Goal Congruency within the Sport Development System for Youth Tennis: “The Nature of the Beast” or a Problem of Structure?

Edward Horne, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
B. Christine Green (Advisor), University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Introduction and Literature Review
Parents undoubtedly play a significant role in the development of their child in all aspects of life, from their education to competitive sport pursuits. It is within the context of sport however, where parents are often portrayed as a hindrance in their child’s sports participation. Current youth sport contexts require even more parental involvement than ever (Danioni et al, 2017). Numerous studies have examined the detrimental impact parents have on their child’s development, and too often identified parents misguided, maladaptive, and harmful behaviors (e.g., DeFrancesco & Johnson, 1997; Gould et al, 1996). Coaches are often characterized as in opposition to parents, largely based on development of preconceived notions regarding parents. Yet, parents exert significant influence on and have important insights about their children that could greatly assist the coach in their development (Gould et al, 2008). For this to be effective, parents and coaches must have congruent values, goals, and role expectations (Gaudreau et al, 2016). The current literature pertaining to sports parents is restricted in that it overwhelmingly focuses on the perceptions of others (e.g., coaches, athletes) towards parental attitudes and behaviors in sport (e.g., Harwood & Knight, 2009). Even so, there is evidence that parents play an especially important role in preteen years, with coaches and peers becoming more influential with increasing age (Horn & Horn, 2007). The sport of tennis provides a unique context for investigating the parent-coach relationship. Tennis stands apart from other sports when investigating this relationship because of the costs associated with involvement, the individual nature of the sport, and the substantial commitment required outside of the school setting (Gould et al, 2008). More importantly, tennis coaches do not routinely attend competitions; leaving parents to fill this void. Common to other individual sports however, is that the salience of the parent-coach relationship, which forms a significant portion of a support team in tennis (Wolfenden & Holt, 2005). This study examined the value and goal congruence of parents and coaches of elite youth tennis players, and compared the views, experiences, and contingencies of parents with those of coaches, to identify strategies to enhance the parent-coach partnership and facilitate the development of the players.

Method
A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify parents and coaches of participants at tennis facilities in Florida, South Carolina and Illinois. Snowball sampling was also utilized as a method for reaching potential participants. Parents participating in either focus groups or in-depth interviews had a child between the ages of 10 and 14 who regularly participates in tournament play. The criteria for coaches required sufficient experience working with juniors in this age group. Two focus groups were conducted, one group inclusive of six parents, while eight coaches participated in the second focus group. The semi-structured protocol for parents included four topics of discussion pertaining to their child’s tennis development, while also incorporating questions related to contingencies: (a) goals/objectives, (b) sacrifices, (c) parent’s role and, (d) coach focus. While coaches discussed (a) their goals/objectives, (b) the tournament process, (c) parental involvement, and (d) sacrifices. The insights gained from the focus groups were then used to shape and direct the second stage of data collection, semi-structured interviews. Ten parents were interviewed as a part of the study, while twelve coaches were interviewed. Although the main line of discussion followed that of the focus groups, additional questions were added within topic areas as a result of focus group findings. For instance, ‘does the pay structure in tennis effect your approach to your job?’, and ‘does coaching tennis impact your life away from the court?’ were included in the coach’s interview protocol. Whereas, insights gained from conducting the parent focus group led to the inclusion of several questions, for example: ‘did the competitive youth tennis environment meet your expectations?’.

Findings
Results suggest a lack of professionalism within the parent-coach dyad, considering the financial commitment and time parents dedicate to their child’s tennis development. In some cases, parents were unaware of the goals coaches had for their child’s tennis. This may be the result of minimal opportunity for face-to-face interaction with a coach, as coaches often have lessons prior to and following their child’s lesson. While parents may see this interaction as part of the lesson, coaches see it as forfeiting their free-time in order to discuss with a parent their child’s development. The standard structure of tennis lessons does not include compensation for the time spent consulting and interacting with parents; pay occurs only for on-court instruction. This is also the case regarding tournament play, for coaches to attend they forgo the chance for paid instruction on a weekend, and thus sacrifice both time and money when observing their client in competition. Consequently, tennis coaches appear to attend tournament play far less than coaches of other sports, therefore relying on parents (whatever their tennis experience) as well as the young players themselves for feedback from which to generate future training sessions. Additionally, findings show parents are ill-prepared for the “nature of the beast” that is youth tournament tennis, and rely on other parents for insight and advice, a point coaches recognize as an area of contention. Finally, coaches perceive, somewhat mistakenly accordingly to initial results, that parents are overly concerned with short-term success, and fail to prioritize the long-term development of their youth sport participant.

Discussion

Based on these results, it would seem that the business demands placed on tennis coaches, such as their pay structure, and the daily routine they must adhere to restricts their ability to communicate appropriately with parents, the financiers of their child’s tennis development. As coaches are often paid only when on court, they are thus incentivized to prioritize time on court, at the expense of time spent attending tournament play, or meeting with parent to establish firm goals and objectives, and develop a plan for their development. Parents appear woefully unprepared for the ‘nature of the beast’ that is the junior tennis tournament environment. They lack awareness of future decisions they will likely face as their child’s commitment to tennis grows. Additionally, findings suggest parents struggle with the coaching process, in that their coach rarely observes their child in competition, or finds time to discuss at length their child’s development. Parents do however, contrary to a coaches’ beliefs, consider the long-term expectations from their child’s participation in competitive tennis, with parents often regarding their return on investment to be the positive influence tennis plays in their child’s overall development. Suggestions for restructuring youth tennis provision, and recommendations for improving coach-parent interactions will be provided.

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