

# Sports Psychology: Understanding and Influencing the Road to Success

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The concept of development, including athletic development, consists of quantitative and qualitative change that is orderly, cumulative, and directional (DeHart, et al, 2000). Read this definition of development again and see if it hits home. Do you try to effectively *develop* the players you coach? Do you try to bring about change in your players that is orderly, cumulative and directed? Do you believe that how you coach your players today will impact their abilities and performance in years to come?

Hopefully, your answer to all these questions is YES. Yes, you try to develop tennis players by enhancing their physical, mental, technical and tactical skills. Yes, you try to work in an "orderly" fashion by teaching skills in a sequential manner and at developmentally appropriate times. And, yes, you appreciate that your work today will affect future development. Wow, what a responsibility. And, as you undoubtedly know, effectively developing the players you coach is much easier said than done, as the road to success is a difficult and challenging one.

To help you navigate the challenging road of developing tennis players, a series of articles in the USA Tennis *High-Performance Coaching Newsletter* (Saviano, vol 3., No 2 and 3, 2001) put forth a model of Progressive Development of a World Class Player. Additionally, recent work at the US Olympic Committee can help coaches gain an even greater understanding of talent development (Riewald & Peterson, 2003). Let's take a look at this research and then, along with the USA Tennis model of Progressive Development, draw some coaching implications.

## Understanding Elite Athlete Development

There is much interest in the "why's and how's" behind the success of elite level athletes. Because of this interest, a great deal of effort has been placed on understanding the process of development of elite athletes and significant influences along this road. Recently the US Olympic Committee contacted past Olympians and asked them to complete a survey about numerous aspects of their development. Of particular relevance to this discussion, Olympians were asked to list up to five factors that contributed most to their success and five obstacles that had to be overcome in their quest for success. *The Olympians needed to reflect back on significant positive and negative influences over the course of their athletic development. This is powerful information for you as coaches as it may impact the way you approach talent development.* As you read through the success factors, ask yourself how critical each is for the development of tennis players. Think about what you can do to ensure these factors are working for your players.

## What factors positively influenced success?

Olympians were asked to identify five factors that had a significant influence on their athletic success.

Following is a description of the top ten factors (the percentage of athletes who identified this as a factor influencing their success is provided in parenthesis).

1. *Dedication and Persistence (58%)*: This related to the positive influence of the Olympian's inner drive, desire, persistence, and commitment to achieving their goals.
2. *Family and Friends (52%)*: This support or influence included financial and emotional support, instilling confidence, providing an introduction to the sport, and the provision of stability.
3. *Coaches (49%)*: Excellent coaches throughout their development were identified as having a great influence on success.
4. *Love of Sport (27%)*: Love of, and passion for, the sport greatly influenced success, often providing the necessary motivation to continue training in less than optimal conditions.
5. *Training Programs and Facilities (22%)*: The opportunity to train with club, college, national level, or resident teams and access to programs and facilities was important.
6. *Natural Talent (22%)*: A genetic predisposition or God-given talent played a role in athlete success.
7. *Competitiveness (15%)*: A strong competitive nature and love of competition was identified as a factor influencing success.
8. *Focus (13%)*: The ability to stay focused on goals and the task at hand, despite distractions, had a significant influence on success.
9. *Work Ethic (12%)*: Hard work and a strong work ethic were factors that influenced success.
10. *Financial Support (12%)*: The financial support from sources such as sponsorship, college

scholarship, private donors, athlete grants, and fundraising contributed to success.

### **What obstacles had to be overcome to achieve success?**

The second question asked Olympians to list up to five obstacles to their success. After reading the list, you'll recognize that several of these obstacles are the "flip side" of some of the identified success factors, adding even greater strength to the importance of that factor.

1. *Lack of Financial Support (53%)*: Some implications of lack of financial support included increased stress and insecurity, compromised training due to having to work, and inability to compete nationally and internationally.
2. *Conflict with Roles in Life (33%)*: This related to conflict experienced in trying to balance/manage multiple roles including work, career, school, family, and athletic endeavors.
3. *Lack of Coaching Expertise or Support (29%)*: This related to having coaches with limited knowledge or expertise as well as conflicts with the coach.
4. *Lack of Support from USOC and NGB (22%)*: Issues with these organizations included a lack of mental preparation programs, no organization or encouragement, and being too bureaucratic.
5. *Mental Obstacles (22%)*: This includes such obstacles as low confidence, perfectionism, and dealing with pressure.
6. *Lack of Training/Competition Opportunities (20%)*.
7. *Medical Problems (20%)*: Injuries, illness, and other medical issues, as would be expected, were perceived as an obstacle to athletic success.
8. *Lack of Social Support (11%)*: Family, friends and peers who provided little or no support and at times even discouraged athletic pursuits were perceived as obstacles.
9. *Physical Limitations (8%)*: Identified limitations included characteristics such as height, weight, strength and endurance.
10. *Failure (6%)*: This related to a fear of failure and learning to deal with failure.

### **Making use of this Information**

As summarized above, these Olympians identified numerous success factors and obstacles that had a powerful influence on their development. Several implications can be drawn based on these factors combined with our knowledge of the development of tennis players.

#### Coaches – a critical influence throughout development.

**It probably can't be emphasized enough that quality coaches are important to athletes and their successful development.** Based on these Olympians' responses, it can be seen that great coaches were a prominent factor in an athlete's success and, conversely, a lack of great coaching was a deterrent to success.

The significance of the coach is certainly not overlooked in the USA Tennis Model of Development. In this model, the coach takes a prominent role from introducing the young athlete to tennis to working with the world-class player.

The list of characteristics and skills that make great coaches great is probably quite long and varies depending on the athlete and the situation. However, the Olympians did identify some coaching characteristics they deemed to be most important. These include being knowledgeable, motivating, dedicated, committed, encouraging and supportive.

To enhance your effectiveness in developing the players you coach, first, appreciate and value the significant influence you have on the players. Next, ask yourself what coaching characteristics and skills are important given the players you coach. Ask the same of your players. Finally, strive to develop and utilize these needed skills.

#### Love of Sport

This notion of a "love of the sport" being important for athlete development seems to come up repeatedly. In the present study, the Olympians report that their love of sport had a significant influence on their ultimate success. "Love of the Game" is also identified as a variable that is thought to affect the development of elite tennis players (Saviano, 2001). Bloom (1985), in his research on talent development, found that those individuals who achieved "excellence" developed a love of the sport during their early years. Helping the athletes develop and maintain a love of tennis is probably worthy of our attention.

While the initial enjoyment of the sport should be developed during the early years, a love of the sport is not limited to the years when the athlete is first learning to play tennis. Rather, a love of the sport should

permeate throughout player development. The player's love and passion for tennis can be sparked and fueled by the coach via such strategies as structuring an appropriate training and competitive environment, meeting the athlete's needs or motives, challenging the athlete and modeling a passion for tennis.

#### Individual Characteristics

Dedication and persistence, competitiveness, focus, and strong work ethic were factors identified by athletes as having influenced their success. These individual characteristics occupied five of the top 10 factors that the Olympians felt positively influenced their success. It is interesting and important to recognize that the athlete has control over these individual characteristics that influence their success.

You need to endeavor to facilitate the development of these attributes in your tennis players, a concept discussed in a recent High-Performance Coaching Newsletter article (Lubbers, 2001). Lubbers emphasized the need to integrate mental training, which encompasses many of these individual characteristics, into daily physical and technical training. Additionally, strategies were offered on how this can be accomplished.

#### Support from Family and Friends

Fifty-two percent of the Olympians identified family and friends as providing different types of support (i.e., emotional, financial, technical), which positively impacted success. Conversely, some respondents viewed lack of support from family and friends as an obstacle to success. Similarly, in tennis, the family has been identified as having a significant impact on development of world-class players. Given this, effort should be put forth to integrate family and friends into the system and educate them as to how they can be more effective in providing support to the player.

#### **Final Thoughts**

Every player is unique – from training needs to how you communicate with them to the composite of factors that will have the most significant influence on success. However, much can be learned by looking at athletes and highlighting the factors that seem worthy of close attention, as was done in the Olympic athlete research. To benefit from this information, look back over the list presented here and think of each player you coach. Are all the pieces in place to promote talent development or are there roadblocks you can help knock down? Taking the time to perform this type of analysis will ultimately make you a stronger coach and help you to develop stronger players.

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