

Retaining Participants in the Sport of Tennis: A Literature Review and Evidence-Based Recommendations

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INTRODUCTION

- Tennis had recently experienced a decline in participation in the United States at the time of this project (1997/1998). Because of this phenomenon, the United States Tennis Association sought direction ways for promoting participation in the sport, especially at the initial levels of competence.
- While a well-coordinated effort to seek out new players and provide them with basic instruction and play was already present, these activities may have had limited in their ability to *maintain* participation in the sport.

PURPOSE

- The purpose of this project was to review past research on individuals' maintenance of participation in sport (i.e., theories of sport participation and research studies on sport continuation/dropout – for both general and youth populations).
- With this task completed, the second goal of the project was to suggest specific techniques that coaches and other practitioners could use to help increase retention of their players in the game of tennis.

RESULTS

In terms of continuation within a sport, the following conclusions were made from the review of past literature:

- Players seek to develop competence and mastery over their skills, while minimizing risks (e.g., failure or loss).
- Perceptions of self-confidence are important and are linked with perceived ability.
- An emphasis on internal and self-directed (intrinsic – satisfaction of skill improvement) motivational factors encourages continued participation, while an emphasis on external (extrinsic - trophies) factors discourages participation.
- Different individuals (e.g., introverts and extrovert, males and females) will appraise the same situation or series of events in different ways.
- The presence of social and fitness aspects support continuance with a sport.

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COACHING IMPLICATIONS

Mastery/Intrinsic Motivation

- Promote a mastery-based tennis climate; redefine success to include positive outcomes other than winning. This will promote the perceptions of success in the forms of skill improvement, being persistent, or having fun.
- Provide simple skills evaluation tools so that new players may easily track their progress.
- Introductory lessons should minimize verbalized instruction (from coaches to players) and emphasize guided trial-and-error learning.
- Adults should receive follow-up phone call(s) after the initiation of instruction. Scripts should be developed to promote skills mastery as the primary goal and minimize perceptions of threat (e.g., negative evaluation from peers, spectators, coaches, etc.).
- Ensure that young players' practices and games are fun by catering to children's shorter attention spans, incorporating change-of-pace within practices, maximizing participation, and increasing action in practice by altering rules and/or equipment.
- Allow players a say in the design of practices, including timing and assessment methods.

Players' Goals

- Place emphasis on players' personal goals and be sure these goals are divided into short-term (incremental) goals and are specifically tracked over time.
- Reward short-term goal achievement.
- Provide ongoing feedback regarding players' goals.



COACHING IMPLICATIONS (cont)

Maximize Self-Confidence and Minimize Threat

- Focus on strengths as opposed to weaknesses, provide effective models (e.g., players that are similar to yours, skilled athletes, etc.), and emphasize that persistence is as important as ability.
- Introductory lessons should be formatted to reduce potential social evaluation (e.g., through frequent player "rotations").
- Competition should *not* be a necessary goal for all new players. Allow players to choose when to begin competing, and recognize that some players will never move onto this stage.
- Motivations to participate differ among players. Use surveys to determine what motivates your players so you can organize practices to best engage and inspire the athletes.
- Modify game rules, equipment, and the court during practice to increase perceptions of success. These modifications can minimize an often difficult and frustrating learning process.
- Help alleviate anxiety by decreasing players' uncertainty and by helping to reduce the importance of competitive outcomes.
- Create an environment that reduces a fear of trying new skills and an atmosphere where ridicule is not tolerated.

Social Aspects of Tennis for Youth Players

- Promote a *team* competition format very early to enhance cohesion and reduce the perceived threat from social evaluation.
- Provide interactive drills.
- Encourage pre- and/or post-lesson social themes (e.g., pizza party) to advance group camaraderie

Fitness

- Organize practices specifically designed to increase fitness and the perception of making fitness and wellness progress.
- In introductory lessons, basic footwork and stroke skills training should be weaved into aerobic systems. Supplement these with flexibility training and strength band usage.
- Teach your players how to monitor fitness gains.

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