

2

The Parent's thoughts

Is tennis good for my kid?

Let's go back to the first question that keeps bothering parents: the decision to choose tennis as a sports discipline for their child.

- Can my child play professional tennis?
- Can he/she succeed?
- Who wants a career as a tennis player more – a son, daughter, or you, a parent?
- Does he/she have the talent?

The greatest confusion encountered by parents involves the last word – talent. The end of thousands of careers is due to the misuse of that word. The term "tennis talent" is commonly used by former tennis stars, famous coaches, and tennis associations who organize "talent fishing" events. To answer these broad, talent-related questions, let me first ask some support questions. Those will make everything else more understandable. Why do tennis players' children not follow in their footsteps? Why hasn't Federer taught tennis to dozens of his compatriots while thousands of them are playing every day? The simplest answer would be because they do not have talent! Well, yes, but it is complete nonsense.

So what determines when someone reaches the peak of his/her tennis career and becomes a professional player?

My answer should revive all of those whose children are not necessarily born talented. Nothing here is connected with an individual's sporting talent or athletic abilities. Is this a distinctly odd argument? Let's examine it.

The biggest influences on the development of the sport are:

1. The parents' decision and the age of the child who begins training.

The sooner training starts, the better, but I believe that the critical time to start training with a view to becoming a professional player is at the age of 7 or 8.

2. The child's physical abilities, but without exaggeration. Eighty percent of children have them. There are many sports features that are necessary for playing tennis, and no one has them all. It is important to make an effort to develop all of them. Is one thing more important than another?

Is strength more important than speed; aggression than peace; the dynamics of the legs than the ability to anticipate; technique than bravery; height than the dynamics of short legs; the arms' range than motor coordination; physical strength than mental strength; workload than capability?

3. The child's willingness. The most important thing during the first stages of training is good fun, a cool coach, a friendly group, etc. The initial desire must develop into the pleasure of playing and competing, while a parent's task is to keep up the enjoyment in spite of training loads, pressure on technique, or the stress of tournaments.

4. Finance – relatively small in the beginning. Tennis court rental, racquets, balls, coaches, proper shoes, fees for tournaments and so on. Such costs are only a warm-up.

5. Training possibilities – availability of tennis courts nearby (preferably indoor). It is hard to imagine the tennis training in the days of Fibak, who commuted by train from Poznan to Warsaw to play tennis on the indoor courts. Due to the

extensive amount of training, the close location of proper tennis courts is crucial. Andy Murray, in his childhood, used to live opposite the tennis courts.

6. Parent's determination – at first, they decide about the coaching of their child. Parents also need to cope with all sorts of psychologists. They will be fighting with the comments about over-tiring their children, taking away their childhood rights or limiting their living space, etc. They will be accused of the realization of their own ambitions and many other iniquities.

First of all, it's important to realize that the general age of consent is between 18 and 21 years of age. By this age, without a doubt, your pupil has to have the essential skills of a professional player. For those who say that parents force their children to train, we counter the fact by stating that starting school at the age of 4 could also be considered an attack on the child's civil liberties.

7. Time flies and other crucial aspects start to play a role:

- a child plays very well and wins tournaments, or
- a child often loses tournaments

Here you see the so-called "**Parent's pathology**" – excessive expectations.

If your child plays well and wins, she is perceived by many as talented. Such thinking might reduce the motivation for training and lead to the use of those techniques that are already strong. Another aspect is when a previously 'talented' child starts to lose often. This child's training was probably neglected. Unfortunately, the child with the lack of training might not be able to catch up. Lastly, we see the case of a child who often loses or never wins. This is not proof that he is not talented but rather that there is a need to practice more or to change his coach.

Unfortunately, both the statistics and literature do not conform to the above thesis. When we realize that at the age of 12 years old, players like Nadal, Federer, Murray were already masters in their countries, it can confuse and demotivate us.

Andy Murray's mother, Judy, wrote that when her son won the 12U Orange Bowl in Florida and later, at the age of 12, when he won the British Championship 14U, she thought that he might have something special. I strongly disagree with those kinds

of statements. I agree that there is such a word as "talent." I even like it; however, in professional sports, it should be eliminated from the dictionary and not used under the threat of punishment. The fact that the players mentioned above were the best in their age group caused their parents to become more determined, and it helped them make the difficult parental decision of their child becoming a tennis player.

How do you make the same decisions if the child loses? It is difficult – so let's forgive parents. The risk factor is bold; what will the child do in life, how will he/she make a living, will my child have any profession, what about an education, etc.? Theories about talent kill the desire for trainers to train or to continuously correct techniques and, above all, to train new or less mastered individuals. The so-called "talented player" usually has several abilities or few tennis techniques mastered very well. For instance, a fast approach, very good forehand or service. Often, this is enough to win matches. This creates a large risk of playing mostly or only on those techniques. However, such a position blinds and reduces the desire to train in other less-favoured techniques, and the player stays in his/her comfort zone. That limits his development.

For example:

- An excellent game with forehand spin reduces the urge to step in on the ball and play in the front with more body participation.
- A superb play of the backhand slice reduces the desire to play spin with a fast, lower body approach to the ball.

8. The choice of a coach. That is a broad topic. Until 10-11 years of age, it is enough for the coach to be just OK. Nowadays, coaches should be very positive. Training should be fun, and the matches played should not assess the player's abilities but rather his training progress. This is quite difficult to do. Apparently, the Czechs do not create pressure to win for players up to 15 years of age, in order to avoid paralyzing their abilities and above all to enable the trained techniques. That approach is very wise, and there will be more explanation about it later. Anyway, there is a need to say goodbye to those nice, good coaches by the age of 12. The so-called "babysitters" do not

teach professional tennis, which has to be taken into consideration.

The problem is that for a 12-year-old teenager, it is hard to find a committed and dedicated professional coach. There are many reasons why, but we will just mention a few: an unsatisfactory salary, a lack of determined courage-minded coaches, the master has to be trained by the master, and often there is a lack of competence. Years ago, in karate, sensei were considered to be the ones with a secret knowledge. Nowadays, in the public's perception, the only good coaches are former tennis players. This thesis has some truth but is certainly not the rule.





J *Train a lot and well*

Hubert Wagner

One of the very likable coaches who plays an important part in the tennis development of my son has mentioned the reasons why there is such a lack of trainers for professional players. Coaches involved in dedicated training are often deprived of other commercial customers and work with the risk that parents might one day decide to stop training their child. Another example from the coach's point of view is that payment for training is logical, understandable, and acceptable; however, it is not so straightforward when it comes to the tournament trips. One trip is generally fine, but what about 10 or 15 trips a

year? What are the costs of flights, hotels, wages or rewards for family separation? And what about holiday leave? Well, I think we have the answer for why there are so few coaches to train young candidates to become tennis professionals.

So what's next? Maybe a tennis academy? Sure, the more expensive, the better. Agassi had already been well trained by his father when he started to attend the Bollettieri Academy. The tennis academies are business entities. Of course, all academies are focused on playing tennis, but not all are at the level needed to develop a pro-

fessional player. What's more, academies combine school education with tennis coaching, which, in my opinion, lulls parents. If their child is not a professional player, they believe that at least he/she will still have a chance for higher education. For many people, tennis academies are just a way to higher education.

9. Consistency, determination, and parents' courage.

When the child approaches 14 years of age, it is a time to decide what is more important: tennis or education. There is still a possibility to focus on

both, but at this age, training twice daily is obligatory. There is a need to take part in tournaments and competitions, although not necessarily world class ones. Schooling is out of the plan, and even if there are opportunities for learning on an individual basis, through the internet or tennis academies, the dream of a Masters degree in mathematics has no chance of realization. It is impossible.

You, as a parent, have to decide what your child will do in adulthood, and your child may not

have the talent :) Or maybe he/she might suffer a sport injury. How do you train your child to win against a cyborg-like player such as Djokovic? What are the chances? At this stage, most often the adventure with professional tennis ends. These are the reasons why only some players move on. There is a need to realize the responsibility. Decisions have to be taken for a child when he/she is only approximately 14 years old. Attempting to compromise at this stage can end up leading to a bad scenario – your child will not have the proper

education or tennis profession. However, you can always count on the fact that exceptions do occur.

10. If that part of the decision is already done, you need to deal with another aspect – *money!* It is our task as the parents. Let the child train.

As Hubert Wagner, the Polish volleyball coach, said, "Train a lot and well." Those two adverbs contain the whole complex truth. I will develop this issue in my following publications.