

TEACHING
TENNIS

VOLUME 3

**THE DEVELOPMENT
OF CHAMPIONS**

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2—COACHING CHAMPIONS

The Definition of a Tennis Champion

“A person who has defeated all opponents in a competition or has shown significant results in a series of events over time.”

In the game of tennis, there are many champions. When playing competitions, we can win a local event as a junior or as an adult, but there are many different levels to follow to succeed as a champion. Rankings at each level or age group can also be a way to define a champion. As players, you can move up from local, state, and regional events to national events; and as juniors, you can also advance in the different age groups (twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen). In college, you can advance in positions on your team then to being successful in regional events or in the NCAA final tournament. In international junior and pro events, there are several levels to progress, which all lead to major Grand Slam events. Each level provides champions, and each step requires more skills to advance. Below is the list that shows the progression of levels in the US and in international events:

1. Local (level 9–6, in 2021 this will change to 7-6)
2. State (level 5–3)
3. Regional/National (level 3–1)
4. ITF Juniors (Levels 5–1, B3, B1, A)
5. ITF Juniors Grand Slam events
6. College US (NCAA—D1, D2, D3, NAIA, NJCAA)
7. ITF Pro Future Events (10K–15K)
8. ITF Pro Challenger events (25K–100K)
9. ATP/WTA events (250, 500, 1000)
10. ATP/WTA Grand Slams (US Open, Wimbledon, French Open, and Australian Open)

As you can see, there are many levels to go through to become a top player. But that does not mean you can't become a champion in your own right. Everyone has their own skill and talent level that can make them excel to their top performance. To reach your goals, you have to give it your 100-percent effort and see how far you can go. At the same time, provide yourself with the proper opportunities to succeed.

Developing a Champion

There are many pathways to take to develop a champion. Some of these champions are natural talents of the game, with a good understanding of how to execute their strokes with ease and how to use them strategically. But then there are also examples of hard workers who have used their energy and persistence to learn the game and become successful in their own right. Some players become a champion early as a junior. Whereas for others, it might take a while, and they don't mature until college or right after when they play on the tour. So what are the fundamental components that make them succeed?

1. Developing good fundamentals of the strokes and footwork

Having smooth and efficient strokes and footwork will greatly increase the chance to develop as a player. Sound fundamentals are easier to execute and repeat with automation to greatly increase consistency and confidence. This in turn will increase the execution under pressure to perform in competitive match situations. The simple, rotational, and continuous execution of the strokes is more efficient than mechanical strokes with hitches and/or stops in the motion. The rotational (oval shaped) and continuous motions can use the gravitational force to accelerate the racket head from the top of the backswing. The momentum of the racket and the drop of the arm and racket into the forward action toward the contact point enhances racket head speed and uses less energy. Lesser energy relaxes the arm and grip pressure needed to produce the stroke to increase feel and coordination to control the ball. If you consider how many strokes are hit over the course of a match (average of two hundred to

five hundred strokes over a two-to-three-set match), you can imagine that this will influence not only consistency but also efficiency and stamina of a player. Over the long term, it also can prevent injuries. The proper and smooth footwork of a player can also be of great influence to greater consistency and efficiency in execution of the strokes. You can observe this in how well players position themselves behind the ball before each stroke in a timely and balanced fashion.

2. Having an experienced developmental coach and mentor

Finding an experienced developmental coach or mentor is not an easy task. In a study done by the USTA, it was estimated that 60 percent of all young tennis players in the US are coached by their parents. Having an experienced coach, with knowledge of developing players, will greatly increase your chances to succeed in competition. This person should be someone with an interest in developing juniors to advanced players and who has a proven track record in doing so. As a parent or player, you need to do your homework. You need to investigate their background, experience, results, and demeanor as a coach. These factors become important to find the coach who fits your character traits and whom you respect not only as a coach but also as a person. Ex-players have the experience on how to play themselves but don't necessarily possess the coaching and development skills (or patience) to pass their experiences on to promising students. To develop a champion, you need more advanced skills as a coach:

- a playing background that provides insight in what it takes to become a player
- a professional coaching education for high-performance players
- a trained professional with a passion to gain knowledge and experience of developmental progressions of coaching, tournament scheduling, and advanced training methods
- an understanding of child psychology and physical development
- a person who promotes good character and values in his players
- a coach who takes the time to watch his player compete in tournaments

- a compassionate and patient person who mentors a player to be successful

All these factors combined should make it clear that as a parent, you cannot do this job unless you are a high-performance coach yourself. And even then, it still might be ill-advised if there are too many emotions involved.

3. Having a good training environment

The training environment is set by the coaches and managers who are responsible for the programming at your facility. They can set the stage to create a pleasant training atmosphere that stimulates the learning and developmental process and makes it comfortable and fun for students and parents alike. So how do you create this particular environment in your facility and programs?

- employ experienced developmental coaches with a passion for coaching
- employ friendly and knowledgeable office staff
- be strict on discipline and rules during training but also make it fun
- have a good mix of training, games, fitness, and match play in practice
- have developmental plans for all your players and discuss it with all involved
- create a social environment around the group so they feel like a team
- go to tournaments or road trips together
- have other social events together at your facility (club matches)

When you do all these things in your facility, the staff, members, kids, and parents will feel part of a group that treats everyone with kindness, compassion, and respect to create a pleasant and competitive environment.

4. Continuity of coaching

This is an important factor in the development process. Having one voice and method can greatly help the progress and confidence of a player—especially when working with advanced players in the age groups ten to sixteen (as juniors) and sixteen to twenty-one (as transitional players). In the first stage (ten to sixteen), you are trying to develop all the fundamentals in technical, tactical, physical, and mental aspects of competition. Without mastering this first stage, there is little chance to move on to the second stage. In the second stage (sixteen to twenty-one), you are developing national and international players who are transitioning to college or pro events. This last group is the most difficult to manage, and this is where most mistakes are made. Too many changes at this stage destroy confidence in a player's ability to play. Parents need to consider this before they decide to coach their own child. How long can you fulfill this role? And is it the right choice for your child? Many players change coaches if they, or their parents, see other players be successful with another coach. Especially in tennis, the grass seems to be greener on the other side. Making a change in coaching makes you lose time in development more often and is not recommended. If a new coach starts changing the technique of a player, a loss of confidence is most likely going to occur. With every major change in your strokes, you should count on a loss of at least six months to a year. This is even more the case with older players. The longer a player has been trained to hit the ball a particular way, the longer it takes to change anything. The reason for this phenomenon is the muscle memory that assists in automated motions.

Changes in strokes should only be considered if the current stroke will hamper the player's development and if players themselves are adamant in making the change. In the development of every player, there is a certain plateau where they stagnate for a while before improving again. This is true for virtually every player and can be deceiving to players and parents in thinking they are not making any progress. Only make changes in coaching when you feel the

coach has reached their plateau in what they can teach you or when the relationship is breaking down.

5. Quality of play in practices and matches

In order to develop champions, it is crucial to have quality and intensity in your practice sessions. The quality of play is the level of execution of strokes, strategy, physical execution, and mental attitude. The intensity is the level of effort applied in practices and matches. They are both imperative to the development of high-performance players in order to succeed at a national, international, or elite level of play. Coaches can improve intensity by making it clear how fast a drill or exercise needs to be executed by using a grade scale from 1 to 10, 10 being the highest level. In the beginning, you can ask the player if they know at what level of intensity they are in and correct them if they are over- or understating these levels. Very soon, they will learn how to use this in match play to defeat their opponents on intensity alone. The quality can be improved by using video. Players can receive good feedback on their execution and make corrections accordingly. Sometimes you can have them perform in front of their peers as an example. You will see how much more they try to execute with more quality (to impress their peers), and others will follow that example more willingly with more energy and excellence.

6. Make a developmental plan and proper tournament schedule

Once a player becomes more advanced and is playing an extensive tournament schedule, it is time to make a developmental plan. The plan is an outline on how to develop their game to fit their style of play from a technical, tactical, mental, and conditional aspect. This plan needs to be a guideline for the training and tournament schedules. It should contain detail on when to play, when to train, and most importantly, when to rest! The plan needs to be made together with the player, coach(es), and parents. Make it simple and realistic to its purpose and stick to it! Make sure everyone fully agrees to the plan and has had ample input. Usually, the simple and original plans are the best for everyone.

7. Becoming a student of the game

In order to learn how to play the game, you have to study all aspects of the game. You can do this by studying other players and matches to learn about the execution of strokes, strategies, shot choices, patterns, different footwork usages, and strengths and weaknesses of players and how they are exploited. This is where a logbook can be instrumental to make notes on your training, matches, and strategies and the strengths and weaknesses of your opponents for future reference. Reading books and tennis articles and discussing matches with your coach are other ways to increase your knowledge and become a student of the game.

8. Commitment, passion, and sacrifices

Becoming a high-performance competitor in tournaments requires a very high commitment in training and matches to be successful. Players need to be fully engaged and must understand the process of development and longevity of the learning process. This is needed to gain the skills and experience necessary to reach their goals. It takes passion for the sport and great character to become a champion. You have to love the training and hard work it takes to make improvements in small strides (sometimes you don't improve for a while until you master the skill). Amounts of improvements can vary over time and are not always visible. Players can reach a plateau before making another jump in skills and experience before the results are clearly visible. The sacrifices in the tennis sport are not only great on players but also on family members. Becoming a high-performance player takes time and money. You need time to train several times a week for several years and time in playing many tournaments to move yourself up the rankings to get into national and international events. Parents and players are spending most of their free time after school and during weekends and vacations at the training facilities and tournament sites. This can be a lot of added stress on the family in general and on relationships if the main goal is results instead of the improvements and the pleasurable aspects of the game. Also, the financial aspect plays a large role in developing a top player. It is quite expensive to train in a program several days a week with possible private lessons as well. And then you

have the cost of travel, entry fees, and coaching. All in all, there's a need for large commitment from all involved.

9. Having a financial understanding to develop a champion

Developing a high-performance tennis player is very costly. Not only in the cost of training with group and private training but also the travel expenses of the sectional, national, or international tournament schedule (this might also be one of the reasons why many parents in the US are coaching their own child). Just playing in the sectional events can be expensive. If the goal is to reach the top of the national rankings in each age group, the costs are much higher. Below is an example of the total yearly cost for an average high-performance junior player at a sectional level:

• Training	Group training (three times a week, forty weeks)	\$ 5,000
	Private training (one time a week, forty weeks)	\$ 3,000
• Tournaments	Travel to events (sectional and national)	\$ 8,000
	Coaching at events	\$ 8,000
	Total	\$24,000

To make calculations for a transitional player and pro player starting on the tour, the numbers are different from juniors since more training, coaching, and traveling are involved. See an estimate of the cost below:

• Training	Private training (six days a week, twenty weeks)	\$20,000
	Fitness training (three days a week, twenty weeks)	\$ 5,000
• Tournaments	Travel to events (twenty-five events)	\$30,000
	Coaching	\$25,000
	Total	\$80,000

As you can see, becoming a tennis champion is an expensive venture. Even as a top junior in the US, it takes about \$24,000 in order to play the sectional and national events. As a transitional or starting pro player, these costs only go up. There are some advantages if you are a top player in your age group with financial aid from the federations and sometimes even from your section.

10. Enjoying the journey

Learning the game of tennis and excelling to become a high-performance player can be a very enjoyable experience if you allow it to be! Having fun along the way and taking the time to enjoy your accomplishments are very important factors. Too often, elite players can get caught up in a quest for money or to become famous. And granted, it is not easy to stay grounded when you become a champion and you get so much attention from all around you. Especially as tennis players, we get spoiled once we get to travel to national and international events. Seeing all the different sites and events is not there for everyone, so once you get to be in that fortunate position, try to respect it and enjoy every minute of it. Stay humble and stick to your routines and always take some time to explore your surroundings. This will keep you grounded and make you perform better with less stress. Make sure to make friends along the way with other players, coaches, and parents. This will enhance your comfort level in the tennis environment. With less drama and emotional baggage in relationships, you can compete more freely at a higher level. Your competitive life span will end at one point, so don't let the best moments pass you by and enjoy the journey!