (Reilly et.al 2000) and because of this selection in majority of countries is still based on tournament results achieved at a young age. Because of this many junior players, who do not achieve good results early on are lost from the sport of tennis.

So, in my opinion there is still a space for improvement in few areas:

JUNIOR DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM.

Despite achievements of sport science natural model of players' is often still in place. It's favors early maturing children, often born in first months of respective year (Malina 2003) and therefore because many players, who are not successful at the young age, drop out.

STRUCTURE AND ORGANISATION OF TOURNAMENTS.



Knock out system still dominates, even under 10-12. Research on relative age effect (e.g. Edgar, O'Donoghue, 2005, Unierzyski 2010). conclude that we are losing many players who were born later in the calendar year. Therefore, I have no doubt, that the cut off date for age groups should be flexible and based on calendar/chronological age of individual, not on fixed date (1st January). I also believe that there should be more events for 11 & 13's. Many research show stimulating role of tournaments

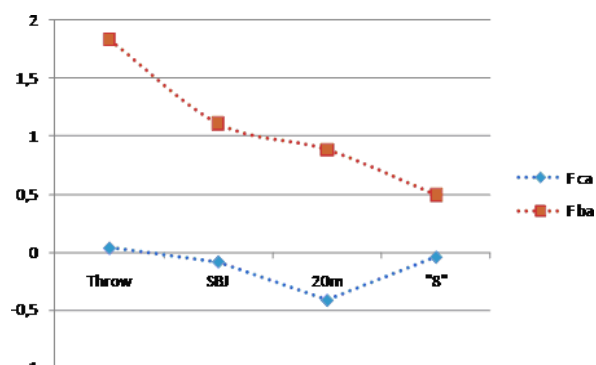
for junior development (Brabenec 1999). Therefore ALL junior players of similar biological development should play similar number of matches regardless of current ranking/sport level

TRAINING LOADS.

Still many players work too much and biological and emotional development is not considered/ respected enough. Retrospective research showed, that the most successful men's players were following training regime adjusted individually to biological age and whose, who were overloaded in vast majority were very good only as juniors (Unierzycki 2010)

TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND TESTING PROCEDURES.

Many nations implemented testing procedures in order to measure players' potential and effectiveness of training. In these models, instead of subjective judgment, knowledgeable experts measurable most desires characteristics of young athletes (like motor abilities, technique, tactics, mental features). But one of very common problems is how to interpret results of tests. Possessing numbers (cm, seconds etc.) is not enough. The influence of biological development on test's results is often not considered and many talented players are not spotted because they are late matures. Graph 1 presents one of arguments why this issue is so important.



Graph 1. Fitness profile of 13 years old junior – future/currently the best tennis player in the world

F ca – profile standardised according to calendar age,

F ba – profile standardised according to biological age.

A player who's profile is shown on graph, as a 13-years old was just one of many young competitors participating in European junior tournaments. He was not very successful, probably because he was biologically more than one year younger than his calendar age. He was also practising much less than his mates. Some years later he became probably the best tennis player in the history of the game. If his physical preparation is analysed traditional way i.e. according to his calendar age, he would be "average" and probably not selected to national team in many countries. (TID theory says that talented player must

possess fitness level above the average for his age). But if his real (i.e. biological) age is considered, it can be seen that his profile is much above the average so he meets criteria of "talent".

Presented case study of is, in my opinion a strong argument, that there is a need to improve programs and methods - we need to create more effective and high quality systems of junior development and talent identification.

As a life-time and mass sport, tennis needs different approach and solutions than classical "Olympic" disciplines, e.g. rowing, wrestling, canoeing, weight lifting, judo, in which selecting the most gifted early might be more important than creating a large participation base. I believe that using achievements of sport science and experience of sport practitioners in a one common system will help to form models suitable to many nations. In such program junior development programs, competitions and talent identification should work together as a one, integrated system. The system which Tennis Canada develops is good example.

Basic principles of a junior development program could be:

- 1) Everybody has a chance to practice at appropriate level ("Play- and Stay"). Most gifted players are scouted and invited to special programmes but everybody should have a chance to participate. To start with a relatively large number of potential champions is more proper than selecting only a small number at the young age.
- 2) Initially identification criteria are "wide" (range of acceptability). They become narrower with the age and stages of career. This approach reduces the possibility of making mistakes when assessing potential of young players.
- 3) Depending of age and potential, players are invited to be part of: e.g. club (C), regional (B), or national (A) system. Individualised (or at least semi- individualised) programmes are offered to more talented children. Even theoretically less gifted kids should get treatment according to their needs (quality!). If they progress they will be able to join the elite group. It will keep them in a game and give a chance of further development (no one knows if they won't develop and reach "A" Level later).
- 4) Everyone from e.g. "B" group, may join "A" group when he/she fulfils certain criteria/conditions (fitness level, results etc.).

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