

# Research on Negative Life Events Among Tennis Players of Differing Success Levels: The Participants' Perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

*The process that athletes go through is complex and intertwined with various negative life events they are faced with. However, it is considered that overcoming challenges at an early age is connected with success in later years. Therefore, the aim of this qualitative study was to research the various negative life events (injuries, lack of financial resources, failure to be selected for the national team) of various tennis players and the way in which these events influenced their tennis career. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three categories of male tennis players (N = 30), these being: (1) Grand Slam winners, (2) players ranked between position 150 and 300 on the professional men's tennis rankings, and (3) players ranked between position 500 and 1500 on the professional men's tennis rankings. Data analysis was implemented by using reflexive thematic analysis. Three topics were generated that included: injuries and the way they dealt with them, financial resources and how this affected their sports development, and failure to be selected for their national team. The obtained results indicate that the differences between the different level of success among tennis players refer more to the overcoming of various negative life events (injuries, lack of financial resources, failure to be selected for the national team) that the players faced during their tennis careers.*

**Key words:** tennis, success, interview, reflexive thematic analysis, development path

## Introduction

Upon attempting to understand and support the development of young athletes, it is important to comprehend the nature of that path and a series of factors which can positively or negatively affect their development. As well as this, it is also important to distinguish between those athletes who achieve their greatest level of success after negative life events, compared to those who are less successful. According to Collins and MacNamara, there is evidence that overcoming challenges at an early age presents a precursor of achievement at the highest level of success<sup>1</sup>. The success of athletes is at least to some extent considered as a product of an organized and systematically controlled process of support and training, while the aim of long-term success of athletes in top-level sport is a systematically planned process<sup>2</sup>.

The first step in the development of a young tennis player is to start playing at an early age. Many players start playing tennis as early as three to six years old.

Additionally, starting at an early age allows a player to develop a love for the game. As young tennis players progress, the focus shifts to developing more advanced skills. This stage is up to the age of twelve (U12). At this level, the player begins to specialize in a certain playing style and begins to participate in regional and national tournaments. In the stage between the ages of fourteen (U14) and sixteen (U16), players begin to improve their skills and start to partake in regional and national tournaments, as well as events at the international level. The next stage is the advanced level, from sixteen (U16) to eighteen years (U18). At this stage, players play in international tournaments to facilitate the transition to a professional career. At this level, the player must have a high level of skill to compete against the best players in the world. The final stage is the professional level, where the player competes at the highest level of tennis tournaments such as Grand Slam events. To reach the professional level, a young tennis player's path is a challenging one that requires hard work, dedication and perseverance.

Sarkar et al. conducted research aimed at studying the traumas faced by the world's best athletes, and the results indicated that traumatic experiences have a positive effect on player performance, as well as that they incite motivation and stimulate learning<sup>3</sup>.

Numerous processes are connected to the success of athletes, while research implies that a negative impact on the development of athletes' careers is very often caused by injuries, financial resources, and failure to be selected for the national team. In their research, Fu et al. state that tennis is a safe and low-risk sport, however still one that is associated with a unique set of acute and chronic injuries<sup>4</sup>. Players are at risk of injuries – regardless of the level of success (i.e. competitive or recreational) – whereas the profile of tennis injuries remains unique compared to other racquet and throwing sports with regard to physical requirements, biomechanical loads, and equipment<sup>5</sup>. Numerous studies have shown that the most common injuries among tennis players are lower limb injuries, followed immediately by upper limb injuries, which usually include the shoulder and the elbow. Additionally, there are also injuries of the trunk, which usually include the lower back<sup>5–7</sup>. Upper limb injuries are chronic and secondary due to repeated microtraumas and excessive use, while lower limb injuries among tennis players are usually acute<sup>8,9</sup>. In a study conducted by Kryger et al., the results stated that apart from lower limb injuries, shoulder injuries are the most common cause of players quitting professional tennis competitions<sup>10</sup>.

Another challenge that tennis players are faced with on their path towards success is their access to financial resources. In his research, Martin states that financial resources are necessary in order to succeed in tennis<sup>11</sup>. Baxter-Jones and Maffulli also state that in tennis, not only by the players, but also by parents, significant resources are invested in terms of emotional, financial and logistical support which in turn has a strong impact on a players' participation in the sport<sup>12</sup>. While young athletes advance in their sport, their families are the ones who bear the financial costs that incur, provide transportation to training and competitions, as well as adjust their daily responsibilities for the future sports career of their child<sup>13,14</sup>. The most noticeable requirement is the financial burden of covering the combined costs of clothing and equipment, training and competition fees, as well as local and long-distance travel expenses<sup>15</sup>. Most players competing in professional tournaments and at various levels of financial winnings are in danger of premature career termination due to inability of financing<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, in a study by Shrom, Cumming and Fenton, the conclusion was made that considerable financial resources are required for supporting a professional tennis career, and that a lack of funds results in stress and financial difficulties for the players' families<sup>16</sup>.

An important role in providing support to young tennis players is played by national tennis federations. According to Brouwers et al., national tennis federations (i.e. Tennis Australia, U.S. Tennis Association and Tennis Canada)

are the highest governing authorities in tennis on a national level, and are responsible for creating national tennis policies and programmes<sup>17</sup>. Even though national tennis federations play a major role in the development of elite-level tennis players, private tennis academies also significantly contribute to success in tennis<sup>18</sup>. For instance, according to MacCurdy the number of tennis players training at the national training centre in Spain is quite low, while many players train at private tennis academies<sup>19</sup>. However, almost all players are “under the umbrella” of the national tennis federation by means of scholarships, training camps and tournaments<sup>19</sup>. Generally, in a study by Crespo and Reid (2009), it was pointed out that national tennis federations and private academies must cooperate while striving for the same objective – developing elite tennis players<sup>20</sup>. According to Crespo and McInerney, national tennis players should establish a cooperation programme as part of the overall player development programme<sup>21</sup>.

The data obtained in the above-mentioned studies provide valuable insight on experiences encountered by the athletes. However, there has yet to be any research that focused exclusively on what athletes themselves highlighted as essential for their career to be successful. This study provides an original contribution on the characteristics of sports careers among tennis players with differing levels of success, and thus the aim of this study is to research various negative life events (injuries, lack of financial resources, failure to be selected for the national team) and their impact on tennis players' careers.

## Materials and Methods

### *Participants*

In an intentional sample of examinees, 30 tennis players were interviewed (aged between 25 and 50). The research participants were divided into three categories of male tennis players; (1) Grand Slam winners (N=10), i.e. tennis players who have won at least one of the four Grand Slam tournaments in tennis (Australian Open, US Open, Roland Garros or Wimbledon), (2) players ranked between positions 150 and 300 on the professional men's tennis rankings, further on in the text “participants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of success” (N=10) (according to the official website of the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), or who were at one point of their career in ranked in that position), and (3) senior male tennis players with national rank, further on in the text “participants of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success” (N=10) (ranked between 1 and 10 on the national ranking list or between position 500 and 1500 on the ATP rankings, i.e. if at some point of their career they were ranked in one of the mentioned positions). For the selection of research participants, a specific method for biographical studies was used, including participants who best fit the research, as well as those who were deemed to provide the most valuable information in relation to the research questions asked<sup>22</sup>.

## Procedures

Data collection was implemented through three phases and by applying the semi-structured interview method. The first phase included contacting the potential participants by e-mail. The second phase involved making direct telephone contact in which the participants were briefly presented with the procedure, aim, and research topic. The third phase was the implementation of the interview with the participants.

The data collection in this research was conducted by using the qualitative methodological approach through carrying out biographical studies by means of gathering life stories of tennis players at different levels of sporting success. A default identical interview structure (so-called interview guide) was prepared beforehand for all the participants in the study. Each question in the interview guide was open-ended which gave a series of responses that were significant for each participant. The interviews were carried out until the studied topic was exhausted, i.e., for as long as feedback in the conversation did not begin to repeat itself. With the aim to avoid having environmental factors (noise, lights, poor weather conditions) influence the responses of the participants, the interviews took place in quiet and isolated places.

In order to achieve optimal personal context of the data, it was exceptionally important that all participants clearly connect personal experience with key phases that refer to their own careers<sup>23,24</sup>. It was previously indicated that this approach increases the accuracy and truthfulness of memories, and that was a major step in overcoming certain limitations of retrospective memory. This aspect is specific for this type of data collection, and guarantees the memory of personal experiences for each participant relating to a certain period of their life<sup>23,25</sup>.

All the participants agreed to participate and gave an informed consent, while this study was approved by the Committee for Scientific Work and Ethics at the Faculty of Kinesiology University of Zagreb, number: 6/2021.

## Design and Analysis

Each participant was presented with the aim and purpose of the research in detail. All interviews were recorded by video recorder and by camera for subsequent transcriptions and interview analyses, on which the participants were also informed and asked to give consent. Each participant was guaranteed with anonymity and confidentiality of the personal information they provided, as well as being allowed to withdraw from the study at any given time. All interviews were conducted by the third author due to an elevated trust and relationship with the participants as a result of the respect for their history and present situation, and the requirements of general/specific elite performance and development experience. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, i.e. recorded by what was stated, and each interview lasted up to 60 minutes.

The reflexive thematic analysis approach, developed by Braun and Clarke (2019)<sup>26</sup> was used and the analysis consisted of six different stages which were carried out inductively, by having the statements of the participants coded so that they could be summarized on a level of explicit meaning. The software for qualitative analysis (QSR NVIVO 9) was used for transformation of raw data units (into thematic hierarchies by recursive inclusion into producing codes), and for the production and organization of data categories<sup>23,27</sup>.

## Results

The participants shared how they lessened different negative life events in order to achieve success in tennis. The interview analysis resulted with the formation of three different inter-related topics. The first topic was to do with injuries and the methods of dealing with them. The second topic focused on financial resources and their impact on sports development at the beginning stages of a sporting career. The third topic focused on the effect of not being selected to represent their national teams. Each of the mentioned topics is further studied hereafter.

### *Topic 1 – Injuries and methods of dealing with them*

Sports injuries and the methods in which an athlete deals with them was the first topic discussed with the participants. The mentioned topic proved to be quite relevant as the participants described their injuries and diseases that followed them and presented setbacks, however, some of them also mentioned experiencing additional motivation for success following an injury.

Participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success considered injuries as a normal and a constituent part of tennis. They all reported having minor injuries, however they stated that these injuries did not present limitations in their sports development while being junior tennis players. One of the 3<sup>rd</sup> level participants elaborated as follows:

“I didn’t have that many problems with injuries except for muscle spasms. True, yes, I also had certain problems with the shoulder, but I took care of that by spending one month in therapies. So, I can’t say that injuries held me back and were the reason why I didn’t succeed.”

Apart from certain smaller injuries, such as twists, sprains and muscle spasms, the players stated that after injuries they experienced mental downfalls, and that it took them a significant amount of time to get their game back to the level it was prior to sustaining the injury. During that time, they felt that they lacked adequate professional support from their coach, which could have allowed them to be capable of directing their energy towards factors directly related to sports performance.

“You know, when fear gets to you... By the time I regained my psychological level, I lost an entire summer, however, I kept playing.”

“I was extremely frustrated after that injury because I witnessed my guys moving forward, while I lost an entire year, without knowing why I lost it. That was some serious wandering. If only I broke an arm, so, I would know I had a broken arm, so you have to take a break for a year, OK then.”

“Yeah, yes, I was down mentally. I lost faith in myself because I wasn’t in training, or playing matches.”

While for some players minor injuries presented additional motivation for continuing the “fight” to get back to achieving good results (during the transition from junior to senior ranking), others could not handle such small, however recurring injuries, thus they decided to end their tennis careers. One of the participants describes his “battle” as follows:

“After my injury, I’m struggling, fighting it, and this all goes on for a year, two years, three years, and then I reach the conclusion that this can’t keep going further. Overnight tennis changed to something totally else, this sport was no longer tennis for me, this sport was a nuclear sport. Suddenly the pace just swallowed me up.”

It was found that the players first issues with injuries started to occur after their junior-level career and during their transition into seniors. Injuries and overtraining were common features experienced by players at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of success. Several of them stated having discus hernia. The participants who experienced problems with discus hernia stated that they took breaks from competitions and training for several months, but when returning to play, they were not able to reach the ranking they had prior to the injury. They indicated insufficient attention to the body position during training, such as the lack of balance, as the primary cause of their injury.

“I wasn’t paying enough attention to my body. At that time, while working with my physical therapist and my coach, I wasn’t entirely focused on that, you know? I wasn’t stretching enough, I just played tennis.”

“My back was killing at the tournament, and the more I played, the worse was the pain. The injury was in fact that stress was adding on stress. It wasn’t that I hadn’t been prepared enough, quite the opposite, I was overtrained.”

In addition to the mentioned injuries, several participants emphasized concern for their health. Two participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of success had mononucleosis, while one participant had hepatitis. Their experiences and the effects after the disease were pointed out in several quotes:

“It was hard for me because I had no energy, it was unbelievable. You know, I wake up, have breakfast, and want to go back to sleep. It was terrible.”

“I’m playing a match, and I’m feeling as if I’m playing my fourth match in that day. I won several matches with vomiting, I’m throwing up and I can’t play.

Somehow, after my first mononucleosis I was never again at the same energy level.”

They also added that looking back, they might have created pressure for themselves and perhaps that was the trigger for the development of mononucleosis. They believe that they should have gained more support from their coach in the way of promoting rest, in order for their bodies to be functional even in the most challenging of situations. Therefore, one of the participants stated that he was his own greatest enemy as he went back to training and competing too soon after illness.

“When you want to do everything quickly, you also sometime force it a little and – here comes an injury! That is how I got my back injury, shoulder injury and many other.”

“I was an overly motivated athlete, and I always gave it 100%, while some players who were with me knew when to rest and they kept their health. Wrong decisions, too much of my motivation and impatience.”

As the cause of their injuries and illness that started appearing and accumulating, all the participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of success attributed everything to mental preparation. They stated that at that point they were more focused than ever on tennis, whereas they were neither physically, nor mentally ready for the challenges of senior-level tennis.

“You know, when the head wants to do everything fast, but the body stiffens up a little? I believe that was all. I wasn’t accepting this situation where you’d say: c’mon, OK, here I am, it is what it is, let’s start again!”

In order to evolve and become successful players, the Grand Slam winners work excruciatingly hard, but on that path they were also accompanied by injuries. The injuries were constantly present and were a disrupting factor they had to cope with. Therefore, all the Grand Slam winners involved in this study stated that the most important thing is to remain healthy so that one can be able to play more and enjoy the game.

“Some of the young players who performed best at junior level, why didn’t they make it? Not always, but there are often stories about players who kept experiencing injuries they couldn’t get rid of. But keeping your health, that is priority number one for me. If you’re not healthy, you can’t do anything.”

One of the Grand Slam winners mentioned a good junior-level player they remembered who ended his career due to injuries and certified that keeping one’s health is of the utmost importance:

“He was number one or number two, and after only three years of playing professionally he simply stopped. Out of the mentioned three years he was injured for two and a half. If he hadn’t been injured, how good would he have been?!”

Furthermore, another Grand Slam winner reported how after winning a Grand Slam tournament (Wimbledon), he was playing his best tennis, however he then un-

fortunately had an injury. Upon thinking about what preceded this injury, he came to the conclusion that it happened the only time when he did not follow his doctor's instructions.

"I went to see another doctor. Stupid. So, only one time in my career, and I immediately got punished for it."

All Grand Slam winners stated that during their tennis careers they had accumulated injuries and that they were a problem. They believe that these moments were decisive in overcoming crises, as well as presented additional motivation for their development and for becoming better tennis players. Below is another quote by one of the Grand Slam winners:

"In tennis, and in life in general, in moments of crisis, the worst times, I can really grow and get better, precisely because of that."

The Grand Slam winners further highlighted that players need to focus on improving negative elements during their careers in order to place themselves in a more favourable position. In order to minimise the possibility of getting injured, many Grand Slam winners asked for assistance and included experts from various fields of sport and science into their teams, i.e., fitness coaches, psychologists, experts in biomechanics, nutritionists, etc.

"Certain periods in my career, that were the best for me, were the ones when I said to myself 'OK', I must improve in certain areas, so I found experts who helped me do that. Those were the real turning points."

Unlike participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success, who did mental training for a shorter period, the most successful players such as the Grand Slam winners, had a psychologist in their team and regularly practised mental training. Here below are several quotes from Grand Slam winners where they state that it is extremely important to control one's emotions:

"I think that it's about having to control your emotions, accepting your bad periods, and, eventually, improving your game every day. And you must understand it all and have faith in yourself."

"You have to control your emotions so you can do what you must do on the court. And if you have to play a long ball and... You must do it. Because if you have a break point and you play a short ball, you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing. Because you've never... No, no, you must control yourself. Control your emotions, that is the key."

Extremely high loads of stress, insecurity, and the feeling of not fulfilling one's own expectations, had an effect even on the Grand Slam winners, This is one of the reasons why working with a psychologist is considered to be one of the most beneficial aspects of overcoming hard moments and experiences. Below is a quote in which one participant explains the advantages of working with a psychologist:

"I was ready to play with anyone, I was very focused and very relaxed, stress free. If you play while stressed, ultimately you can't give 100%. You're playing tennis, but you're not enjoying it. You can't play at 100% because you have limitations."

#### *Topic 2 – Financial resources and how they affect sports development*

Financial resources, and how they affect the sports development in the beginning of an athlete's tennis career was the second topic discussed by the participants. The participants at all three levels of success referred to financial resources as being significant in tennis progress. However, qualitative differences were determined between the three levels of success among tennis players.

Participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success mentioned that during their junior playing years, they were not aware of the costs spent on coaches, tournaments, hotels, and other expenses that were a part of tennis. They looked for help from sponsors, however, the result was unsuccessful. The lack of financial resources reflected on their tennis, below are some quotes from the participants in relation to the financial aspects:

"I wasn't playing a lot and I wasn't playing across Asia, Africa, USA, I never went outside of Europe. Everywhere I played was any place we could get to by car."

"Honestly, I used to be unaware of how much my father spent each month, I wasn't involved in that, my part of the job was only to train and to play."

They pointed out that their parents were not willing to spend their last resources on tennis. As their financial resources were limited, they did not want to take the risk of taking out a loan, or by borrowing money. They believed that they were investing in accordance with their capacity, however, they were not determined to invest in a coach because they were waiting to first settle down and give up on tennis.

"I mean, yet again, on the other hand I also wasn't ready for what was coming, and neither did they know what to expect. I mean, we went in to play pro level, but without knowing what it was, and still going for it. That's, perhaps, the step that we needed to prepare for better."

One participant at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success pointed out that an injury being the moment he became somewhat more aware of financial resources, which subsequently became the main reason for him ending his career. He explained that he was prepared in terms of his physical conditioning, he played good tennis, but during one tournament he experienced a minor injury in the posterior part of the knee due to which he forfeited the match. Further on, he stated that he immediately called his father and said to him:

"I'm going to become a coach, I'm enrolling into a programme for coach education and that is it, definite-

ly. I said to him I didn't want to continue to burden him financially."

What must be pointed out is the fact that all participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success identified financial resources as one of the main reasons for quitting tennis.

Several participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level stated that they had problems with financial resources. They looked back on the beginnings of their tennis career when their parents did not have sufficient financial resources to support them at tournaments, even locally, let alone abroad. Players from Balkan countries (Croatia, Serbia, etc.) were noted to have huge problems with financing, and in this situation they then found themselves having to take a harder path. They believe that players from France, Australia, and China do not have issues with financial resources. Here below is a singled-out quote from a participant describing how he went by himself to a tournament, without a coach, due to the lack of financial resources.

"I went alone to Switzerland for a tournament. I was alone, I always went by myself to tournaments. It was really hard, but it was about the money."

The lack of financial resources was creating enormous additional pressure. Money was a daily preoccupation. Here are some quotes from participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level:

"I was putting pressure on myself and then the lack of funds, so you end up always thinking about money."

"When I get home and hear my parent comment, I'm not stupid. You hear that they can't make ends meet, and you should be going to a tournament. And then you, when you get to the tournament, subconsciously still hear it and you think to yourself, my poor parents, how are they going to give money for me now. Suddenly you become aware of all the costs."

"I can't allow myself to have my parents invest in something, sleep in 40 m<sup>2</sup> so that I could have everything in the world of tennis, and secondly, that my brother also suffers. No way. Although we took out a loan, I said to myself, never again."

"When you have a financial burden and the training programme is another big financial load for the family, then you are constantly looking for more."

"However, I felt a huge responsibility because it was then that I started to do some calculations. Right, so me and this player share a coach and the coaches' fee is that *much*. We are now in Italy and lunch alone is that much, plus the daily allowance, plus the hotel for the coach, etc. Those numbers were spinning around in my head, and that was creating a burden for me."

Two participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level stated that their parents admitted they should have made the next step forward and invest in a better coach, however, that financial resources limited them in terms of the making this step forward.

"Well, now, my father has regrets because of that. Why didn't I pay for a good coach, why didn't I take out a loan?"

"I'm very lucky that I had a father who, when he saw that I loved it, committed himself to me, and was with me every day. Then again, on the other hand, I had the misfortune of us not having enough financially to push me more early with a coach, who would teach me better."

When asked "Did financial resources present a problem at the beginning of your sports career?" several Grand Slam winners replied that they did not have sufficient finances, however, that at some point they got lucky and got selected for being part of the programme at their federation.

"Yes, then the Federation granted me a scholarship and I started training here. We were three players working with one coach. That helped me a lot."

After starting with professional tennis, further on in their career, Grand Slam winners stated that they had no more problems with financial resources, and they were able to cover the costs of their coaches, travels, physical conditioning coaches, psychologists, nutritionists, etc.

"That part was very simple for me as I already had contracts and I had enough money for investing in a good coach. It wasn't very hard, no."

On the transition between the junior and senior rank, one Grand Slam winner stated that he had no money at all and that his mother made sacrifices by having to work two jobs for a certain period. Then the Federation required him to win points at the following tournament or he would be denied financial resources.

"Then getting lucky with my first ATP point, unbelievable, right? Otherwise, I would have no money at all, the Federation would not help me."

Another Grand Slam winner pointed out his opinion that it was important that things do not come too easily. Likewise, he also thinks that he grew up in a really good family and that his family and relatives created a very comfortable environment for him to grow up in.

"We didn't have anything, we had no money at all. I had to fight for everything that I wanted, everything."

Several Grand Slam winners singled out key moments in their careers. They believe that they succeeded in taking advantage of the opportunity that was presented to them despite the fact that they did not have sufficient financial resources at the beginning of their tennis career. The lack of financial resources and a bad atmosphere at their home presented a challenge and motive for achieving the greatest success, i.e. winning a Grand Slam tournament.

"That makes you want more, I guess, I don't know, it's hard to say exactly."

### Topic 3 – Failure to be selected for the national team

Our third topic was focused on national tennis federations, i.e. how failure to be selected to the national team affected athletes. The participants at the three different

levels of success presented their differing views about national tennis federations.

When discussing national tennis federations, the participant at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level described their relationship with the federation differently. For some players, who believed that they deserved to be selected for their national teams, and were not, was in some way a turning point for them training even harder. They strived to prove that this was where they belong and did not give up. Failure to be selected for the national team, although they met all the requirements, eventually did not have a negative effect on one of the participants.

“Well, no, you simply feel bad, you don’t understand because you got some paper from the tennis federation, from the head coach, which essentially said exactly what the conditions were to be in the national team. And then, when you look at all the details, you meet all the requirements, perhaps even more than that, and in the end, they never invite you. Again, you feel bad, but it’s no tragedy.”

Regarding his failure to get selected for the national team, one of the participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level was aware that at that point he was not good enough and that there were others who were better than him. He pointed out that when he achieved better results, he was once again invited to the national team. He described his relationship with the federation as correct, even though there were also some negative situations, for example:

“They prohibited me from having training sessions with the Federation because I refused to go to the National Championship, as I went to play at a tournament in order to make it to the Top 20 at the U16 International Tennis Federation. Then they didn’t allow me to play, but this also ended correctly.”

The other participant at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level went through all national teams up to the senior category. One of the biggest mistakes of national tennis federations is non-compliance with the goal everyone should be striving for. It is said that many players get lost on the transition from the junior to the senior category. Thus, below one participant presents the reasons why he joined the programme of the national tennis federation.

“I got involved in the work of the Federation to try and help with my advice so that we try to provide to young players what wasn’t given to me. That is, I believe, the only right path, where players are monitored, where we all train together, etc. The Federation did not compensate that, but simply guided us and that was great.”

In continuation, two participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level stated that they had help from their national tennis federations. They pointed out that this was very important as their parents did not have the required financial resources to fund them, and with the support of the national tennis federation they could train without feeling any financial pressure. Further on, they elaborated that top-level individuals should be working in national tennis federa-

tions; thus below is a quote where one of the participants describes a situation at one national tennis federations:

“Would you look at how our system works, look at it! What’s worst, we have quality people. When I now come to the federation and when they list me the names of the coaches, I never heard of those people before. I never heard of those people, you win Davis Cups, and your coaches are some unknowns!”

Other participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level did not have any help from national tennis federations and that was a problem for them. They point out that expert competence is what shall enable young athletes to have a proper training process during which they shall properly master technical and other elements, as well as balance out the relationship between individual and group training, something which is of great importance. In the interview they state that they did not have such support and that in their opinion, that is one of the key factors for success.

“I think that, when it comes to making it to the Top 100 or Top 50 on the ATP rankings, in countries which have a very well managed training and competition system, there will always be quality-level players. In countries where this isn’t the case, such environments depend more on outstanding talents.”

“I regret that we don’t have any similar system where, by means of the national tennis federation, all this knowledge, which some players possess, is transferred.”

A negative experience of playing for the national tennis federation at the Davis Cup was described by one of the participants. He states that they were playing against one of the best national teams and that they were not favourites, however, the media blew them up as being the favourites in the match. After losing this match, he was accused of being the worst player on the court. Instead of supporting him, the national tennis federation did not take any action to help him overcome the situation.

“And then someone also knocks you out like that. I came to a point where I was fighting with myself, I reached a wall. I’m trying, but it’s not working. That was when my insecurity slowly started. I felt like I was worth nothing. Later on, when I wasn’t invited to join the national team, I thought I really was worthless and I withdrew even more into myself, I was insecure.”

At some point during their careers, all the elite-level tennis players in this study spent time together in a team, meaning they trained, played, and travelled together. That is how the information around the national tennis federations began for all the participants that are Grand Slam winners. One Grand Slam winner explained that he had to move away from home to a sport house when he was 14 years old. He stated that it was a sport house for different sports as well as tennis. Each Grand Slam winner pointed out that there was a turning point in their career, and that it was the moment when they were taken “under the umbrella” of the national tennis federation. For exam-

ple, some of the Grand Slam winners define their turning point as follows:

“Allow me to explain one key moment in my career, and that pivotal moment was when I moved and when I started training here. There were these three players in the beginning, we trained together with one coach. They were the best three players in my age category. We were all good players and we always trained together. We started improving our physical conditioning intensively, we were working hard.”

“I wasn’t present at the meeting that my parents had with the national tennis federation. They came to me and said: we were offered this opportunity, we think it will be good for you to have the opportunity to train with the best players and blah, blah, blah. So I said OK, if you think that it’s good for me, I’ll do it.”

One Grand Slam winner explained how the national tennis federation operated in his country. He said that the national tennis federation made teams of four players and that these teams were very successful. He thinks that this method of operation is successful all around the world. This positive example of team creation is presented below:

“You know how it is, if he can win the title, so can I, because last week I beat him at practice. You support one another and that is something I think is very successful.”

## Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this study was to qualitatively research the various negative life events (i.e., injuries, lack of financial resources, failure to get support from the national tennis federation) among male tennis players at three different levels of success: (1) Grand Slam winners, (2) players ranked between 150 and 300 on the professional men’s tennis rankings, and (3) players ranked between position 500 and 1500 on the professional men’s tennis rankings. By using reflexive thematic analysis – injuries, lack of financial resources and failure to get support from the national tennis federation were identified as significant setbacks for achieving great success in tennis. Some other unpleasant life events (war and divorce of parents) were mentioned in the interviews, however, through analysing the interviews, the three events that were mentioned most often by the participants were selected for further analysis. The discussion was based around the question of how different negative life events affected their tennis career.

The key finding in this study was that, regardless of a player’s level of success, negative life events were particularly difficult for some tennis players. This is the first a qualitative study which reports on negative life events among tennis players at three different levels of success. Stambulova suggests that the positive sides of athletes’ careers are often the focus of research in relation to sporting careers (i.e., success stories, facilitative environ-

ments)<sup>28,29</sup>, however, there are also some studies that illustrate the negative sides, such as injuries and burnout<sup>30–32</sup>.

The severity of tennis injuries can vary significantly, from minor distractions which do not affect performance, to more serious traumas which require withdrawing from tournaments<sup>33</sup>, or even quitting sport in general. In a research study by Oršolić, Barbaros and Novak, it is highlighted that all participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success (ranked between 1 and 10 on the national ranking list or between position 500 and 1500 on the ATP ranking, i.e., if at some point of their career they were ranked in one of the mentioned positions) had a very successful beginning stage of their junior career, up until the moment of transition from junior-level to senior-level tennis. During this period, various problems tended to arise, the most often one being injuries. The mentioned injuries were seen as particularly unpleasant experiences<sup>34</sup>. Based on the findings of this qualitative research, tennis players at the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of success (ranked between position 150 and 300 on the ATP ranking, i.e., if at some point of their career they were ranked in one of the mentioned positions) were prone to injuries, especially injuries as result of overtraining among talented tennis players. Shannon et al. found the number of injuries among elite tennis players to be high. In this research there is also evidence to suggest that some of the injuries may be as a result of poor rehabilitation and/or premature return to play, particularly in the case of muscle strains<sup>35</sup>. The findings of this study indicate that the participants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> levels of success did not have, in a certain part of their career, adequate support that would direct them to easier elimination of injuries and ways to deal with them. The participants who were Grand Slam winners also perceived injuries as unpleasant experiences, but unlike the participants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success, they brought experts from different fields of sports and science into their team at a pivotal point in their career with the aim of preventing injuries. The experiences of Grand Slam winners indicate that it is possible, even despite injuries, to achieve the highest level of success in tennis. Injuries caused by overtraining, and playing while having pains in general, or despite functional limitations, appear to be a consistent appearance among elite-level athletes<sup>36,37</sup>.

The financial demands of tennis are remarkable when considering how big a team a player in the development stages must have around him<sup>34</sup>. The logistical requirements of competitive tennis were presented as problems among participants at the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success. 3<sup>rd</sup> level participants cited lack of finances as one of the most common reasons for ending an active career. They point out that the parents could follow the financial demands of tennis up to a certain stage, but after that the lack of finances was reflected in their tennis career. Research conducted by Shrom, Cumming and Fenton says that many professional players face negative financial situations<sup>38</sup>. The lack of finances created a great burden for the participants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> level of success. It is not uncommon for the substantial



financial resources required to support a professional tennis career to lead to stress and financial hardship for players' families. It could be stated that the socio-economic status definitely plays a part in the success of tennis players<sup>11</sup>. Regardless of the study by Martin, for Grand Slam winners the lack of financial resources was a strong stimulus for achieving the greatest success. Studies have shown that only the top 100 ranked players can finance themselves<sup>39</sup>. By entering the professional tennis Grand Slam events, the winners secured financial independence and the possibility of further investment in the coaching team.

According to Turner and Plum, the question that troubles each tennis nation is where to invest its resources. Furthermore, the question arises, if it takes 10 years and 10,000 hours of training for a player to reach the top level of the sport, should one invest in the foundations of sport (development) or wait until talented players reach the top and then direct the financial resources towards several elite-level players (performance)<sup>40</sup>. Thus, talent identification has become a crucial characteristic of national development systems for expanding elite sports<sup>41–45</sup>. In addition to this, the findings of this study indicate that the participants at the 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success secured all national selections, but at the transition from the junior to the senior stage there were no invitations. Although they were good juniors, not being selected for the national team had a negative effect on them. While the participants of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> level of success were in national selections at some stages of their career, the Grand Slam winners were more regularly in these selections. Based on the results of this study, the conclusion could be made that Grand Slam winners had the support of national tennis federations, which can be associated with subsequent success.

The main strength of this study is in the fact that a significant percentage of participants are Grand Slam winners, and although some consider it to be limited, the sample size met the recommendations for a qualitative research study<sup>26</sup>.

A weakness of this study is the absence of female tennis players, thus an overall picture of negative life events in tennis is not presented.

More research is necessary for determining or recognizing other negative life events or traumatic experiences which affect the career and the level of success of a tennis player. It is hoped that the popularization of scientific re-

sults from this study could help in resolving doubts of parents and coaches about negative life events which occur in a tennis players' career and professional life, as well as for them to be minimized.

This qualitative study presents evidence on a series of challenges that tennis players faced during their adolescence and until they reached a certain level of success in their tennis career. The study proves that tennis players at different levels of success dealt with these challenges differently, despite their injuries, financial difficulties, and the failure to be selected for the national team.

A few recommendations for tennis stakeholders (parents, tennis and fitness coaches, national coaches) on how to behave in order to avoid and overcome unpleasant life events as easily as possible:

- despite the injuries that appear during a tennis career, it has been shown that one should not give up on one's goals to achieve success. It is extremely important for a tennis player to assemble a tennis team that will include coach, fitness coach, physiotherapist, doctor, nutritionist, and others in order to achieve this success.
- finances, which are extremely important at the beginning of a tennis career, are not a decisive factor for achieving the greatest success. Finding sponsors or coming "under the umbrella" of national tennis associations can largely solve the financial burden.
- not being selected for the national team is not crucial for success in tennis. Of course, being selected offers more opportunities, such as the support of the Federation.

The results of this study could contribute to the broadening of knowledge on the effect of negative life events on athletes' tennis careers, whereas on the basis of the results of new scientific insight, young tennis players could learn about accepting events with the aim of achieving top-level results.

In short, we believe that the differences between the various levels of success among tennis players refers more to the overcoming of different negative life events (injuries, lack of financial resources, failure to be selected to the national team) that tennis players were faced with during their tennis careers.

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## **ISTRAŽIVANJE NEGATIVNIH ŽIVOTNIH DOGAĐAJA RAZLIČITIH RAZINA USPJEŠNOSTI TENISAČA: PERSPEKTIVE SUDIONIKA**

### **SAŽETAK**

Proces kroz koji sportaši prolaze složen je i isprepleten raznim neugodnim životnim događajima s kojima se suočavaju te ovisi o određenom stupnju uspjeha. Međutim, smatra se da je prevladavanje izazova u ranoj mladosti povezano s uspjehom u kasnijim godinama. Iz tih razloga cilj ove kvalitativne studije jest istražiti različite negativne životne događaje (ozljede, nedostatak financija, neizbor u nacionalnu selekciju) te kako su oni utjecali na njihovu tenisku karijeru. Polustrukturirani intervjui provedeni su s trima kategorijama muških tenisača (N = 30), i to: (1) Grand Slam pobjednici, (2) igrači rangirani od 150. do 300. mjesta i (3) igrači rangirani od 500. do 1500. mjesta na profesionalnoj teniskoj ljestvici. Analiza podataka provedena je korištenjem refleksivne tematske analize. Generirane su tri teme koje uključuju: ozljede i način kako su se nosili s njima, financije i kako su one utjecale na sportski razvoj te neizbor u nacionalnu selekciju. Rezultati ukazuju na to da se razlike između različitih razina uspješnosti tenisača više odnose na prevladavanje različitih neugodnih životnih događaja (ozljede, financije, neizbor u nacionalnu selekciju) s kojima su se suočavali tijekom svoje teniske karijere.