

DEVELOPING A CHAMPION TENNIS PLAYER

Learn to love it, Enjoy the struggle, Sacrifice to master

Becoming a professional tennis player is no easy task. There are many pitfalls along the way, and many intangibles that can make or break a player's chances. Although an exact formula for success does not exist due to the unique nature of each athlete's strengths and weaknesses, there are some fundamental building blocks that must be established in order for the improbable to occur.

These foundations can be broken down into three main parts: Learning to love it, Enjoying the struggle, and Sacrificing to master. This article discusses some of the key components within each of these stages of development, organized by physical, tactical, technical, and mental categories.

Learn To Love It

Developing a love for the game is the single most important thing a player will do in their career. Without this, the struggle and sacrifices they will need to make during the stages that follow will not be possible. It is therefore very important to develop a young player in an environment that is both fun and structured, with coaches who really care and who understand the basic physical and mindset beliefs that must be established during this essential stage.

Usually, this phase of development takes place when a player is between the ages of 6 - 12 years old. Parents can be hands on, and should encourage and assist their children in acquiring necessary skills. It is during this period that a young player makes the decision that they enjoy the sport, and want to play more. They should also begin to feel challenged— getting a taste of what is to come on the road ahead.

Enjoy The Struggle

Once a young player has decided that tennis is the sport for them and they are hungry to improve, they are ready to learn to train and develop their skills further in order to compete at a higher level. For the 4 - 6 years of this next phase, the emphasis should be on working hard and improving all aspects of performance. The parental role now begins to shift to one of fostering independence and trusting the process of their child and in a supporting role to the coaching team.

In order for this period to run smoothly, good communication between the player, parent, and coaching team must be maintained. An element of fun is also critical in order to continue building love of the sport. Typically, this stage is embarked upon at around 10 years old for a girl, and 12

years old for a boy. This small age gap is due to the mental and physical differences in maturity of children during adolescence.

Sacrifice To Master

The final phase is all about what players are willing to sacrifice in order to master the sport. By this stage of development, tennis should become the number one priority. All of a player's time and energy goes into maximizing their potential in all performance areas of their game. They will need to be training progressively harder—both physically and mentally—and traveling to national and international tournaments to improve their ranking as they strive to reach the top of the sport.

The age of athletes in the mastering phase is 15+ for females and 18+ for males. By now the player and coaching team should have a well-established working relationship, and communication transitions from between player-parent-coaching team to direct exchange between the player and the coaching team. The parental role at this stage lies purely in financially and emotionally supporting the athlete, and being understanding of the ups and downs that are an inevitable part of the path to success.

A basic understanding of the concepts behind Learning to love it, Enjoying the struggle and Sacrificing to master, is necessary before exploring each development stage in further detail. The next articles will break each phase down into more easily digestible pieces, and offer specifics on what needs to occur in each building block, such as the physical requirements, tactical implications, technical skills, mental and emotional focus, and the type of coaching and court time that is needed in order for a young player to recognize their dream and become a professional athlete. ■

ABOUT LEE HURST

Lee Hurst is the Founder and Director of 360TENNIS, the premier specialty development program in the North-East. He specializes in the development of tennis players at Sectional, National and International levels, both junior and professional, and currently coaches some of the most promising juniors in the United States. Lee has been accredited by the LTA in London, England, and is a certified USPTA Pro1 and U.S. High Performance graduate. Lee played at the Professional level in the U.S., Europe and Asia and competed in professional club tennis in Hanover, Germany.