Stakeholder involvement with elite development pathways in tennis

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Published in: sport in a digital age

Publication date: 2015

Citation for published version (APA):
This study explores elite sport development pathways in tennis. The research questions that guided this investigation were (1) “How are sport development stakeholders involved with initiating and/or implementing elite player development pathways?” and (2) “How are those elite pathways modelled in tennis?”

Government funding for National Sporting Organisations (NSOs) is often performance based (Sam, 2012) and driven by athlete results at international and world sporting competitions (Oakley & Green, 2001). The need to continually deliver success encourages NSOs to examine their sport development practices and elite pathways. The few studies on elite development pathways that offer a systematic approach to attract, develop, retain and nurture athletes (e.g., Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008) have not yet sufficiently been applied to elite sport or sport specific contexts. In addition, as opposed to the plethora of studies on the role of coaches and sport sciences on elite athlete development, the role of other stakeholders, including sport governing bodies and sport clubs, is less known (Bayle & Robinson, 2007). In light of these issues, this study aims to identify the tennis specific elite development pathways and examine the role and input of stakeholders in the process of athlete development.

This study applied the attraction, retention, transition and nurturing (ARTN) sport development processes framework (Sotiriadou et al., 2008) to tennis. The framework offers an organisational perspective on ‘who is involved with sport development’, in ‘what ways’, at ‘which developmental level’, and with ‘which outcomes’. Even though the framework has been previously proven useful in examining sport development in several contexts (e.g., Darcy & Dowse, 2010; Sotiriadou, Wicker, & Quick, 2014), it is sport generic, it has only been applied in an Australian context, and it lacks insights from the stakeholders involved in the ARTN processes. This study overcomes these limitations because it (1) examines the ARTN processes within a sport specific context (tennis), (2) applies the framework at an international context, and (3) uses qualitative data from interviews with elite sport policy stakeholders.

Data from 18 semi-structured in-depth interviews with international tennis experts from 10 countries were thematically analysed to explore stakeholder involvement and how their interactions and strategies shape elite tennis pathways. The interview questions were shaped according to the properties of the ARTN framework including ‘who is involved’ with the tennis development pathways (i.e., stakeholder roles and input), in ‘what ways’ (e.g., strategies and programs) and ‘with what outcomes’ (i.e., developmental pathways).

The results point toward specific stakeholder involvement in each of the four tennis specific elite development processes. During the attraction/retention process National Tennis Associations (NTAs) are the stakeholder responsible for initiating strategies or programs that local clubs and coaches implement. However, during the second process (talent identification), NTAs, clubs and coaches cooperate to identify talent. Throughout talent development, there is a progressive shift from local clubs to regional/national training centres or private academies. Last, at the nurturing of elite athletes, NTA support is crucial to support athletes in the transition
from junior to senior level. However, once players are self-sufficient based on prize-money (approximately top-100 ranking), NTA support decreases and players are responsible for their private team.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION
The findings extend the application of the ARTN framework in a sport specific setting and add an understanding on the ways stakeholders and strategies help shape development pathways in tennis. The shift in stakeholder dynamics and variation in their roles, relationships and contribution suggests that the same stakeholder (e.g., NTA) could have a very different level of involvement depending on the developmental process. These results reinforce the importance of examining the ARTN framework on a sport specific level to draw meaningful practical implications. For instance, the heightened role of local clubs during not only the attraction/retention phase but also the talent identification and talent development phases points toward the need to revisit the level of support clubs receive and their capacity to deliver optimal developmental pathways.

REFERENCES