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Connection between Social Capital and Sport Success of Young Tennis Players

Dario Novak [1,2,*], Filip Svalina [3,*] and Eva Anđela Delale [2]

[1] Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Split, Nikole Tesle 6, 21000 Split, Croatia
[2] Institute for Anthropological Research, Gajeva ulica 32, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia; eva.andela.delale@inantro.hr
[3] Faculty of Kinesiology, University of Zagreb, Horvaćanski zavoj 15, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia
* Correspondence: dario.novak@kif.hr (D.N.); filip.svalina031@gmail.com (F.S.)

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Abstract: Young athletes are influenced by different physical, psychological, and social factors. Social factors significantly impact a young athlete's growth. Parents, coaches, and schools are important factors in young athletes' sports careers. Achieving sport success without their support would be a real challenge. Social capital is a resource that comes from social relationships and social networks. It is a resource that impacts athletes and sports performance. The aim of this study was to determine the connection between social capital and competitive success in young tennis players. This research was conducted with participants of an ITF (International Tennis Federation) junior tournament in tennis. Research included 75 tournament players (N = 36 girls, age: 15.54 ± 1.29 years; N = 39 boys, age: 16.13 ± 0.98 years). Participants filled out a questionnaire which evaluated their social capital. Social capital predictors were significant predictors of sporting success (13.1% variance explained), which indicated that there is a moderate association between social capital indicators and sport success in young tennis players. Sports performance was higher with a higher degree of family and sports team social capital among girls. It was higher with a lower school social capital among boys. Intervention that leverages social capital might serve as an avenue for performance promotion in youth.

Keywords: social capital; youth; adolescence; tennis; sports success

1. Introduction

Tennis is one of the most popular sports in the world. People of all ages watch professional tennis tournaments and play recreational tennis. It is a sport characterized by a series of short and intensive actions followed with a short break for recovery (Fernandez-Fernandez et al. 2020). Professional tennis is a dynamic game consisting of surface changes, different styles of opponents, differing lengths of matches, an elimination system of competition, and a long competition season (Giles et al. 2019; Fernandez-Fernandez et al. 2009). These factors require professional tennis players to maintain high physical fitness levels, mental stability, concentration, and emotional control. Athletes need well developed motor skills which allow them to play sports at a high level.

Important characteristics of successful athletes have been examined in past research, most notably through a study of the psychological characteristics and development of ten American Olympic champions (Gould et al. 2002). The factors that were uncovered included: ability to control and endure anxiety, confidence, psychological resilience, sport intelligence, focus, competitivity, work ethics, positivity, and the ability to set and achieve goals. Results also suggested that individuals and institutions (community, family, sport staff) had significant influences on an athlete's development. Positive influences of coach and family were shown to be important in reaching athletic success (Gould et al. 2002).

In addition to technical, tactical, and fitness preparation, the coach must monitor the quality of relationships in the competitor's family, everyday life routines, the workload at school, and the motivation of the competitor for training. The above factors all affect the quality of training and competitive performance. Achieving top results depends on external (opponent quality, injuries, tournament draw) and internal factors (information, energy, and psychosocial components). Often, external factors are impossible to control, but internal factors can be within the athlete's control and arguably, these internal factors are a prerequisite for achieving sports success (Dohme et al. 2020).

Shumaker and Brownell (1984) define social support as the exchange of resources between two individuals with the goal of improving the well-being of the recipients of support. Sheridan et al. (2014) point out that support directed from key interpersonal relationships such as coaches, parents, and peers in a sports context has been identified as an essential resource for athletes. The quality and type of social support that an athlete receives is related to some physiological (i.e., recovery from injury), psychological (i.e., burnout, self-confidence, stress), and sociological outcomes (i.e., participation of young athletes in sports, sports and sports performance, group cohesion). Lack of social support is associated with a decline in athletic performance, susceptibility to injury, and athletic performance (Rees and Hardy 2000).

The term social support is closely related to social capital. The past two decades have marked the rise of the notion of social capital as an important academic concept. Social capital is made up of connections between individuals from which mutual trust and social networks arise (Putnam 2001). Social capital is a term that encompasses resources that imply social relations and social inclusion. It is an integral social factor that influences an individual's social norms of behavior (Novak et al. 2016). The development of children and young people is greatly influenced by parents, family, school environment, and the neighborhood in which they live (Novak and Kawachi 2015). Social capital includes moral support, cultural values, guidance, the ability to play sports, and logistical and financial support. This affects the level of self-confidence, motivation, sense of belonging, and the level of sports performance. The player's progress depends significantly on the capabilities and engagement of the parents (Rosso and McGrath 2012).

The competitive success of a young tennis player is affected by a number of psychophysical and social factors that, through their interaction and connection, form a successful athlete. An emphasis on enjoyment with a good ratio of psychophysical preparation and long-term lessons on a healthy and active lifestyle are prerequisites for success (Merkel 2013). Given the importance of the social component in achieving sports success, a more detailed understanding of the functioning of social support and social capital in the context of sports is needed. In line with this, we hypothesized that family, school, and sports team social capital may be associated with the competitive success of young tennis players and that players who report higher levels of social capital in all three domains will have better ranking. However, no studies have simultaneously examined the contribution of different sources of social capital to youth tennis performance. Accordingly, this research sought to determine the connection between social capital indicators and the competitive success of young tennis players. This research sought to determine how different domains of social capital (family, school, sport team) predict the sporting success of young tennis players.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The questionnaire aimed at assessing social capital was conducted at the International ITF junior tennis tournament of the J4 category (under-18). The tournament was held from 2 December to 7 December 2019 in Zagreb. After registering for the tournament, participants were asked to complete a survey questionnaire in English. The sample included 75 respondents (N = 36 girls, age: 15.54 ± 1.29 years; N = 39 boys, age: 16.13 ± 0.98 years) who participated in the tournament.

The ethics board of the first author's institution provided approval of the research experiment. All the participants were informed of the purpose, benefits, and risks of the investigation. The participants voluntarily took part in the testing after they provided written consent signed by their parents.

2.2. Instruments

Respondents completed an anonymous survey questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part referred to the general characteristics of the research participants: gender, chronological age, self-disclosed height and body weight. Participants wrote their current ranking on the ITF list for juniors aged under 18. Self-assessment of one's own health was evaluated with values on a Likert scale: 1 = very bad; 2 = bad; 3 = good; 4 = very good; and 5 = excellent (Fylkesnes 1993).

The second part of the first page contained questions that sought to identify different domains of social capital in the family, school, and in the sports team (Duke et al. 2009). Social capital in the family was assessed by the question: "Do you feel that your family supports you and pays attention to your tennis career?" Social capital in the school was assessed with three questions: "Do you feel that teachers and students trust each other in your school (vertical school trust)?", "Do you feel that students trust each other in your school (horizontal school trust)?", "Do you think that students collaborate with each other in your school?" Social capital in the sports team was assessed with three questions: "Do you think that your parents and coaches trust each other?", "Do you feel members of your team trust each other?", "Do you feel members of your team collaborate with each other?" (Novak et al. 2015; Furuta et al. 2012). The options to answer the question ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The Cronbach α of the school and sports team social capital scales was 0.71 and 0.81, respectively. Since other domains have fewer than three questions, we considered it not appropriate to check Cronbach αs for these scales.

2.3. Statistical Analysis

The basic descriptive parameters of the observed variables were calculated. The normality of the data distribution was tested by the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. Pearson's correlations determined the connection between social capital and the competitive success of all respondents and separately, by gender. Regression analysis was used to evaluate the effects of possible associations of variables. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 13.0. (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA)) was used for data analyses.

3. Results

Mean values are shown in Table 1 for all participants and separated by gender. The majority of respondents (88%) rated their health as excellent or very good, and eight of them (10.67%) rated it as good, while only one person (1.33%) assessed their health as poor.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study subjects.

Variables	All Players Mean ± Standard Deviation (N = 75)	Female Mean ± Standard Deviation (N = 36)	Male Mean± Standard Deviation (N = 39)
Age (years)	15.85 ± 1.17	15.54 ± 1.29	16.13 ± 0.98
Body height (cm)	177.2 ± 8.23	171.53 ± 5.31	182.58 ± 6.89
Body weight (kg)	66.1 ± 8.97	60.09 ± 5.29	71.68 ± 8.04
Self-rated health (score)	4.28 ± 0.71	4.25 ± 0.69	4.31 ± 0.73

Ranking is the best indicator of a tennis player's current competitive success. The tournament in which the respondents participated was J4 rank. ITF tournament's ranks range from J1 as the highest rank and J5 as the lowest strength level based on participants' ranks. This is the lower strength level

of the international junior tournament. Players in this study were ranked between 246 and 2800 and competed in the tournament. Players without points on the International Tennis Federation (ITF) junior list also participated. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents by rank in four strength groups.

Table 2. Overview of the distribution of respondents by rank on the International Tennis Federation (ITF) junior list.

U18 Ranking	200–500	501–1000	1000–3000	Without Ranking
Number of respondents	15 (20%)	21 (28%)	29 (38.67%)	10 (13.33%)

The second part of the questionnaire consisted of questions on social capital in different domains. When asked, "Do you feel your family understands and gives attention to your tennis career?", the majority (66.67%) stated that they completely agree with the statement; 30.67% of them stated that they agree with the statement and only 2.67% of respondents expressed disagreement. This question was used to assess the level of social capital in the family (Table 3).

Table 3. Tabular presentation of descriptive indicators of the answer to the question about social capital in the family on a 5-point Likert scale—all respondents and by gender.

	Variables	All Players (N = 75)	Male (N = 39)	Female (N = 36)
"Do you feel your family understands and gives attention to your tennis career?"	Mean	4.60	4.51	4.69
	Standard deviation	0.69	0.76	0.62

Players were asked three questions which assessed their school social capital. Table 4 shows the average values of answers to questions about social capital in school for all respondents, and separately by gender.

Table 4. Tabular presentation of descriptive indicators of the sum of the values of the answers to the three questions about social capital in school on a 5-point Likert scale—all respondents and by gender.

	Variables	All Players (N = 73)	Male (N = 38)	Female (N = 35)
"Do you feel teachers and students trust each other in your high school?"	Mean	3.53	3.58	3.49
	Standard deviation	1.01	1.13	0.89
	Variables	**All Players (N = 73)**	**Male (N = 38)**	**Female (N = 35)**
"Do you feel students trust each other in your high school?"	Mean	3.59	3.66	3.51
	Standard deviation	0.94	0.99	0.89
	Variables	**All Players (N = 73)**	**Male (N = 38)**	**Female (N = 36)**
"Do you feel students collaborate with each other in your high school?"	Mean	3.92	3.92	3.92
	Standard deviation	0.82	0.88	0.77

The participants of the tournament were asked questions which assessed their social capital in their sports team. The results are shown in Table 5. All respondents show a high level of social capital in the professional sports team. Based on t-tests for independent samples, there is no difference in respondents' responses by gender, neither in overall score nor for separate questions of social capital variables, as well as in sports performance.

Correlations between social capital and competitive performance among young tennis players are presented below in Table 6. These correlations are also shown separately by gender in the same table. A statistically significant positive correlation between school social capital and competitive performance on the overall sample of respondents was present. There is also a statistically significant relationship between school social capital and competitive performance in male tennis players. However, in female tennis players, there is a statistically significant but negative relationship between family social capital and competitive performance, and between sports team social capital and competitive performance.

Table 5. Tabular presentation of descriptive indicators of the sum of the values of the answers to three questions about social capital in the sports team on a 5-point Likert scale—all respondents and by gender.

"Do you feel your parents and your coaches trust each other?"	**Variables**	**All Players (N = 74)**	**Male (N = 39)**	**Female (N = 35)**
	Mean	4.55	4.64	4.46
	Standard deviation	0.71	0.67	0.74
"Do you feel members of your team trust each other?"	**Variables**	**All Players (N = 75)**	**Male (N = 39)**	**Female (N = 36)**
	Mean	4.60	4.72	4.47
	Standard deviation	0.79	0.60	0.94
"Do you feel members of your team collaborate with each other?"	**Variables**	**All Players (N = 75)**	**Male (N = 39)**	**Female (N = 36)**
	Mean	4.45	4.46	4.44
	Standard deviation	0.96	1.02	0.91

Table 6. Overview of the correlation coefficient between the rank of tennis players and the domain of social capital.

	Family Social Capital	**School Social Capital**	**Sports Team Social Capital**
Ranking of all players	−0.13	0.35 ***	0.10
Female players ranking	−0.43 **	0.12	−0.49 **
Male players ranking	−0.04	0.41 **	0.26

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$

In line with current recommendations for conducting linear regression analysis, all assumptions for regressions were met (Field 2009). That being said, a regression analysis was conducted to assess the competitive performance of respondents based on the overall level of social capital and based on the level of social capital in different domains (Tables 7 and 8). Data that were obtained confirm a statistically significant correlation between predictor variables and the dependent variable (rank of respondents) ($p = 0.02$). Selected predictor variables explain 13.1% of the criterion variable. The highest correlation of predictors was determined for social capital in school ($p = 0.004$).

Table 7. Results of regression analysis for the criterion variable rank of respondents (total model).

	Correlation Coefficient	**Squared Correlation Coefficient**	**Adjusted Squared Correlation Coefficient**	**Standard Estimation Error**	**F**	**Statistical Significance**
Model	0.362 (a)	0.131	0.093	1060.507	3417	0.022

a. Predictors: social capital in the family, school, and sports team

Table 8. Results of regression analysis for the criterion variable rank of respondents (separately by domains of social capital).

		Non-Standardized Coefficients		**Standardized Coefficients**	**T**	**Statistical Significance**
		B	**Standard Estimation Error**	**Beta**		
Coefficients	(Constant)	17.33	1119.29		0.02	0.99
	Family	−159.08	219.44	−0.091	−0.73	0.47
	School	183.67	60.91	0.37	3.02	0.004
	Sports team	1.83	76.97	0.003	0.02	0.98

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the connection between social capital and competitive success in young tennis players. There are several most important findings of the study. First, the researchers' findings demonstrate satisfying predictive validity of success in young tennis players with selected predictors of social capital; there is a moderate association between the social capital indicators and sport success in young tennis players. Second, the sports performance was negatively correlated with family and sports team social capital among girls; it was higher with a higher degree of family and sports team social capital among girls. Third, the sport performance was correlated with school social capital among boys; it was higher with lower school social capital among boys.

Parents play a major role in the early phase of a child's engagement with sports. They are the ones who enroll the child in the sports program and provide significant logistical, financial, and emotional support. The involvement of parents and their support is extremely important in the development of a young athlete's tennis career. This is confirmed by the results of this study in which as many as 97.33% of respondents believe that their family supports them and pays attention to their sports careers. At the same time, excessive parental involvement and influence can also be negative. The results of this research indicate that more successful tennis players have positive parental engagement, which helps them realize their sporting potential. Studies show that parental involvement and support are associated with self-confidence, quality of performance, and children's enjoyment in sports (Gould et al. 2006).

Another important factor in young athletes is the school. The school is the main educational institution which, along with parents, represents one of the main moderators of the child's development. For young athletes, reconciling school and sports obligations is a great challenge that becomes much easier with the appropriate interaction and joint action of all actors involved in the educational process.

At the same time, without the support of a sports team, and quality cooperation between the team and parents of athletes, young athletes cannot achieve their sporting success. Without strong parental support and quality coaches during the early stages of participating in sports, a talented child will find it harder to reach their potential. Success in tennis is conditioned by a quality social environment that includes relationships between players, coaches, and parents (Wolfenden and Holt 2005). Parents should provide emotional support and help the player in fulfilling sports, school, and other obligations. They should avoid giving tennis players advice because such involvement gives a negative effect. Coaches should be in charge of providing technical-tactical tennis information. Coaches and parents should act together to be the player's support team (Wolfenden and Holt 2005). The results of this research show a high level of social capital within the sports team. Respondents feel that their team members trust each other and cooperate with each other.

Better support from coaches enhances sports performance during tennis training and competition. When coaches give more support, players work harder, and psychophysiological responses increase during training exercises (Kilit et al. 2019). Coaches play a key role in the development of the young athletes they work with. They provide support and guidance to athletes, resulting in the creation of strong interrelationships. This relationship has been shown to affect the level of involvement and enjoyment of sports activity, motivation, and development of key competencies. A coach's ability to establish a good relationship with a group of players reduces social exclusion within a group of young players (Sheridan et al. 2014).

The results of this research show that there is a correlation between school social capital and the player's ranking. This suggests that players with a better ITF rank have less social support at school. It can be assumed that young athletes who are more successful in their sport have less time to perform quality school obligations. It is a very common case that successful athletes enroll in correspondence schools to have more time for training and competitions. This leads to a situation where young athletes do not participate in regular school classes, and it is assumed that because of this, they have a lower level of social capital and social support in the school. At the same time, the correlation between social capital and competitive performance differs when analyzing tennis players separately by gender.

There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the rank of female tennis players and family social capital and social capital in the sports team. Thus, female tennis players with a higher level of social capital in the family and sports team achieve better competitive success (or have a better rank). This result can be explained by the fact that the female participants in this research had a lower average age compared to the age competition category of the tournament in which they participate. It is to be expected that at that age, they have great support from the family and the sports team. In this study, a statistically significant positive correlation was found between the rank of tennis players and social capital at school for male tennis players. Thus, male tennis players with a higher level of school social capital achieve poorer competitive success. This result can be explained by the fact that the male participants in this research are of a higher average age, and they would be expected to already achieve top competitive results in this age category of the tournament. Namely, typically in tennis, better quality male tennis players aged 16 and 17 show their potential by being ranked higher in the junior rankings, which was not the case with the participants in this research.

The social network around the tennis player has a significant impact on the development of the player and their tennis career. This social network, in addition to parents and coaches, consists of extended family members, friends, teachers, and the school environment (Wolfenden and Holt 2005). Even when a person is academically gifted, a combination of academic and athletic requirements can represent a major effort (Carodine et al. 2001). For example, Romar (2012) in his research analyzed the relationship between academic and sporting success in top young skiers (average age 17 years) from Finland. The survey results show that 73% of the 49 students who participated believe that participation in sports negatively affects their school success. Half of the respondents were satisfied with their current sports achievements. The author concludes that the concept of merging school and sport is useful and that there are a number of factors that need to be taken into account when combining education and a sports career.

Student-athletes compared to students who do not engage in top-level sports find it more difficult to establish long-term goals such as graduation (Clopton 2012). Still, student-athletes have been shown to show greater academic engagement and graduate from colleges on a larger scale. Athletes show a higher level of involvement in social interactions and a higher level of self-confidence (Clopton 2012). A link has also been established between recreational sports and academic success. A study of 680 students found that those students who engage in recreational sports have significantly higher grade point averages than the general student population (Hackett 2007).

Many factors affect a player's further growth and maturation from junior to senior sport. Li et al. (2018) retrospectively and longitudinally analyzed results of the top 300 professional tennis players in the junior ITF tournaments. Based on the player's competitive result as a junior, we can predict their professional success in tennis in the future. They found that tennis players with a better professional rank were also better ranked juniors. According to the authors, competitive success before the age of fourteen is not significantly correlated with senior success. However, the age range of fourteen to eighteen shows a more significant correlation with senior competitive results. It should be noted that players who do not have significant competitive success as juniors still have a chance to break through in professional tennis.

The conducted research has its limitations. The questionnaire was conducted in the fourth strongest category of ITF junior tournaments. There are a total of five strong junior categories. This indicates that the players from this research do not belong to the category of the best ranked, but belong to the initial level of the junior international competition or simply do not have the required level of quality. It is to be expected that the results in a research study that would include the world's best juniors could be different. The social capital questionnaire covers only seven questions. It is suggested that future research include a larger set of questions to assess social capital. Additionally, with more participants included, it will be possible to make separate regression analyses for boys and girls, since results indicate that a different structure of social capital predictors will explain the competitive success of young tennis players for boys and girls.

5. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to determine the connection between social capital and competitive success in young tennis players. Different domains of social capital (family, school, sports team) successfully predicted the sporting success of young tennis players. Gender differences were found in the relationship between social capital and competitive success in tennis. A higher level of family and team social capital helps girls to achieve a better rank, and a lower level of school social capital is connected with a higher rank in boys. Tennis is an individual sport through which young athletes build themselves as individuals and meet new people. With the right approach and social support for important factors such as family, school, and a sports team, a young competitor can be supported to achieve top sports results. It is not enough to focus on just one area of a young athlete's life, which will lead to a better competitive result. A comprehensive approach to the development of young tennis players is needed. Such an approach allows each player to optimize his/her training and, ultimately, the competition itself. Quality training and competition is complemented by a high level of social support that provides the athlete with additional resources that can positively affect their competitive performance. Future research should include top tennis players ranked among the top 100 on the international junior ITF rankings.

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