

Top International Tennis - What's in it for the Tennis Federations and the tennis farmers and factory workers?

by *Dave Miley*

I often compare top tennis tournaments to a shop selling produce. They have to buy or rent the building for the shop (stadiums and courts); they have to hire qualified staff to work in the shop; they have to advertise and promote the shop. But the most important thing for any shop is to source the products that they will sell in the shop from the National farmers and the people that make the products-the factory owners and workers. And then the shop owners hope that the customers (the TV stations, the spectators etc.) will visit their tournament shop, face to face or through tv/online, and buy their products that they have in the store.

In the top tournaments (the Grand Slams and the top ATP and WTA tour events) most of the products (the players) for sale are provided to the store for free (except the ones that are part of their own player development program). The farmers and the factory owners/workers in each non-Grand Slam tennis federation (the coaches, the clubs, the academies) get little back in return for their investment in growing or making the player/products sold in the top tournament store.

The tennis federations also do not get any payment for the shipping and transportation of the player product to the tournament shop via the international player pathway. The shipping and transportation of the players is done through the international player pathway and most of the tournaments that make up the Junior and entry level pro pathway delivering the top players to the pro tournaments are paid for by Tennis Federations that do not host income generating tournaments. One ITF National Federation President once said to me – “It seems like we Tennis Federations pay for everything that loses money!”

Now I know this analogy of a shop is not a perfect comparison with the top tournaments. These tournaments pay fees to the ATP and WTA Tour and they also pay a lot to the players at the events in prizemoney, appearance money and

accommodation, food etc. The fact that the players can use their prizemoney to pay their coaching team sounds good but in 90% of the cases the coaching team at these events were not involved in the development of the players in the player's formative years up to age 20.

Let me pause for a moment to make an important point.

The top tournaments and the people that run them along with the people working in the ATP/WTA and the 4 Slams do a great job. The developments made by these top tournaments and by their staff in the last 30 years, especially by the four Slams, has been impressive. They deserve a lot of credit. I respect all they have done and how creative they have been in developing the tournaments into

what they are today. For me it is the current pro tennis system that is the problem. I think that international player development is in danger of imploding and I question whether the top tournaments are giving back sufficient in



return to the people that help to produce the players and pay for the pathway.

Let me explain.

There are actually only 6 countries that hold big income generating tournaments that are owned or co-owned/managed by the Tennis Federations:

- UK, USA, France, Australia, Canada and Italy.

Between them they own or manage some of the biggest combined events in tennis including Roland Garros, Wimbledon, US Open, Cincinnati, Australian Open, Italian Open and the Rogers Cup and the profit from these events go to these 6 National Federations. The other big combined events (Madrid, Shanghai, Indian Wells and Miami) are owned by private investors. The ATP 500s like the Japan Open usually make less than 3 million dollars each and most ATP 250s at best breakeven or in most cases lose money. The four Slams between them (pre-covid) were making a combined profit of between 700 and 800 million US dollars

per year with the Italian Open and Rogers cup (pre-covid) making just over 17 million US dollars profit each. Not bad!

The Grand Slams have made a big effort since 2013 to pay the players more and the level of prizemoney offered has risen in the past 30 years from around 6.5 million US dollars at each event in 1991 to over 55 million US dollars now. This has greatly helped the top 200 ranked men and women and the Slams should be commended for stepping up. The ATP and WTA has also increased the prize money paid at their top events as has the ITF with Davis Cup and Billie Jean King cup.

The Slams, and Italy and Canada do invest their event profits back into developing the sport in their own countries and this results in the Slam nations having very big player development budgets compared to other nations. These nations also invest a lot in running junior and entry level pro events for the young players in their countries and in turn can provide wild cards to help their

best young players progress quickly. This does not happen in most developed tennis nations where they have, for many years, been consistently producing top players (Argentina, Belgium, Czech, Slovakia, Romania, Netherlands, Belarus, Japan, Ukraine, Hungary, Switzerland, Serbia, Croatia, Sweden etc.).



tennis storm!



The News Agency

4 years ago

- 10 Junior Grand Slam Champions (singles & doubles)
- Jr. Davis Cup Champions (#1 U16 Team in the World)
- Jr. Fed Cup (#3 U16 Team in the World)
- 6 Top 5 (U18) world ranked juniors (#2, #2, #3, #4, #4, #4)

I want to say here that I highly respect what the Italian Federation and the Canadian Federation have achieved over the past 20 years. They have used their annual US\$17 million profits very efficiently and now are not only consistently producing top players but

they have also increased participation and interest in tennis in their respective nations. The four Slam National Federations and others could learn a lot from their efficiency and success. If you want to know more then have a look at an article that I wrote four years ago entitled..... Tennis Canada-the perfect tennis storm!!

<https://davemileytennis.com/2018/02/13/congratulations-to-tennis-canada>

Now back to the big question:

What do the Grand Slams, the ITF and the ATP/WTA give back to the Tennis Federation farmers and factory workers/owners in the clubs, academies that are developing the players and to the Federations providing and paying for over 80% of the international player pathway.

To give some context, let's take a journey back in tennis history.

In 1986, the Grand Slams established the Grand Slam Development Fund (GSDF). At the time, each Grand Slam agreed to give US\$100,000 per year to the fund and this budget was then used to help smaller federations mostly in Africa. In the early 90s this funding increased to 2 million dollars (with the advent of the Grand Slam Cup) and it began to cater to more nations. In the year 1991 the budget with fines and interest was about US\$2.1 million per year with each slam donating US\$500,000.

This GSDF funding was very important for global tennis development. I know because as at the time I worked for the ITF who administered the fund on behalf of the Slams. As ITF Director of Development, I was also overall in charge of how this

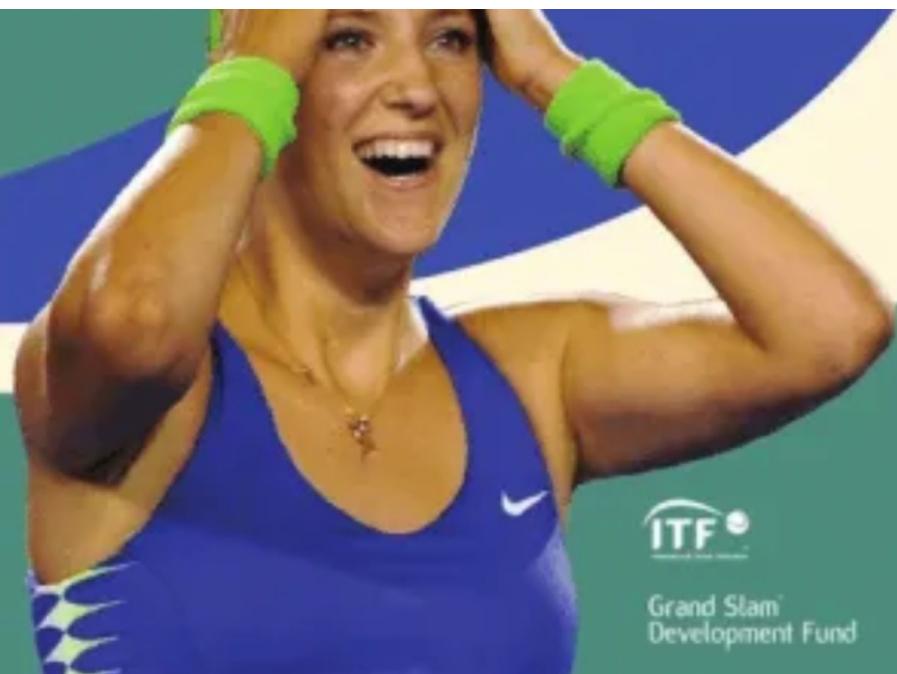


money was used to help pay for junior and entry level pro tournaments and to help talented young players from developing tennis nations. I can assure you it had a very positive impact. At the time in 1991, this funding represented approximately 8 or 9% of the just over US\$25 million paid to the top players in prizemoney at the four Slams each year.

Now, let's move the clock forward 30 years.

Today each Grand slam contributes \$550,000 each to the fund and the GSDF budget is around US\$2.2 million. This represents less than 1% of the total prizemoney given to the players by the Slams (US\$220-230 million). To me this does not seem fair and it appears that whilst the Slams have helped to improve

the financial rewards to the top players they may have forgotten the Tennis Federations and its farmers and the factory owners and workers that spend significant time and money to produce them.



In my opinion, the position of the ATP and WTA is even less generous than the Slams as it seems that they give little back to the Federations that pay to develop most of the players that play in their ATP/WTA

tournament shop. They do not even pay a sanction fee to the Federations of the countries that they run pro events in.

I am not letting the ITF off lightly here and they could always do more but the ITF is giving back via their member Tennis Federations through payments to the Federations for participation in the Davis Cup and Billie Jean King Cup. Also, the ITF pays for a global development program and for the ITF World Tennis Tour (WTT) pathway which costs over 30% of their annual budget. They also give 80 % of the data rights fees gained from the WTT back to the federations. So, they are giving back to the federations some of the profits they make from these events who in turn can help the coaches, clubs and players in their respective nations (let's hope they do as I know some of the Tennis Federations sadly do not do a very good job supporting the players, clubs, coaches and parents).

With the current system in pro tennis it is becoming more and more difficult for most tennis nations (and clubs, parents, coaches and academies) to produce top players and it seems to me that the situation will get much worse over the next 10 years if the status quo continues.

I closely follow the ITF Junior Tour which is often where you see the players that will most likely be top players in the future and I have seen some very worrying trends develop over the past 7 years. Let me explain by sharing some interesting but worrying statistics from the top junior events where I highlight figures from the Grand Slam Junior singles in the years 2015-2019 (pre-Covid). I looked at the players reaching quarter finals of the 20 boys and 20 girls singles events that took place in those years and their nationality.

What did I find?

The number of times Grand Slam nation players reached the quarter finals or better in Grand Slam Junior singles:

- 59 girls (out of 160) and 56 boys (out of 160) - 37% girls and 35% boys were from Grand Slam nations. If you combine those figures it is 115 players out of 320 players (36%) from the Slam nations.
- If you also include the players from Canada and Italy (remember they make around US\$17 million annual profit from their ATP Masters event), the figures for the 6 nations becomes 74 boys and 71 girls which represents 46% of the boys and 44.5% of the girls reaching Grand Slam Junior singles quarter finals. The combined total works out at 45%.
- This means that 45% of the junior players reaching Grand Slam quarter finals or better in those 5 years are from only 6 nations.

I do not want to distract people too much from the point of the article which is that the top tournaments should give back something to the people producing the players and paying for the players pathway. However, I want to point out what coaches and players from tennis nations with less resources know only too well which is that It's not an even playing field out there in global player development.

Let me give you two examples:

- Players from the Grand Slam nations are usually travelling with an experienced coach on the tour paid by the Federation. Players from other nations are too often travelling alone.

- Players from the Grand Slam nations receive a lot of wild cards in their career at futures, Challenger and at Tour and Slam level. Players from other nations receive very few if at all. Some examples from the men's game include the fact that Monfils, Murray and Roddick received 24 + wild cards. Marcus Baghdatis (Cyprus) and Rendy Lu (Chinese Taipei) received none in their career.

Even some very good young players do not automatically qualify for wild cards at big events.

In 2010 The ITF development department made a proposal to the Grand Slam Board that the ITF Junior World Champions would get a wild card into one Slam singles event the next year. It was proposed that the junior singles

champions would get a wild card from the Slam in their region (Pan America, Asia Pacific or Euro Africa) so that it was not an annual burden on each Slam. This proposal was rejected and the ITF was told that one of the reasons was that the junior champions were not good enough to justify receiving each year one guaranteed wild card into a Slam singles main draw. I'll let you judge if all of the 32 men's and 32 women wild cards awarded at Slams each are justified based on their playing level?!! The list usually includes many juniors and young pro players from each slam nation which are far below a junior world champion in level. There are some players from Slam nations that have received over 50 wild cards during their career into Challenger and higher-level pro and Slam events and this is simply not fair and again highlights an uneven playing field!



We should not forget the increasing importance of the US College system in the international players pathway. For good junior players from countries with less resources it is becoming a very good option to take the US college tennis route as instead of paying \$50,000 + per year for 4 or 5 years after juniors playing the entry level pro tour, these players can continue to develop during the four years for free and at 22/23 re-focus on the pro tour. At the Slams there are a lot of singles and doubles players competing successfully from the US college system and one recent success was former University of Virginia player, Danielle Collins, in reaching the final of the Australian Open singles.

When I ran for President of the ITF in 2019, I made a proposal that was not so popular with the Slams but it was one that many ITF Federation Presidents thought was fair. The four Slams are recognised by the ITF as the ITF's official World Championships and they currently pay a relatively small fee to the ITF for this recognition (less than 1% of their prizemoney). My proposal put forward in my manifesto was that, in return for being the ITF's official World Championships, the Slams should pay a fee of 10% of their prizemoney (US\$5.5 million each) to the ITF/Grand Slam Development Fund and that this money would be used to give back to the federations and to those helping to deliver 90% of the players to the Slams along with supporting projects that benefit the sport. This money could be used to help fund the player development programs in ITF member nations, to subsidise and fund junior and entry level tournaments in these nations and to help up and coming talented players from less developed tennis nations. US\$22 million dollars is, of course, a lot of money but put that in comparison to the estimated US\$700-800 million profits earned by the Slams.

Now I want people to understand that I am not attacking the Slams and the big tournaments as much as the overall professional tennis system that does not currently seem to pay back much from the top tournaments to those people that produce top players and who pay to provide the international player pathway. I want to say again that I recognise all that the Slams do to promote the sport globally and what they do for the players playing their events. They also help each year many up and coming young players through its US2.2 million dollar budget of the renamed Grand Slam Player Development Fund. I am highlighting that the system simply does not recognise and give back sufficiently to those Tennis Federations that do not have the privilege of hosting an income generating event.

I also think that the ATP and WTA tours should also contribute and give back. Perhaps the Italian and Canadian Open and all ATP Masters and WTA big events should contribute 5% of their prizemoney to the newly created fund and other Tour events could contribute 2.5% and 1 % depending on being an ATP 500 or 250 level event or similar in the WTA tour? To ensure fairness, the fund could be co-managed by a joint committee of executives or elected people from the ATP, WTA, ITF and the Slams to make sure that it goes to the right "good of the game" areas.

I know that many people out there will say that I am a very naive Irish tennis Idealist but I am proud of that. Remember that my Manifesto slogan in

2019 was “Together for Tennis”. But I say again what I have said in a number of previous articles.....When are the BIG 7 going to work together for the good of the game?!

We should remember that in tennis it is not just clubs and federations producing players. Parents are investing big amounts themselves to work privately or to send their kids to academies but I have to assume that their kids will share some of the financial success with their parents if successful. It's hard to have a system that rewards everyone. But in other sports like soccer, basketball, ice hockey etc. there is a system to payback those who are producing top athletes. If a club invests in the development of a player, the player is usually sold to a bigger club and then this money received by the club selling the player allows the club and its coaches to continue to develop more players. Tennis is an individual sport and so the system cannot be the same as in football but when the BIG 7 next get together to look at how the game should be shaped going forward, I would ask that they discuss this subject and see if they can find a good system to share some of the profits fairly.

Now let me give you some other worrying figures.

In this same 2015-2019 period, these are the results (the number of times a junior boy or girl player from their country reached QF or better) from some previously very successful nations:

Spain-14
Argentina -8
Slovakia-5
Belgium-1
Germany-3
Sweden-3
Czech-6
Serbia-1
Croatia-0
Switzerland-7
Japan-11
Brazil-4
Romania-1
Austria-1
Netherlands-0

Note: The full list is shown below in a footnote.

You will see that Spain is continuing to have good results however it should be noted that they have a very unique system. They have one ranking system for all players (a survival of the fittest attitude), they run 40+ weeks of futures in their own country (paid for by the clubs-not the Federation) and they have 8-10 really good private academies. They have good weather and excellent tennis clubs. So, Spain is unique. Russia is also an anomaly as they have a very good national competitive system which gives young players great development experience and they also have very educated and hard-working coaches.

The federation does provide some grants to some very talented young players (via a very rich federation sponsor) but the progress of over 50% of the players depends a lot on parents and individual sponsors that help the most talented to train and play competitively outside of Russia after the age 15/16. Japan is also doing quite well but even though they make 3 million dollars profit from their tournament, I know that their Tennis Federation is increasingly struggling to support their best players to progress from junior to top Pro tennis. The reality for the majority of countries is that if you do not have a sizeable player development budget you struggle to compete.

I accept that the system can never be completely equal but I think it should be reasonably fair and it should be possible for talented players from any nation to progress to pro tennis. I am seriously worried that if we keep going the way we are, in 2040 there is a danger that there will be only 8-10 nations represented in the top 100 men and women. Then how will the top tournaments sell successfully the TV rights globally to 200 nations?

One statistic to consider that might be the first sign of a global tennis warming and of a meltdown in the international player development system?

- In 1991 the number of countries represented in the top 100 men and women combined was 28.
- It grew significantly year on year over the next 30 years and in 2019, 49 countries were represented.
- In 2021 it has dropped for the first time in 30 years to 45 countries represented.

In conclusion, let me summarise:

- Only 6 National Tennis Federations generate substantial profits from their Professional events and can afford to have very large player development budgets.
- Players from Slam nations are beginning to dominate at top junior level along with only 2 or 3 other nations.
- Most nations have relatively small player development budgets and they are increasingly struggling to develop top players.
- The amount of money donated by the Slams to global development has reduced significantly over the past 20 years in real terms while the overall profits of the Slams have increased dramatically.
- There is no system to reward those federations and other people and academies in the other nations helping to produce top players and paying for the international player pathway.
- There is a danger that in the future the top-level tennis will be represented by very few nations (8-10 nations) which could impact negatively on the economics of the big tennis events and the sport overall.



My request to the BIG 7:

It's time to find a system in Top International pro tennis to pay the tennis farmers and the tennis factory owners and workers and the ITF Tennis Federations to recognise the great work they do and to continue to have a fairer pathway for talented players to progress.

Footnote- Quarter final Grand Slam junior singles results 2015-2019 for nations outside the Slams and Tennis Canada and Italy.

Girls

Russia- 19
Spain-4
Belgium-1
Germany-1
Argentina-1
Colombia-3
Brazil-0
Czech-1
Slovakia-5
Hungary-5
Japan-5
Chinese Taipei- 3
China-6
Ukraine-9
Serbia-1
Belarus-1
Sweden-1
Latvia-1
Switzerland-5
Poland-4
Slovenia-1
India-1
Indonesia-2
Denmark 2
Romania -1
Netherlands-0

Boys

Russia-4
Austria-1
Spain-10
Belgium-0
Argentina-7
Germany-2
Colombia-2

Brazil-4
Czech-5
Slovakia-0
Hungary-2
Greece-5
Japan-6
China-4
Chinese Taipei-4
Ukraine-1
Croatia-0
Belarus-0
Switzerland-2
Poland-1
Sweden-2
Korea-6
Belarus-3
Finland-5
Chile-1
Israel-1
Estonia-1
Romania-2
Cyprus-1
Dom republic-1
Serbia-0
Netherlands-0



ends

Dave Miley
www.davemileytennis.com