

Burnout in Competitive Junior Tennis Players

Gould, D.¹, Tuffey, S.¹, Udry, S.¹, & Loehr, J.²

Department of Exercise and Sport Science, University of North Carolina Greensboro¹
Loehr-Groppel Sports Science Associates, Wesley Chapel, Florida²

This research was funded by a USTA Sports Science and Medicine Research Grant (1993/1994).

INTRODUCTION

- There is considerable concern both inside and outside the tennis community regarding competitive pressures placed on junior players. These pressures have been found to lead to detrimental consequences such as burnout.
- Smith (1986) defined burnout as a psychological, emotional, and physical withdrawal from a formerly pursued and enjoyable sport as a result of excessive stress that acts on an athlete over time.
- Burnout can be influenced by a number of factors, which include perfectionism, a lack of assertiveness skills, the need to please others, excessive training workloads, parental pressure, the repetitive nature of sport, inconsistent coaching practices overuse injuries, and excessive time demands (Feigley, 1984; Juba, 1986; Smith, 1986).
- In response to continuing concern with junior tennis burnout and lack of scientific research on the topic, this investigation was commissioned by the USTA to obtain an accurate description of junior tennis burnout that would not be specific to a particular region of the country and would adequately represent junior tennis as it is played in the United States.

PURPOSE

To identify and psychologically describe junior tennis burnouts and compare these individuals to players who did not burnout of junior tennis.



OVERALL PROJECT METHOD

- **Phase 1:** A national sample of junior tennis burnouts and comparable players who did not burnout completed several surveys that measured the athletes' levels of anxiety, burnout, perfectionism, motivational orientation, and athletic identity. The results of the surveys from the two groups of athletes was then compared.
- **Phase 2:** In-depth interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of the burned out athletes who had participated in the first phase of the study. This second phase focused on obtaining detailed information about the experience of burning out of junior tennis and recommendations for preventing burnout.

YEAR PERFORMED 1993

SAMPLE

PHASE 1:

- 62 junior elite tennis players (30 burnout, 32 comparison)
- Gender = 36 males (58%), 26 females (42%)
- Mean Age = 16.4 years ($SD = 2.4$)
- Mean National Age Group Ranking = 55th ($SD = 36.08$)

PHASE 2:

- 10 USTA junior elite tennis players from first phase with the highest reported levels of burnout and perfectionism.
- Gender = 4 males, 6 females
- Age Range = 12-23 years

PHASE 1: RESULTS

Relative to the comparison players, burnout players:

Demographics

- had less input into their training;
- were more likely to have played on their high school team;
- were more likely to have played in higher age divisions in tournaments, and;
- practiced fewer days.

Psychological Variables

- were lower in external motivation;
- were higher in amotivation (lack of motivation);
- reported being more withdrawn.

Personality Variables

- were higher on perceived parental criticism and expectations;
- had higher need for organization;
- experienced greater concern over mistakes; and
- had lower personal standards.

Coping Skills

- were less likely to use planning strategies; and
- were less likely to reinterpret adversity/and issue as positive and growth coping skills.

PHASE 2: RESULTS

The following are examples of the findings from the interviews conducted with junior tennis athletes:

•Signs and Symptoms of Tennis Burnout:

- Lack of motivation
- Low emotional and physical energy
- Negative feelings (e.g., frustration, depression, nervousness, isolation)
- Inability to concentrate in and out of tennis environment
- Injuries/illness

•Factors Leading to Burnout:

- Physical concerns (e.g., lack of physical development, overtraining)
- Logistical concerns (e.g., gave up all time for tennis, did not like travel)
- Social/interpersonal concerns (e.g., no social life, negative evaluation from parent(s), coach not helpful)
- Psychological concerns (e.g., pressure, inappropriate expectations)

•Preventing Tennis Withdrawal:

- Change structure of tennis involvement (e.g., skip some tournaments)
- Address problem earlier
- Change outlook on tennis (e.g., change attitude on court)

•Advice to Players:

- Play for your own reasons
- Balance tennis with other things
- No fun – No play/Relax
- Take time off

•Advice to Coaches:

- Personal involvement (e.g., be there for things in and out of tennis)
- Two-way communication
- Utilize player input
- Understand players' feelings



RECOMMENDATIONS

- **View Burnout as Being Caused by an Interaction of Player Characteristics and Situational Demands.**
 - Avoid treating burnout as a personality weakness. Doing so could lead to players feeling reluctant to ask for help because of embarrassment.
- **Monitor Burnout Levels in Players**
 - Know the signs and symptoms of burnout (see phase 1 & phase 2 results).
 - Establish open lines of communication with your players so that you are made more aware of how your players are coping with sport-related demands.
- **Parental Education**
 - Parents can aid in monitoring, preventing, or alleviating signs and symptoms of burnout by being more aware of the critical role they play in their child's tennis and by being exposed to other topics such as of optimal push and appropriate parental involvement.
- **Provide a Socially Supportive Junior Tennis Environment**
 - Provide more doubles play opportunities in junior tennis and place more emphasis on the USTA's "team tennis" program in which players travel to tournaments as teams—not playing their own teammates.
- **Player Education**
 - Provide the athletes with suggestions for preventing and diminishing the effects of tennis burnout (see phase 2 results – advice to players).
- **Allow Players to Have Input Into Training**
 - Provide players the opportunity to give you feedback on your decisions about training and competition.
 - However, do not abandon your moral and legal responsibilities of ensuring a healthy and safe tennis program and playing environment.
- **Limit the Possibilities of Players "Playing-Up" in Age Divisions**
 - Moving up in age divisions is not for everyone. Resulting consequences could be both physical (e.g., injury) and psychological (e.g., feelings of isolation).
- **Minimize Parental Criticism and Coaching**
 - Encourage parents to take a supportive role in their child's tennis involvement that does not involve in-depth critiques of on-court activities such as strokes and play.
 - It is suggested that parents not coach their own children in junior tennis, especially at the more intense levels of play.
- **Recognize and Limit Travel Demands**
 - In addition to the normal stress of tennis training and competition, being away from home and friends was also found to create stress in the young athletes.
- **Beware of Overtraining**
 - Carefully monitor both organized and informal training regimens of athletes because overtraining can lead to burnout in some athletes.
- **Emphasize the Fun of Junior Tennis**
 - Common results of maintaining a fun atmosphere in the tennis environment are reduced stress, better play, and increased wins.
- **Teach Preventative Stress Management Strategies to Players**
 - Junior tennis players need to master stress management and coping skills to prevent burnout, play to their potential, and fully enjoy the game.