

Athletic Perceived Competence and Self-Evaluation Processes in Adult Tennis Players

Sheldon, J.P.

Department of Behavioral Sciences
University of Michigan-Dearborn

This research was funded by a USTA Sports Science and Medicine Research Grant (2001).

INTRODUCTION

- Perceived competence is related to expectations for the future, which is often the motivation for practice, effort, and participation.
- If players feel confident about their tennis ability, they also will think they have the potential to be good in the future, which would require practice, effort, and continuation of tennis participation.
- If players think they're not at all good at tennis, then they are likely to think they are not going to play well in the future, which could make players frustrated, stop trying, and/or give up the sport forever.
- In order for tennis players to figure out how good they are, they must decide to which sources of information they must pay attention (e.g., win/loss record, position on the team, improvement, feedback from coaches, or personal goal achievement).
- People often use multiple sources of self-evaluation information, yet some sources may be more important for certain types of people based on factors such as age and gender.
- The ways in which individuals assess their competence as tennis players is essential for you to understand if you are to positively affect your athletes' development.

PURPOSES

This study had two main purposes:

- To determine if tennis players consider psychological factors when they determine how good they are at tennis and if these athletes place more importance on physical or psychological skills when doing so.
- To find out if athlete gender and/or perceived tennis ability played a role in the various sources of self-evaluation used.



SAMPLE

Participants for this project were 467 tennis players from 15 tennis facilities in a Midwestern state.

Gender: females (n=323), males (n=143)

Age Range: 19 to 74 years

Ethnicity: Caucasian (90%), African-American (4%), Asian American (2%), Hispanic (2%), N/A (1%)

USTA Rating: 2.5 (n=28), 3.0 (n=136), 3.5 (n=162), 4.0 (n=69), 4.5 (n=48), 5.0 (n=17), 5.5 (n=1)

PROJECT METHOD

Participants completed a series of questionnaires that measured different physical (e.g., strength, endurance, and flexibility) and psychological (e.g., coping with adversity, peaking under pressure, and concentration) variables along with players' USTA ratings, age, perceived tennis shot abilities and overall perceived tennis competence. The results of the surveys were used to address the study purposes in two separate investigations.

RESULTS

Investigation #1

Of the 12 psychological and physical variables that were studied, 5 were related to players' perceived tennis competence (presented in the order of most strongly predictive to least strongly predictive):

- USTA Rating,
- Perceived Tennis Shot Abilities,
- Age,
- Confidence and Achievement Motivation (e.g., play to beat others vs. play to test one's abilities), and
- Strategy Knowledge.

Because gender differences have been found in perceived competence in past studies, separate analyses were then performed for male and female players.

Predictors of Perceived Tennis Competence for Women

- Perceived Tennis Shot Abilities,
- Age, and
- USTA Rating

Predictors of Perceived Tennis Competence for Men

- Perceived Tennis Shot Abilities,
- USTA Rating,
- Confidence and Achievement Motivation, and
- Strategy Knowledge



RESULTS (cont.)

Investigation #2

This portion of the project investigated how gender and level of perceived tennis competence influenced the sources of information players used to determine their self-perceptions of tennis competence.

Female players were more likely than males to utilize the following sources of information :

- Personal Improvement Information,
- Feedback from Coaches/Instructors,
- Feedback from Teammates,
- Personal Attraction to the Sport, and
- Degree of Perceived Effort

Male players were found to use comparisons with peers slightly more often than females.

Players with *High Perceived Tennis Competence* were more likely than those with *Moderate or Low Perceived Tennis Competence* to utilize the following sources of information to draw conclusions about their competence in tennis:

- Objective Measures (i.e., personal statistics),
- Personal Assessment of Performance,
- Feedback from Spectators,
- Comparisons with Peers,
- Feeling Nervous and Excited, and
- Degree of Effort Exerted.

Players with *High Perceived Tennis Competence* were slightly more likely to use 'Reaching Personal Goals' as a source of information than athletes with *Moderate or Low Perceived Competence*.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences in the sources of self-evaluation between players of *Moderate* and *Low Perceived Tennis Competence*.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are strategies you can use to develop this sense of competence in your adult players:

Perceived Competence Development

- Place more focus on improving shot-making abilities than on improving general fitness.
- Athletes' perceived competence can be enhanced through in-depth training in tennis strategy and through encouragement to put forth 100% in practices and competitions.
- Try to instill in your players a strong sense of confidence by using appropriate, non-patronizing feedback and encouragement.
- When coaching female players, focusing on strategy knowledge, effort, and confidence may be particularly beneficial.

Sources of Perceived Competence

- Females appear to use feedback from coaches/instructors more than male players. You can use this receptiveness to instill in your female athletes knowledge of strategy, a strong work ethic, a sense of confidence, and a solid tennis stroke.
 - Your feedback, however, must be related to the performance of these behaviors mentioned above rather than being general or ambiguous.
- Provide your female players with personal improvement information.
- If you use comparisons with opponents, teammates, or other players as a way to develop a sense of competence in your players, it would be more useful to apply this strategy with males than with your female players.
- When working with players who have a strong sense of tennis competence help these athletes maintain this positive self-assessment by setting challenging (yet realistic) personal goals and by tracking and making them aware of their personal statistics.
 - These personal goals will most likely develop into personal standards, which is another self-assessment source used by those with high perceived competence.
- While these findings provide a starting point for helping your players develop their perceived tennis competence, always remember your players are individuals and may have experiences, preferences, and needs that are different from the above mentioned recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Because perceived competence relates to motivation, it would be beneficial for you to always try to help increase your players' self-perceptions of their tennis ability. It is also critical for you to understand what sources of information players use to determine this sense of competence so you can best optimize these self-perceptions. Use the previously mentioned recommendations as a guideline for enhancing players' beliefs about their competence in tennis, but be sure to assess how each player responds to these practices and make appropriate adjustments based on individual needs and preferences.