Comparing Practices of USA Tennis Against a Global Model for Integrated Development of Mass and High Performance Sport

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A series of grassroots initiatives, a focus on health & fitness benefits, an excitement provided by the pro game’s positive role models and an infrastructure that supports development and consumer connections–are all making tennis one of the fastest growing sports in the 21st century US (USTA, 2010). However, international opposition is increasing and demanding concerted efforts from the US to remain one of the top tennis nations. Analysis of August 2010 rankings showed that among the top 50 male tennis players, eight players were from Spain, six from France, four from the United States; two were from Russia; 14 were from Central and Eastern Europe combined; among women, Americans had three spots in the top 50—a 90 percent drop from 30 years ago; Russia had nine (Kimmelman, 2010). Since 1988, when tennis was restored as a medal Olympic sport, various countries, including such important US opponents as China and Russia, have increased investments into both mass participation and high performance tennis. There are also more nations competing at the elite level, particularly after the disintegration of Central and Eastern European socialist countries into smaller independent states (e.g., Croatia, Serbia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia) each retaining their elaborate high performance sport systems inherited from the USSR. United States tennis is well known for the world’s best academies and university programs attracting top international talent. However, fundamentals, discipline and methodological sophistication at all levels of development from grass roots to elite, in areas such as coaching, facilities, medicine, science and other athlete services have been mentioned as advantages of other leading sport nations (Coyle, 2007; Daily Times, 2004; De Bosscher et al., 2006; Smolianov & Zakus, 2008).

This study examines the current state of tennis and its national sport body, the United States Tennis Association (USTA), against an ideal-type global model for high performance (HP) development that integrates mass participation (Smolianov & Zakus, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). We sought to determine what developments and improvements of the sport might be possible. The basic thesis is that HP system can develop sport talent, but that can only occur to full potential through an effective, underlying system of mass participation.

This paper attempts to identify a holistic system to advance tennis in the US so that they remain a leading tennis nation; thereby positively influencing overall US international performance and national health. Referencing practices from around the world would better inform USA tennis regarding its high performance status (Sparvero et al., 2008). USTA’s knowledge of global practices in both improving international performance and maximizing national participation is particularly important in light of the US Olympic Committee’s (USOC) recent move away from grass roots funding, which may result in decreased mass participation (Dittmore et al., 2008).

Over 200 sources of literature on general (e.g., De Bosscher et al., 2006 & 2010; Fetisov, 2005; Green & Houlihan, 2005 & 2008; Isaev, 2002; Riordan, 1978, 1989 & 1991; Tan & Green, 2008) and tennis-specific (e.g., Coyle, 2007; Kimmelman, 2010) sport delivery systems from 28 Australasian, North and South American, and Western and Eastern European countries were analyzed to construct a globally applicable model of high performance tennis integrated with mass participation, comprising of the following seven elements and three levels:

Micro level (operations, processes, and methodologies for development of individual athletes):
1. Talent search and development and
2. Advanced athlete support.

Meso level (infrastructures, personnel, and services enabling sport programs):
3. Training centers,
4. Competition systems, and
5. Intellectual services.

Macro level (socio-economic, cultural, legislative, and organizational):
6. Partnerships with supporting agencies and
7. Balanced and integrated funding and structures of mass and elite sport.

The above model was used to design a questionnaire of 54 statements reflecting desired practices. Examples of the survey statements by element are:
1. Young tennis players are trained based on guidelines for multiple development stages recommended by USTA,
2. Player career is prolonged by medical personnel knowledgeable in tennis,
3. Training centers provide specialized facilities and equipment for each age and level of participation,
4. USTA attempts to integrate professional and amateur tournaments into a progressive plan of competitions gradually preparing athletes for peak performance at "Majors" (i.e., Australian, French, Wimbledon, U.S. Open) and the Olympic and Paralympic Games,
5. Research results are well communicated to coaches (e.g., by research institutes, universities, and USTA),
6. Cooperation with agencies outside of sport industry (e.g., medical, scientific, military, philanthropic and sponsoring organizations, lotteries) is in place,
7. A multi-stage system of elite tennis player qualification is integrated with a system of fitness tests for mass participants.

The 54 statements were validated by 12 international experts, including executives from tennis governing bodies, academics who published on high performance and sport development (including tennis), and tennis coaches and administrators.

Using organizational directories, a survey of NCAA Tennis Division I, II and III coaches was conducted. The questionnaire was delivered online to 398 US tennis coaches and administrators. Respondents were asked to think about USA tennis system as a whole and indicate how often each of the desired 54 practices was performed, from ‘never’ to ‘always’ on a 5-point Likert scale. They were also asked to elaborate on practices and whether some should be improved or implemented. A total of 107 professionals participated in the survey with a response rate of 26.8%. Then four administrators from United States Tennis Association (USTA) and United States Professional Tennis Association (USPTA) were interviewed, including those in charge of development and science. The semi-structured interviews were based on the seven elements summarizing the 54 statements of the model. Content analysis of these governing bodies' websites and organizational documentation was also conducted. The results will be completed by the end of 2010 in order to report the results at the NASSM 2011 Conference.

The presentation will show how the model was applied to compare the USA tennis system against other systems to identify areas for improvement and practices transferable to the US. Following the presentation of the survey and interview results, a list of recommendations will be presented so that USTA may implement the improvements. It is hoped that this study will assist USTA and USOC in advancing the development and success of tennis while contributing to mass participation and the health of the nation.