



Thoughts on ITF Junior Tennis - The ITF Junior Activities and their role in Professional Player Development

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This presentation aims to answer two main questions that are relevant in contributing to understand the role and importance of ITF Junior activities in professional player development. These below are only thoughts based on information available and processed by the ITF and do not mean to provide any scientific conclusion on which developmental pathways is more significant for successful professional tennis performance.

WHY DO THEY PLAY INTERNATIONAL JUNIOR TENNIS?

Generally the best juniors at national level need to start playing internationally when they have established themselves as the best players at home and need to find valuable competitive opportunities to understand that they still need to improve very much if they want to go all the way to professional tennis.

ITF Junior circuit events are organised in regional circuits within the calendar in good geographical and grade order for ease of travel by players. In 2005 the ITF Junior Circuit consisted of 318 tournaments in 115 countries. Junior Team Competitions are also organised annually in each region as qualifying events to the 14/16 & Under World Team Finals. Based on the above it seems justified to say that access to ITF Junior activities for talented players is quite handy.

The ITF Junior Circuit mirrors the Pro Tours (world ranking, code of conduct, grand slams, grade As, big crowds, media's attention, etc.) – great professional environment (National Association coaches, high players goal).

The junior tournaments have generally a very good “professional” structure and ambience. In some cases you may see that even prestigious and “posh” tennis clubs when hosting junior events are willing to give out all of their courts and free access to the club-house when the tournament is on.

More than everything else the junior tournaments offer free hospitality (accommodation and meals) to players and coaches.

Draw-sheets in junior tennis are composed by players from all over the world. This aspect helps comparing the standard of players from different countries for the benefit of players and coaches.

The roll of honour of the top ITF junior tournaments and the Junior World Ranking provide inspiration/motivation (to be followed by hard work on and off the court) to the junior



players to follow the footsteps of their favourite champions. This helps the coaches to make the juniors (15-18) understand that playing PRO tennis is not so impossible as it seems and so eliminating the risk of abandoning tennis for lack of confidence.

The junior game allows the juniors to play the right number of matches (singles and doubles) for their ideal technical, tactical and mental development. Also it allows some juniors to play the Grand Slams for two or three years in a row enhancing the emotional control and getting used to play big events in front of big crowds.

As the Junior Grand Slams are held in the second week of the Grand Slams the top pro players are looking for sparring partners and they are very happy to play and/or warm-up with juniors. This provide the juniors with an incredible opportunity to measure standard with the best players in the world. It is quite common see some of the best juniors practising with Federer, Nalbandian, Coria, Ljubicic, Dent, Sargsian, Volandri. Spending time on and off the same courts, practising with the Pros and watching their matches help the juniors to develop and get inspired and increase motivation to succeed.

In some cases being the best junior in his/her own country can results in getting wild cards into professional events organised in the country by the relevant National Associations and or affiliated Clubs and not only. There are also some junior tournaments that offer to the winners wild-cards into professional events thus helping the transition from juniors to professional.

Competing successfully at junior level can bring sponsorship and agents opportunities.

The best ITF junior ranked players have the opportunity to travel extensively to play the best tournament in different continents. Learn to travel is an important aspect of being a professional player.

The junior game is played on different surfaces from grass to clay and from hard to indoor carpet. Players are motivated to learn on how to adapt their game to the various surfaces.

The combined ranking motivates the players to play doubles making it easier for the coaches to work on their player's game development. The World Junior Ranking is best of six singles results and 25% of the best six doubles results.

Finally the junior team competitions prepare the players to manage the pressure that comes from representing their country. The responsibility of playing for one's country brings out the best and sometimes the worst in players but there is always a tremendous sense of pride involved.

HOW LONG DO THEY STAY IN JUNIOR TENNIS?

Since 1997 junior girls unlikely the boys unfortunately so far, have been benefiting from the Junior Exempt Project that rewards the top ten year-end ranked junior girls with three main draw special exempts up to and including \$75,000 prize money level. This project has encouraged enormously junior girls to remain in the junior game by providing them with a suitable reward for outstanding achievement at that level.

Junior players boys remaining predominantly in the Junior game until their 18th year through reasons of choice, National Associations/coaches advice, educational requirements, financial restrictions would benefit from a feed up system similar to the one in place in the girls to help them integrate with the professional game structure.

A selection has been made among male and female players born respectively from 1984-1989 and 1985-1987 that have reached a professional ranking better than hundred (100) in the women's game and better than two-hundred (200) in the men's game.

The following players were identified and their player's activity was studied in order to follow the competitive path (tournament schedule) they adopted to make a "successful" transition to the professional game.

Female players:

Vera Zvonareva (7 September 1984)
Anna-Lena Groenefeld (4 June 1985)
Myriam Casanova (20 June 1985)
Barbora Strycova (28 March 1986)
Vera Douchevina (6 October 1986)
Shuai Peng (8 January 1986)
Marta Domachowska (16 January 1986)
Sania Mirza (15 November 1986)
Dinara Safina (27 April 1987)
Ana Ivanovic (7 November 1987)
Maria Sharapova (19 April 1987)
Shahar Peer (1 May 1987)
Tatiana Golvin (25 January 1988)
Sesil Karatancheva (8 August 1989)
Nicole Pietrangeli (23 April 1989)

Male players:

Ancic Mario (30 March 1984)
Janko Tipsarevic (22 June 1984)
Robin Soderling (14 August 1984)
Andreas Seppi (21 February 1984)



Todd Reid (3 June 1984)
Daniel Gimeno-Traver (7 August 1985)
Jo-Wilfried Tsonga (17 April 1985)
Wayne Odesnik (21 November 1985)
Stanislav Wawrinka (28 March 1985)
Marcos Baghdatis (17 June 1985)
Nicolas Almagro-Sanchez (21 December 1985)
Thomas Berdych (19 september 1985)
Yeu-Tzuoo Wang (8 February 1985)
Rafael Nadal (3 June 1986)
Gael Monfils (1 September 1986)
Richard Gasquet (18 June 1986)
Stakhovsky Sergiy (6 January 1986)
Novak Djokovic (22 May 1987)
Andrew Murray (15 May 1987)