

key behavioural characteristics of successful juniors

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SUCCESS in tennis is clearly dependent not only on athletic ability and training, but also on a host of behavioural factors. Young people who reach high levels of performance in tennis, and indeed in almost any other endeavour, frequently share common personality characteristics. Studies have shown that development of these critical qualities can serve to accelerate learning, maximise potential, and improve competitive performance. The following list therefore provides a brief outline of '10 Behavioural Characteristics of Successful Juniors'.

Vision

The benefits of goal-setting have long since been advocated, however it is undoubtedly true that high level performers consistently possess specific aims and targets towards which all of their efforts are directed. Essentially, every performer needs a reason for training – the clearer the goal, the easier it is to overcome difficulties and challenges along the way. Young players in particular need to develop realistic ambitions. With the help of a coach, dreams and aspirations can be moulded into intelligent plans and stepping-stones to success. Players with a positive vision of the future can deal with any obstacle in the present.

Long-Term Perspective

Junior players need to be aware that progress in tennis is a long-term challenge. Goal setting, training focus and commitment are needed over a period of years. Unfortunately many junior players are overly focused on winning *now!* They improve a little but then are disheartened by a poor performance or injury. By emphasising long-term development it's easy for juniors to understand that no match is ever too important, no injury is ever that devastating and no challenge is ever impossible to deal with. Progress is easy if time is available. Successful young players have a definite

picture of their long-term goals and have learned that steady and consistent progress provides the most efficient route to competitive success.

Action-Oriented

Winners are doers. All over the world there are many talented young players hoping to make a breakthrough into the professional ranks. Those who commit themselves to hard work and training on a consistent basis are obviously most likely to succeed. Unfortunately, progress in tennis is not easy and training can often be monotonous, time consuming and physically demanding. The temptation to cut corners is constantly present. In addition, the social pressures exerted by family, school and friends make training a difficult task not only to schedule, but also to complete effectively. Winners in tennis are often those who are excellently organised, intensely focused and committed to action. They know exactly what areas of their game need work, have a solid understanding of training principles and are willing to make training and practice a priority in their lives. Ask your players: "What is your long-term goal and what did you do today to move closer to achieving it?" Remember, talent development requires information, motivation and self-discipline.

Independence

While very few players have ever succeeded without the help of coaches, family and friends, a large volume of research literature has shown that successful people in all walks of life display a significant level of independence. Undoubtedly the characteristics of tennis itself lend themselves to the cultivation of independence – an individual sport where competitive players often travel alone and are required to fend for themselves in unfamiliar surroundings. For this reason, it is not surprising that a high percentage

of our top professionals have come through the ranks of Junior ITF events, Futures and Satellite tours. Equally, it is easy to see how many top junior players, protected by coaches and family over a number of years, often fall by the wayside when they suddenly take the plunge into international competition. The answer therefore is an increasing prescription of freedom, control and responsibility from parents and coaches to the young player. Successful athletes frequently describe themselves as 'workers', 'problem solvers' and 'independent'. Players lacking in any of these departments will almost certainly experience huge difficulties in the world of professional tennis.

Attention To Detail

A fine line separates numerous talented juniors around the world from those who eventually make it as top professionals. It is interesting to note however, that the gap between these two groups is often created off the court. Those who expect high standards of themselves, who have a precise progress plan and who show a ruthless attention to detail, are obviously in an excellent position to improve steadily. Organisational characteristics are clearly crucial in determining progress. Psychology research tells us that elements of risk and uncertainty are removed by controlling as much of the environment as possible. In tennis terms this simply means that players who are fully prepared for competition, are likely to perform better. Juniors should certainly be expected to scout opponents, to follow competitive rituals, and to devise game-plans. In short, players need to be aware that success in competitive tennis is dependent on a vast array of variables and that preparation and attention to detail are critical in terms of controlling the environment and developing confidence.

Responsibility

Winners make progress, losers make excuses. The foundation of improvement in junior tennis is a willingness of players to accept responsibility for their own performance. In a sport where coaches and parents frequently offer generous guidance and encouragement, it is often easy for competitors to lose sight of their responsibilities. Ultimately, it is the player who steps onto the court to compete and, as a result of this, they must be willing to accept the inevitable burdens that accompany this position. Losses and poor performances cannot be blamed on others. Excuse-makers look to apportion blame anywhere but on themselves and consequently, miss countless opportunities to learn, improve and grow. Top athletes understand that their future is in their own hands. While others may provide support along the way, their role is almost always temporary and their involvement rarely vital. Those players who have learned to rely on themselves and who are willing to face challenges without apportioning blame or making excuses, are in an excellent position to progress in the face of adversity.

Positive Approach To Competition

Competitive tennis by its very nature can be stressful and mentally demanding. A continuous stream of tournaments and ranking events creates a high level of performance pressure. Players are expected to peak at numerous stages during the year and are frequently met with difficult opponents, crucial matches and challenging conditions. Understandably, those young competitors who struggle to adapt to these situations, will almost certainly fail to reach their true potential. In order to maintain progress, it is vital therefore that players view competition as a stepping stone, a challenge, and an opportunity to improve. Losing is never a problem as long as lessons are learned, responsibility is accepted and plans are made. Competition is the best way for players to monitor their progress and positive athletes will always look for opportunities to test what they have learned against top opposition. It is always a pity to see situations where players avoid

tournaments, opponents or 'threatening' situations. Clearly these types of players have adopted an attitude that will restrict their long-term growth. Great players look for challenges and use what they learn to ensure that every performance is better than the last.

Resilience

The ability to cope with failure, to deal with injury and to 'bounce back' from defeat often characterises great champions. It has to be remembered that at the early stages of player development, success is the exception rather than the rule. Young players need to learn that things won't always go their way and that strength can be gained from challenging situations. History is littered with examples of athletes, academics, musicians and public figures who were continuously met with failure in their early years, but whose determination and self-belief carried them to ultimate success. Winners don't quit and quitters don't win.

Confidence

Confident players experience less competitive stress, are more likely to face challenges and risks, and frequently adopt a positive attitude towards training and match play. The type of confidence usually displayed by top competitors is almost always 'performance related'. In other words, they rarely believe any more than other players, that they are going to win a specific match or tournament. Instead, their focus is on their performance and on the belief that skills learned in training, can be applied in matches. Confidence is therefore largely an 'ability-driven' behaviour. A player cannot be confident unless they have trained a particular skill effectively and have used it in competitive situations. Interestingly, the particular skill in question may need to be tested in numerous matches before the player feels truly confident. Obviously there may be problems along the way and the skill may breakdown under pressure. In the event of this happening both parties must accept their joint responsibilities – the coach must assess the breakdown and train the problem, the player must focus on improvements and implement the changes positively in the next match.

Perspective

It is always frustrating to see junior players behaving poorly or getting upset at themselves for performing badly. Equally, it is fascinating to see how well many champions can separate their 'tennis life' from their 'everyday life'. While training, travel and competition clearly take up a large part of any modern player's time, it is vital that juniors are aware of the world outside tennis. They are very lucky to be young, fit and healthy and to have the opportunity to compete against many talented peers. They should never lose sight of the fact that they are fortunate to be in such a position, that their experiences and memories will stay with them forever and that they clearly have the support of many wonderful people. Respect, appreciation of others and a positive outlook on life will contribute to tennis and personal growth. Life is a gift, talent is a bonus, and competition is a privilege.

There is no doubt that in our efforts to help young players, we must always look further than their basic technical, tactical and physical abilities. While the merits of psychological training on-court have been heavily promoted over the last few years, it is perhaps time now to turn our attention to the role of primary behavioural characteristics. Success in tennis is about much more than just winning matches.

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