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The Influence of Parents in Identifying and Developing Australian Female Tennis Talent

Abstract

This study investigated the role of parents in developing Australian female professional tennis players. Top WTA ranked Australian singles players (n=10) and their parents (n=10) responded to written questionnaires. Participants were asked to recall their tennis background and describe the current role of parents and compare these to possible earlier roles. Further, participants were asked to make recommendations to parents who wanted to help a player develop her talent. A series of inductive content analyses was conducted to analyze the data. These analyses revealed a significant, and changing, role of parents in a development process extending over 10 years. Sacrifices were necessary in order to pursue a tennis career but positive benefits were generally reported by players and their parents. The importance of a caring and respectful home environment for aspiring players was highlighted.

Keywords: athlete development, parents, tennis.

Introduction

The development of talent to achieve excellence has been a focus in the sport of tennis for many years. Defined as "any innate capacity that enables an individual to display exceptionally high performance in a domain that requires special skills and training," (1) the term talent describes those individuals who show promise with the potential to excel.

Tennis Talent Development Research

The beginnings of tennis talent development research can be traced to Monsaae's (2) investigation of 10 male and eight female US tennis players who were ranked in the top 10 in the world between 1968 and 1979. Monsaae identified a changing relationship between player and parent throughout a player's career culminating in parents moving into the background and playing a less direct role.

Carlson (3) interviewed five professional male and five professional female Swedish tennis players to examine key factors influencing the successful nurturing of tennis talent. The study's results showed that extensive training and early sport specialization did not favor elite development; instead, psychological skills, ambition and a drive to win were critical for success; positive parental involvement and encouragement were associated with a player's progress; and, environmental factors (with the player-coach relationship being of utmost importance) accounted for significant variance in explaining which players would succeed in reaching the pinnacle of their sport.

Wolfenden and Holt (4) examined players' (two male aged 14 and 15 years, one female aged 13 years), parents' (4) and coaches' (2) perceptions of talent development in elite junior tennis. The study found parents fulfilled a number of significant roles (including providing emotional, tangible and informational support) and the parents' relationship with the player's coach could be jeopardized if parents attempted to fulfill unwarranted roles (e.g., providing technical advice during tournaments). Children and mothers sacrificed their social lives; family resources were heavily directed to the child's tennis; and family time was constrained due to the talented child's commitment to tennis (at 13-15 years of age).

The role of parents in US elite junior tennis has been extensively investigated in recent research. (5) This research highlighted the positive role played by parents in providing opportunities, emotional and logistical support, love, encouragement and optimal push (motivation). Notwithstanding such positive influence, parental involvement could also be a restrictive factor if parents became too intense and involved in their child's tennis (e.g., too much emphasis on winning and unrealistic expectations). In their discussion of the findings, the researchers concluded that they believed there was no one way to successfully parent one's child in junior tennis.
Purpose of this Study
The purpose of this study was to extend key talent research in Swedish, British, and American tennis to investigate a nationality of player and parent that had not been previously been investigated. Prior to this study there was no known talent development research in Australian tennis and the governing body of tennis in Australia, Tennis Australia, supported research to be undertaken that would provide a sound basis for developing its female tennis players and, specifically, in understanding the roles parents might play in nurturing young Australian female talent into world-class competitors. Understanding the appropriate role of parents in tennis talent development was further deemed most important by Tennis Australia in light of publicity denoting ‘interfering’ or ‘ugly’ tennis parents in national and international tennis publications. (6)

Method
All selections of participants and methods of data collection, primarily qualitative, (7) were approved by the University human research ethics committee prior to the commencement of the project.

Participants
Data were collected from 10 Australian professional female players (mean age of 24.3 ± 2 years) who held a Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) singles ranking (range 159 to 837) and were competing on the WTA and International Tennis Federation (ITF) women’s circuits. Female data was also collected from their nominated parent (one male and nine female).

At the time of the study, players had started to play tennis at a mean age of 6.9 (± 3.1) years, taken their first lesson at a mean age of 7.5 (±2.7) years, entered their first tournament at a mean age of 9.7 (±2.2) years, decided to concentrate on tennis at a mean age of 13.9 (± 2.7) years, had gained their first WTA singles ranking at a mean age of 17.7 (±1.7) years and had an average of 5.7 (±3.7) coaches during their career at the time of data collection. All parents, with one exception, had a sporting background covering the sports of tennis, gymnastics, soccer, ice-hockey, golf, javelin, European handball and basketball. Five parents had a background in tennis ranging from social play through to elite and veteran competitors. Two parents held a tennis coaching qualification; one held a Masters in Sport and Physical Education and one held a gymnastics coaching qualification.

Materials
Talent development was examined by means of two self-report instruments, a Player Questionnaire and a Parent Questionnaire. The questionnaires consisted primarily of qualitative measures. To avoid repetition, the content of these questionnaires is described below in the section relating to the development of the instruments.

Procedures
- Selection of participants
Consistent with qualitative methodologies, purposive sampling to select study participants was adopted. Following the recommendations for information- or data-rich individuals (8) and Tennis Australia’s request for research to address female talent development, Australia’s top WTA ranked female singles tennis players were targeted for investigation. Juniors (i.e.; players under 18 years of age) were excluded from the study to ensure all participants in the study were a homogeneous group of professionals (i.e., earning a living from the sport).

It was the researchers’ objective for 10 sets of players and parents to participate in the study (comparable to Monsaa’s (2) study). To this end, the researcher contacted Australia’s 10 top WTA female players. When two of these players failed to consent (citing a lack of time availability), the next two highest ranked players were contacted and subsequently consented to make up the targeted sample size.

- Data collection method
Data was collected by way of written questionnaires that offered a practical and valid solution to ensure all targeted participants located across Australia were examined (9, 10, 11) and to accommodate players’ requests to respond to questionnaires at times convenient to their tournament, training and travel schedules. A set of questionnaires, information sheets and consent forms (individualized for player and parent) were emailed (and a hard copy mailed) to Australia’s top 10 WTA ranked singles players to addresses provided by Tennis Australia. The information sheet issued an invitation to participate and provided details of the study.

To address potential threats to validity, a number of procedures were adopted in the design stage of the study including the development of clear instructions to participants for responding to the questionnaire; informing participants of the practical implications of the study: the assurance to participants of confidentiality of their responses; and, the waiver of any requirement for participants to identify themselves in responding to the questionnaire. No prompting of responses was provided since it was deemed important for participants to recall salient features and recollections in their own words and at whatever length they chose. (8)

The Player Questionnaire consisted of 16 questions (and component parts) and asked players to recall their earliest
memories of playing the game, significant influences in becoming a player, how tennis had changed them, what sacrifices were made, what involvement did their parents have and to make recommendations for parenting aspiring players. A similar questionnaire was used with the parents. The adoption of two questionnaires for parent and player allowed for an examination of talent development from different, yet related, sources. That is, players and parents permitted a triangulation of data sources, and provided a basis to establish the consistency of data collected, by comparing the perspectives of individuals from different viewpoints.\(^{(8)}\)

- Data analyses
The procedure adopted for organizing and synthesizing participants’ responses followed those of recent sport talent development researchers for analyzing qualitative data\(^{(4, 7)}\) which, in turn, had been modeled on Patton’s\(^{(8)}\) recommendations for such analyses. Described by Gould\(^{(7)}\) as one of the more popular methods of analyzing qualitative data, the inductive content analysis procedure involved a series of steps designed to create a hierarchy of themes. In this procedure raw data themes (smallest unit of information that could stand by itself) within narratives were identified and themes that shared similar meaning were subsequently grouped into higher-order themes. All steps in the inductive content analyses were independently scrutinized by a member of the Australian College of Sport Psychologists, who was knowledgeable in qualitative research methods. This member reviewed the researcher’s analyses and challenged her to justify the identification and organization of raw data themes from participants’ responses. Where discrepancies between the member and researcher existed, these were discussed and consensually validated.\(^{(8)}\)

Results
- Early Tennis Period
Eight players reported immediate family members (parents and brothers) had introduced them to tennis, with the remaining 2 being introduced by other family members (aunt and grandfather). Eight players recalled their earliest memory of playing tennis, with four citing the occasion as ‘hitting’ with family members. Ten players reported family and home environment had influenced them to become a tennis player. Seven players reported their first coach had also influenced them to become a tennis player with other influences including seeing elite players as role models\(^{(5)}\) and one player wanting to be different and ‘not the usual student’.

Five parents reported their daughter’s first coach had been the first to notice their daughter’s talent and 2 reported no-one had advised that their daughter had talent. Two parents reported their daughter’s first coach had influence the player to concentrate on tennis. Three parents reported family members had influenced their daughter to make this decision and 5 parents reported their daughter had made her own decision (after enjoying and playing the game for some time).

- How Tennis Changed Players’ Lives
Players were asked if tennis had influenced or changed their life. All reported that this had been the case with players citing the opportunity to travel and enjoy a unique lifestyle provided by tennis. As described by two players:

“Tennis has made my mental and physical aspects of me grow. It creates many positive personality traits such as determination, and even being disciplined and organized. It is a challenging sport and it really keeps a player very busy. You also get to travel to different parts of countries and for me, it has been a great direction in my life. You also meet many new people and cultures, and it is very healthy too!” and

“Tennis has given me the opportunity to travel around the world and live a unique lifestyle outside of a 9-5 job.”

- Sacrifices
  - Player sacrifices
Players were asked what parts of their life they had missed out on by their involvement with tennis. Seven players reported that they had missed out on certain activities (e.g., ‘socializing, hobbies) but that there had been ‘no regrets.’ Three players reported regret as to what they had been foregone. As described by one player, she missed:

“a normal social life, including access to friends whenever and wherever. Limited social activities. Relationships are strained and it’s hard to meet guys on a predominantly women’s tour”.

  - Parent’s Financial Sacrifice
Parents reported they had, on average, spent A$95,750 in total (including lessons, equipment, travel to tournaments etc) to facilitate their daughter’s journey to the professional ranks with one family requiring to take out a loan to meet expenses.

- Family Dynamics Arising from Player’s Involvement in Tennis
Parents were asked how having a talented daughter in tennis influenced family dynamics and what strategies were adopted to address issues arising from such
involvement. Four (40%) parents reported that having a talented tennis player had little effect with other siblings’ careers and sporting interests. Six parents reported effects on family dynamics to include arranging family holidays and family outings around tournaments, parent’s work choices influenced by their daughter’s demands and the need for all the family to co-operate “to make it work”.

With respect to managing family issues arising from the player’s heavy involvement in tennis, two parents reported there was no need to manage any family issues. Eight reported they enlisted a number of strategies that included prioritizing the player’s sporting commitments, conducting family meetings to gain consensus on issues, both parents sharing duties at home and at the courts and all family members being prepared to make sacrifices. As reported by one parent:

“Family issues were dealt with constant family meetings to discuss and assess where everyone as at or how they were feeling. This was vital and efficient as it allowed everyone to express how they were feeling about things, any concerns that they had, and overall, it allowed us to keep communications strong with the family, which ultimately make it much easier to overcome any family issues we might have had”.

Role of Parents
- Current Role
Players, parents and coaches were asked what role parents currently played in their daughter’s tennis career. All parents reported they provided supportive roles as confidante, friend, mentor and/or parent. Other reported roles included those of financier, assistant coach, travelling companion and player manager. Typical responses included:

“My parents play a big role with my tennis career. My dad helps me out financially, which is awesome because if I didn’t have their support, I wouldn’t be able to travel the world and get me ranking down. My mum helps me out a lot! She is kind of like my second coach. She travels with me most of the time and helps me with the little things. I couldn’t travel by myself. My mum is my great companion” and

“My first role is to be mum to her and I then oversee all areas of her development. I also encourage and assist her in maintaining a balanced life, which includes family, friends, school and tennis”.

- Changes in Parent’s Role
Players, parents and coaches were asked if the parent’s role had changed over the years and, if so, to describe these changes. Five players and 6 parents reported changes as illustrated by one parent’s response,

“It was more involved in begin with. In the early years of her playing, it involved me being very proactive in many aspects. From driving her to tournaments and practice and watching many of her training sessions. However, when she became involved in state and national teams and training squads my role adapted to an emotionally and psychologically supportive parent, rather than a hand on one. That is my role in her career today”.

- Appreciation of Parental Involvement
Players were asked what aspects of their parent’s involvement in their tennis careers they had appreciated most over the years. Appreciation for financial and transportation assistance was cited by three players. All players reported appreciation for the emotional and psychological support of their parent, including encouragement, patience, unconditional love and always being there for their daughter and her tennis as illustrated:

“...in retrospect, they always wanted the best for me even I didn’t agree at the time with their decisions” and

“(they provided) encouragement to pursue my dreams despite failures along the way. Encouraged to pursue many activities not just tennis”.

- Suggestions for Parents
Players were asked what recommendations they had for parents who want to help their daughter develop her talent at tennis. In the main, players wanted ‘parents just to be parents’ to encourage and support irrespective of match results and empower players to make decisions and learn from these. As illustrated by two players:

“I think trust is the key. Allowing (players) to experience hard situations by themselves; therefore, they then need to find a solution” and

“To support them in what they choose to do and help them to lead through the right path”.

Discussion
This study examined the influence of parents in identifying, and developing, Australian female tennis talent. In remarkably similar findings to Monaas’s (2) study, players in this study, on average, started playing the game at 6.9 (versus 6.5 in Monaas study) years of age, took their first lesson within a year of starting the game, had competed in their first tournament within 3 years and had committed to pursuing a career in tennis at 13.9 (versus 13 in Monaas study) years of age. In both studies, players took just over 10 years to reach world-class status which is consistent with the period of time posited by Ericsson,
Krampe, and Tesch-Romer\textsuperscript{[12]} as the general rule for individuals to attain international-level performance. The similarity of these findings between Monaas’s and this study is not totally unexpected given Open (Professional) tennis was introduced in the mid 1970s, and as such, offered individuals an attractive opportunity to pursue their interest in tennis as a career some 10 years prior to Monaas’s study.

The influence of family on a player’s journey in tennis is significant and as such, consistent with robust and extensive research findings of parental influence on developing talent across a range of sports and other domains.\textsuperscript{(13, 14, 15)} As evident in this study, such an influence had deep roots with 90% of parents having a strong background in sport and 50% of parents with a playing background in tennis. Without exception, all players reported their family had introduced them to the game and had provided a home environment that valued the game and motivated them to pursue their initial love for the sport. For this, players expressed their gratitude and especially their appreciation for the psychological support and encouragement given by parents (in addition to the tangible assistance in terms of financial and time driving players to training and competition).

This study found evidence of a changing role for parents in the process of talent development. These changes did not necessarily move in the direction found by Monaas\textsuperscript{(2)} for parents to move into the background over time. Rather, this study found evidence that some parents currently take an active role in coaching, travelling with and managing the player. In follow-up discussions with these parents, they explained such an active current role was a result of a lack of financial resources to employ someone to fulfill the role of coach, travel companion and manager and also their belief that they were best equipped to undertake these roles.

What is not in question is the considerable financial burden on families to fund their daughter’s interest in the game. Leand\textsuperscript{(16)} has suggested that the financial cost to families to fund their child’s first few years on the circuit (i.e., coach and travel expenses) can exceed over US$50,000 a year. Parents in this study reported they had spent, on average, over US$80,000 on their daughter’s tennis to cover lessons and travel and accommodation to tournaments in the formative years leading to international circuit travel. In addition to the financial costs, 60% of parents reported effects on family dynamics and arrangements with siblings similar to those reported by Cote\textsuperscript{(17)} and Wolfenden and Holt.\textsuperscript{(18)} Aware that the daughter’s heavy involvement in tennis can affect family dynamics, parents in this study present a number of strategies – including consultation with family members, prioritizing and delegation of duties – that they adopt to address family issues.

The question of whether tennis had changed a player’s life was addressed in this study as it was in Monaas’s\textsuperscript{(2)} study. All players in this study reported tennis had been a strong influence on their lives in terms of personal development and travel and lifestyle opportunities. Although the majority (70%) of players reported they had missed out on certain activities due to a commitment to tennis, they reported no regrets. For those players (30%) who reported regret, they cited missed opportunities to include those of social activities, having a normal environment and undertaking study.

This study provided players with the opportunity to make suggestions to parents as to how to best nurture talent. The suggestions offered to parents are consistent with those identified by Gould et al.\textsuperscript{(5)} with Olympic champions and Gould et al.\textsuperscript{(6)} with elite tennis juniors. In the main, players want ‘parents to be parents’ and to be there for their daughter in providing unconditional and total support and guidance irrespective of match results.

The implications of this study’s findings highlight the importance of embracing parents throughout the athlete development process. To this end, there would appear to be a considerable value for national tennis associations (such as Tennis Australia) to conduct ‘parent’ sessions or forums aimed at engaging parents in a positive professional relationship where their roles are acknowledged and nurtured with respect to an individual player’s changing needs.

In conclusion, this study extends the knowledge base of athlete development with a gender- and sport-specific examination of Australian female professional tennis players. A strength of the study was the support given by a very elite group of professional athletes and their parents. As noted above, this provided an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of the importance of parents in the tennis talent development process from two different, but related, sources. In terms of limitations, it is acknowledged that data was collected in a retrospective approach, and accordingly, subject to possible attribution effects and memory bias.\textsuperscript{(6)} Finally, future tennis development research directions may target other professional tennis players across different nationalities in order to provide a basis of comparison with this study’s findings.

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References


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Tennis Australia and the International Hall of Fame recently honored Dr Young for her contributions to Australian Tennis.

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