

Making the right choices

It takes passion and commitment to reach the highest levels of the game. Making smart decisions as a junior to enhance development and avoiding common pitfalls is important too.

RYAN HENRY explains

Tennis can be an incredible vehicle for developing character, as well as building lifelong friendships, travelling the world or benefiting from a subsidised college education. While there is no guaranteed pathway to success, there are important decisions that can help maximise the joy of the game and accelerate development.

AVOID: AN UNSTRUCTURED TRAINING AND COMPETITION PLAN

An effective training and competition plan is crucial for a player to maximise their potential. A well-constructed player development plan should consider:

- ▶ Quantity and quality of on-court practice hours

- ▶ Volume of competitive matches played
- ▶ Technical development
- ▶ A physical training and injury prevention program
- ▶ Spending time in an environment where players are pushed and encouraged to develop key personal qualities such as a strong work ethic, discipline and resilience.

Experienced high performance coaches can assist to help design an effective plan to fit individual goals.

AVOID: CHASING RANKING POINTS AT ANY COST

Match play is perhaps the most important part of any junior player's development plan - although a common mistake is chasing tournaments to inflate

ranking. This often requires a lot of time and financial sacrifices from families and the intense focus on earning ranking points creates an unnecessary level of pressure. Rankings can be a good tool to measure progress, however implementing improvements made in practice and enjoying the excitement of competition should be the main purpose of tournament play.

Excessive travel to tournaments is not always necessary either. Joining a local league, entering local UTR events or arranging practice matches are other effective ways to gain valuable match play experience.

AVOID: MULTIPLE PRIVATE COACHES

For a player to reach their full potential, they need a high performance coach to mentor them through the many facets of the game. Some parents choose

multiple private coaches for their child thinking the different perspectives will increase the rate of improvement. This can be expensive and ineffective, as inconsistent messages can confuse players and slow long-term progress. Having one

coach who can provide valuable guidance and mentorship is almost always more effective than having two.

PROGRESS: As teen sensations Coco Gauff and Bianca Andreescu climb the rankings, they are being careful to avoid burnout by not overplaying.

AVOID: CHOOSING THE WRONG HIGH SCHOOL

To achieve big goals in tennis, players in high school should spend a minimum of 12 hours per week on court in a high-quality environment and play 80 plus matches per year. Many schools can facilitate such requirements - but a vast number are not as supportive. When choosing a high school, find out whether a high volume of quality time on court is possible either within the school program or close by.



high school are not physically or mentally mature enough and rarely progress past the lower levels of the professional tour.

Unless ranked inside the top 200 by the age of 18, athletes are far better off developing their game for a further four years at a college in the United States. This provides an opportunity to train and compete with other world-class athletes aged 18 to 22, as well as further their education.

AVOID: PURSUING A US COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP WITHOUT HELP

One of the hardest aspects of choosing the US college pathway is finding the right one to attend. With over 4500 colleges to select from, applying can be an overwhelming process and many players miss this opportunity through not understanding the tennis and academic eligibility requirements.

The cost of utilising the services of a reputable college placement company will often pay for itself through achieving a bigger scholarship. Companies such as Study and Play USA have a successful track record in helping players gain entry into US colleges.

AVOID: TOO MANY AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

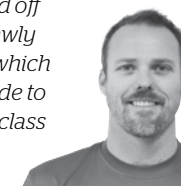
Exposure to a wide variety of sports at a young age can create a well-rounded athlete with highly developed fundamental motor skills. Diversifying activities is actually a good idea in primary school - but for students with big tennis aspirations, they should reduce non-tennis related activities significantly in high school. If they do not focus primarily on tennis, there is a high risk of falling behind in their development or others in their age group overtaking them.

AVOID: TURNING PROFESSIONAL TOO EARLY

Professional tennis is more competitive than ever, with most players peaking in their late 20s and early 30s. The average age of players in the top 100 is slightly higher than 25 for women and over 26 for men. Of those who do make the top 100, it takes an average of four years to do so.

Most players who turn professional immediately after

Ryan Henry is a former professional tennis player and co-founder of Voyager Tennis Academy which specialises in the development of elite junior players. He is also the co-author of 'Winning on and off the court' - a newly released book which is a parent's guide to creating world-class players and people.



CASE STUDY:

Astra Sharma

A long-term development focus is paying off for Australia's Astra Sharma.

Astra Sharma has achieved many firsts in a breakthrough season.

The 24-year-old West Australian has made her main draw debut at all four Grand Slams, soared into the world's top 100 and reached a first WTA final. It has been an incredible run for the athletic Sharma, who had started the season ranked No.230.

A promising junior who trained at Tennis Australia's National Academy in WA, Sharma opted to further her development through the US college pathway.

While completing a Medicine, Health and Society degree at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Sharma also continued to build her game and confidence.

"The coaches there took me under their wing and developed me for a good four, five years. I came out and absolutely wouldn't be the player I am today if I didn't go," Sharma notes.

Highlights this season include reaching the Australian Open mixed doubles final, a first Fed Cup selection and her singles ranking peaking at No.85 in June.

Flourishing in her first full season on the WTA Tour, Sharma's maturity shows.

"It's been exactly what I hoped for, just trusting my process, not thinking too much about the ranking - in fact, I barely track my ranking," Sharma says.

"It's a good tool to get into tournaments but at the end of the day I want to keep putting myself in positions where I'm playing the top players and the ranking essentially allows me to do that, which I'm grateful for."

With new experiences come new goals - and Sharma's quest for improvement is unwavering.

"I'm really good now I think at isolating what I need to work on and then pulling that out and getting really specific in practices," she says. "The process is hard work and dedication, but with a much more high-level specificity... It's about improving what I have."

