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DOCTOR IN MOVEMENT AND SPORT SCIENCES

THE ROLE OF JUNIOR SUCCESS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROFESSIONAL TENNIS PLAYERS

PINGWEI LI

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ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH

“Success is a journey, not a destination.” This dissertation discusses the role of international junior success in terms of competitive performance in evaluating, predicting and developing eventual senior success at an individual level in professional tennis. It offers a glimpse into the career trajectories of elite athletes for us to witness how they progress from their starting age all the way to the achievement of their career peak performance.

Study 1 and Study 2 provided 30 years longitudinal and in-depth data regarding player performing age and results on their developmental trajectory. Study 1 explored the role of junior success by examining the developmental trajectory among top 10 professional players from 2007-2017. While Study 2 expanded the analyses to include top 300 professional players. Player developmental career trajectories were compared by player career peak ranking level (i.e., top 10, 11-20, 21-50, 51-100, 101-200 and 201-300) and by gender. It was shown that age-based ranking results have a relatively high value in predicting higher-ranked (e.g., top 10) and lower-ranked (e.g., top 201-300) players, but not for players whose peak ranking were in between, with more than 60% of them not distinguishable and with top 51-100 ranked players having the lowest predictability.

Study 3 addressed the following questions by semi-structured in-depth interviews with 34 international high-performance tennis experts from 22 countries.

- *To what extent junior success is important in developing senior success?*
- *From what age junior success is important in predicting senior success?*
- *What are the most important reasons for player achieving senior success? And what are the reasons for successful junior players dropping out?*
- *How do you use junior success to evaluate the potential of a player for future success?*

A decision-making framework that integrated performance and other critical factors was developed by the researchers to guide tennis practitioners – including coaches and related policy and practice – to better support the future selection, development and junior-senior transition of emerging tennis talent.

“Every player is different, if there are 100 players, there might be 100 different pathways toward success.” The development of elite tennis players needs to be tailor-made with multiple and alternative pathways being available for player development and transitions. It is an art to integrate science into coaching. Through a mixed methods research design, this PhD research brings together both empirical facts and international experts’ coaching experience, which contributed to the knowledge and decision making in talent selection and talent development for tennis.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Pingwei Li is a former national-level tennis player. After receiving her master degree in physical education in Beijing Sport University, she worked as a fitness coach for the U14 girl’s team at the high-performance tennis training center at Hunan, China. In 2015, She started her doctoral research at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium. Her research provides evidence-based facts for coaches, parents and federations regarding talent selection, prediction and development. She has been invited to present her research at numerous international conferences and has published her work in leading scientific journals.

Pingwei is also the founder of China-Europe Tennis Platform, which aims to promote the exchange regarding coach education, high-performance training, scientific research between China and European countries. Being created in 2018, this platform has attracted more than 4000 coaches, players and parents in China.

