



The Progressive Development of a High Performance Player

Paul Lubbers, Ph.D.

Director USA Tennis Coaching Education

How does one become a World Class Player? What skills and attributes does it take to get to the top? This article will briefly discuss some of the keys to long-term development and bring to life some of the prerequisites that players need to learn in order to maximise their abilities.

The progressive development of a world-class player is a long-term process that research suggests takes a minimum of 10 years or 10,000 hours (Ericsson, 1999). Further research shows that world-class players go through distinct phases of talent development. According to Bloom (1985) and Gibbons (1998), elite athlete development is broken into the following three stages.

- **Stage 1: Introduction/Foundation.** Having fun and developing a love of the game characterise this phase. In addition, the individual is free to explore multiple sports, experience success but with little pressure to perform, and receives encouragement from coaches and parents.
- **Stage 2: Refinement/Transitional.** During this phase the athlete evolves into a “serious” player. He or she no longer wants to just play tennis; they want to be a *good* “tennis player”. Most often, the athlete enlists the help of a master coach that specialises in refinement of skills and fundamentals.
- **Stage 3: World Class Performance.** This phase is marked by many hours of practice and the honing of technical skill and expertise into personal excellence while competing at the highest level of competition. While the player maintains a love of the game, tennis becomes a serious business and significant part of that player’s life.

What is so interesting about these stages is that players do not begin playing tennis with championships in mind. Instead, they become exposed to tennis, derive satisfaction and enjoyment, and fall in love with the game. Then after falling in love with the game, they progress into a more serious and focused involvement. Thus, in the early years of involvement, the best way to produce a top player is to do the same things needed to grow the game with all children—encourage fun, fundamentals, and involvement. Once this foundation is built, a more focused and intense approach evolves.

One variable in the first stage that is particularly important to the ultimate development of the player is the acquisition of fundamentals. The successful acquisition of fundamentals is the cornerstone of the continued refinement of technical and tactical



skills as well as physical and mental growth. After all, it is hard for a player to enjoy and fall in love with the game if he or she cannot play it! In addition to making the experience fun and teaching fundamentals, the primary mental skill to focus on in the early years of involvement is the enhancement of self-esteem via heavy doses of positive instruction and encouragement. If this does not occur, it leads to self-doubt, anxiety, and motivation concerns in subsequent stages.

In the middle stage (refinement/transitional), the developing player must learn how to practice with purpose and intensity. He or she must further refine fundamentals and create a vision of the type of player they want to become while learning what it takes to become a positive competitor. In addition, depending on the developmental stage of the player, the physical aspect of training begins to take shape.

Coaches must address the strength, endurance and flexibility needs of the player to improve performance and fend off potential injury. Goal setting becomes particularly important in this stage. Players must not only learn to set goals, but the right *types* of goals (performance goals). Players must also learn concentration skills; develop stress management strategies for dealing with the pressures that result from intense practice and play, and mental preparation strategies.

In the third, world-class performance stage, the players must train to endure the demands of professional tennis. Both the physical demands and the mental demands are great during this stage and players must find ways to continually challenge and motivate themselves because performance gains will come at a slower pace. Learning to maintain focus and deal with distractions on and off the court are especially important in this stage, as the successful player will spend more time in the limelight. Finally, the player in this stage must develop self-regulation skills. While coaching is still critical, the player must learn to make decisions for him or herself and manage an increasingly complex physical and social environment.

In summary, world-class players are developed through stages and it is important for coaches to understand these stages in order to provide the opportunity for young players to develop to their full potential. Certain skills are emphasised during each stage and it is important that overzealous parents and coaches do not try to skip stages in an attempt to make players champions before they are ready.

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