

Understanding Young Tennis Players

“High performance sport is a world of dreamers, but of people who live their dreams” (Joel Bouzou, Pentathlon World Champion, 1987)

A. Tennis related psychological characteristics of young children (4 to 10-11 yrs old) (Gonzalez & Ochoa 2003):

- Anxious
- Impatient
- Poor concentration span but which improves with age
- Prefers to play not learn. This evolves in time to a great disposition to learning
- As approaches 10 yrs old develops competitive tendencies

B. Determinants of success

What determines success in tennis (aside from physical and technical qualities)?

- “Success in tennis is about much more than winning matches, it is about developing the right attitudes” which among others are (Wilson 2001):
 - Effort
 - Fair play
 - Team spirit
 - Responsibility ⇒ which in turn helps to build-up their independence, self-esteem and self-confidence

They in return, can:

- Accelerate learning
- Improve competitive performance

C. Helping your child to develop the adequate attitudes and personality development

Parents can help guide their tennis player child by setting some basic goals ((Zlesak 1995 – Miranda 2001):

- PUNCTUALITY, i.e. be on time for the lesson or training: respect to peers, the coach, oneself
- Give them increasing INDEPENDANCE and RESPONSABILITY (i.e. prepare their bag) on and off the court ⇒ which in turn helps build up their self esteem and self confidence.
- Maintain your POSITIVE backing and SUPPORT ⇒ which in turn provides encouragement, motivation, to feel good with themselves etc.

Reinforcing self esteem:

- Reward EFFORT not just ability
- Give praise and SMILE often
- Listen and ASK for suggestions and encourage them to decide
- Tell them how GOOD they are

Factors affecting independence and decision making:

*A tennis player makes 900 decisions per match (Brabenec 1981). In order to accomplish this process with efficiency, the following factors among others are important:

- Experience
- Concentration
- Training and competition program adapted to the level and characteristics of the child
- Assist them together with the coach in learning (Goulet et al, 1989-Harwood 2001):
 - to discover important cues and patterns in their and their opponent's game
 - where to focus
 - the consequences of correct and incorrect decision making
 - appropriate mistake management
 - to think positively and have positive body language
 - understanding quality effort levels
 - to consistently apply high mental efforts

D. Important considerations

- Parents play a **SIGNIFICANT** role in the long term tennis project of their child and are a **VALUABLE** resource in the mental training of their child ⇒ therefore it is important to put more **EMPHASIS** on their role in relation to the progression of their child towards the elite level
- Should get **EDUCATED** about how to react in winning and loosing
- Improve their **UNDERSTANDING** to help support the coach
- Research reinforces the **IMPORTANCE** for parents to possess the necessary skills or at least information in order to cope with the psychological and other demands of competitive tennis. The results have shown that (Harwood & Knight 2009-Bois et al. 2009):
 - Parents experience diverse stresses before, during and after their children's matches
 - The presence of both parents in a match was associated with higher pre-match anxiety
 - Female tennis players perceive greater parental pressure
 - Parental directive behaviors and pressure are associated with pre-match anxiety
- Children love to **PLAY**; simultaneously by the nature of its activity competitive tennis and its demands are full or **STRESSING** situations

E. Conclusion

*According to research, tennis players usually reach top-level performance after about 10 years or 10.000 hours of deliberate practice, therefore it is important for parents to: Endeavor that their child sees tennis as a **FUN** and **EASY** sport to play for it to become an unforgettable experience for **ALL**