

Artículo de investigación

Social perception as a factor in the professional success of a tennis player

Социальная перцепция как фактор профессиональной успешности спортсмена-теннисиста

Percepción social como factor en el éxito profesional de un jugador de tenis

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Abstract

The large role of social perception in an athlete's professional success is an issue of scientific sports psychology that requires further study. Traditionally, social perception is considered in sports from the perspective of advertising goals or facilitating athlete's personal growth. However, not enough attention is paid to social perception as a factor in professional success, which reduces the potential of tennis players from different countries when competing. This is a factor, for example, with Chinese tennis players. The article presents the results of a study that compared certain parameters of social perception in elite tennis players, winners of regional tennis competitions and beginners. The authors established that, in contrast to elite athletes, the winners of regional competitions do not possess such important socio-psychological qualities as "openness to experience", "effective anticipation of the opponent's and their own actions," etc. When beginner tennis players lack skills of appropriate social perception of their professional activity, they form negative habits that impede successful professional development: perfectionism, being easily distracted, worrying too much about winning or losing, etc. It has been revealed that, for instance, Russian coaches tend to focus on the development of technical skills.

Аннотация

Социальная перцепция как эффективное средство профессиональной успешности спортсмена – недостаточно изученный аспект в научной спортивной психологии. Традиционно социальная перцепция в спорте рассматривается с точки зрения реализации рекламных целей или в ракурсе стимулирования личностного роста спортсмена. Однако недостаточное внимание к фактору социальной перцепции в плане формирования и развития профессиональной успешности не способствует, например, повышению конкурентоспособности теннисистов разных стран в соревнованиях с участием китайских теннисистов. В статье описываются результаты сравнительного исследования выраженности параметров социальной перцепции у элитных теннисистов, спортсменов-победителей региональных соревнований и новичков в теннисе. Установлено, что, в отличие от элитных спортсменов, победители соревнований регионального уровня не отражают важность таких социально-психологических качеств как «открытость к опыту», «эффективное предвосхищение действий противника и своих» и др. В условиях отсутствия навыков правильной

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Due to this, Russian tennis players acquire important social perception skills spontaneously, inconsistently, and therefore, not systematically, and this impedes their progress.

Keywords: Social perception, athlete's personality, beginner tennis players, elite tennis players, professional success, the psychology of sports achievements.

социальной перцепции профессиональной деятельности у начинающих теннисистов формируются негативные качества, препятствующие успешному профессиональному развитию: перфекционизм, легкая отвлекаемость, слишком большая озабоченность по поводу победы или проигрыша и др. Выявлено, что, в частности, в российской тренерской традиции внимание при подготовке теннисистов уделяется в основном отработке технических навыков. В силу этого отдельные важные навыки социальной перцепции формируются у российских теннисистов спонтанно, случайно, а значит – не системно. Это не дает им возможность достичь более высоких результатов.

Ключевые слова: социальное восприятие, личность спортсмена, начинающие теннисисты, элитные теннисисты, профессиональный успех, психология спортивных достижений.

Resumen

Gran papel de la percepción social en el éxito profesional de un atleta es un tema de la psicología deportiva científica que requiere más estudio. Tradicionalmente, la percepción social se considera en los deportes desde la perspectiva de los objetivos publicitarios o para facilitar el crecimiento personal del atleta. Sin embargo, no se presta suficiente atención a la percepción social como factor del éxito profesional, lo que reduce el potencial de los tenistas de diferentes países cuando compiten. Este es un factor, por ejemplo, con los tenistas chinos. El artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio que comparó ciertos parámetros de percepción social en tenistas de élite, ganadores de competencias regionales de tenis y principiantes. Los autores establecieron que, en contraste con los atletas de élite, los ganadores de las competencias regionales no poseen cualidades sociopsicológicas tan importantes como "apertura a la experiencia", "anticipación efectiva del oponente y sus propias acciones", etc. Cuando los tenistas principiantes carecen de habilidades de percepción social adecuada de su actividad profesional, forman hábitos negativos que impiden el desarrollo profesional exitoso: perfeccionismo, distraerse fácilmente, preocuparse demasiado por ganar o perder, etc. Se ha revelado que, por ejemplo, los entrenadores rusos tienden a centrarse en el desarrollo de habilidades técnicas. Debido a esto, los tenistas rusos adquieren importantes habilidades de percepción social de manera espontánea, inconsistente y, por lo tanto, no sistemática, y esto impide su progreso.

Palabras clave: Percepción social, personalidad del atleta, tenistas principiantes, tenistas de élite, éxito profesional, psicología de los logros deportivos.

Introduction

Sensitivity to social perception has the most influence on communication (Spaulding, 2015) and is the basis for personal self-regulation (Budyakova, 2014). Modern studies consider the special role of social perception in professional success (Kalyagin & Filonov, 2011). However, its influence on the professional success of an athlete has not been properly studied. Moreover,

general studies of social perception indicate that their results may well be applied in sports. For instance, the amassed data show that social perception underlies many aspects of the space between a person and others. Thus, social cognition is extended to the body of a person (Pellencin et al., 2018), which is important in many sports, including tennis (Alexandru &

Lorand, 2015). Neuropsychological studies of social perception have theoretical and practical significance for sports psychology through the assessment of personal qualities and emotions of a person (opponent) based on their facial expression (Brooks & Freeman, 2019).

Some research papers focus on social perception in sport. However, these studies, as a rule, ignore the problem of professional growth of an athlete. For instance, increasing the attractiveness of a team or an athlete's appearance are frequently discussed issues (Peluso, Rizzo, Pino, 2019; Dietl, Özdemir, Rendall, 2019), but social perception is often considered in the context of increasing interest in sports (Li et. al., 2018). Some researchers explore an athlete's personal (not professional!) growth from the perspective of social perception (Arigo, Pasko, Mogle, 2019).

At the same time, for example, table tennis is a sport in which players' interaction a priori implies social perception of the opponent, since this is an interdependent activity. However, coaches sometimes fail to notice the importance of this factor, which negatively affects the success of an athlete. Currently, international table tennis competitions are mainly won by Chinese athletes. It came to the point that even European tournaments began to turn into a kind of Asian championships. In this situation the Russian school of table tennis, so far, cannot propose innovations in the methodology of teaching table tennis that would prepare athletes to successfully compete with the Chinese (Galanov & Burtseva, 2016; Zaitseva & Reznikova, 2010). However, obviously, to understand the reasons for the success of Chinese players, it is necessary to study in detail the methods of teaching table tennis in different countries.

Researchers have been actively discussing the problem of improving the methodology of teaching table tennis in Russia to increase the competitiveness of Russian tennis players. However, they made only general conclusion: that it is necessary to improve the technical training. For example, it is said that Chinese athletes have the best coordination and pace technique. An advantage of Russian tennis players is a better sense of rhythm (Ivanova & Gui, 2015; Mishutin & Barchukova, 2018). Meanwhile, international studies have shown that a special feature of elite table tennis players is their developed ability of social perception. Top-level players begin any game with an attempt to determine the features of the

opponent's playing. During the match, they not only study the opponent, but also put special barriers to make it difficult for the opponent to understand the player's personal tactics (Sève et al.; 2002).

In this regard, it seems crucial to study the works of Chinese scientists, representatives of a country where tennis has become a cult game, and the nation is particularly proud of the outstanding achievements of their tennis players. Chinese authors discuss not only mastering the game technique, but also the development of the athlete's personality (Zou, Liu, Yang, 2012). Even at the beginning of the 2000s, despite the victories at some international tournaments, Chinese experts raised concerns that tennis, due to its western origin, would not be accepted by the Chinese population, and Chinese athletes, due to the eastern mentality, would be disadvantaged in a sport that has western roots. This problem was solved by including some elements of Chinese martial arts into the training of table tennis players. These were not only technical methods, but primarily a special philosophy containing elements of social perception (Li-feng Zhang et al., 2012).

The importance of social perception as a factor in the success of a tennis player has been named in a number of US and British studies. For instance, it was found that young tennis players experience serious difficulties when moving from junior to elite sport. The ability to correctly understand how one is perceived in a new status does not come by itself. As it turned out, not all players can overcome the barrier between experienced athletes and former juniors without special assistance of a coach (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, Spink, 2008; Matthews et al.; 2012). When studying the personality of students at a tennis academy in the UK, it was noted that only a small percentage of tennis players were able to deal with the tasks of a new socio-sports identification when moving from a junior to a senior group or from senior to elite sport. At the beginning of the transition, they could not identify themselves with elite athletes. After realizing this problem, schools developed and introduced programs to regulate the socio-psychological development of tennis players. In specially created videos, experienced athletes, by personal example, told beginners how to properly position themselves in elite sport. This contributed to the formation of adequate social perception in former juniors (Pummell & Lavalley, 2019).

At the same time, most scientists exploring social perception in tennis note that more research

should be conducted for better identification of social perception mechanisms (Lewis, Knight, Mellalieu, 2017). For example, the issues of adequate and inadequate self-perception of athletes and the influence of these factors on the effectiveness of their professional activities have not been properly explored. Researchers should further explore the parameters of social perception among tennis players that must be taken into account when forming professional social perception. These are the issues that we empirically researched in this paper.

Methodology

The study involved 40 people divided into two groups. The first group of 20 students, aged 17–20, included students from Yelets State University who did an optional course of table tennis and had some tennis experience but less than four years. These were beginner tennis players who did not have sports awards. The second group of 20 people, aged 10–30, included experienced tennis players, and winners of tennis tournaments at no higher than regional level. Some of the group used to be and still are tennis coaches.

Research hypotheses are as follows:

1. Tennis players who have participated in regional competitions are more focused on the formation of technical skills, and are less able to assess the importance of social perception for the success of an athlete.

2. An insufficient level of social perception in beginner tennis players contributes to the formation of negative personal qualities that impede the development of an athlete's professionalism.

The methodology, which is called "Evaluation of Sport Qualities of a Tennis Player," was based on the psychological parameters of the success or failure of tennis players, namely lists of qualities of tennis professionals and beginners noted by elite athletes and winners of international tournaments (Ivancevic et al., 2011). These lists were used in our methodology as a reference for a correct or incorrect social perception of tennis athletes. The study participants were asked to evaluate the professional qualities of table tennis professionals and beginners, selecting from the proposed lists the most significant qualities that characterize, in their opinion, the professionalism of athletes at different levels. It was important to determine the differences in the qualities chosen by beginners and winners of regional competitions and the lists of elite athletes. The significance attributed to certain qualities (parameters of success or failure) could be said to reflect the level of social perception of the professional activity that a tennis player has.

"Here are two lists of qualities. The first list contains the qualities of a professional tennis player. The second list represents the qualities of a beginner in tennis. In both lists, please tick the qualities that you agree with. Why do you think so?"

The answer form

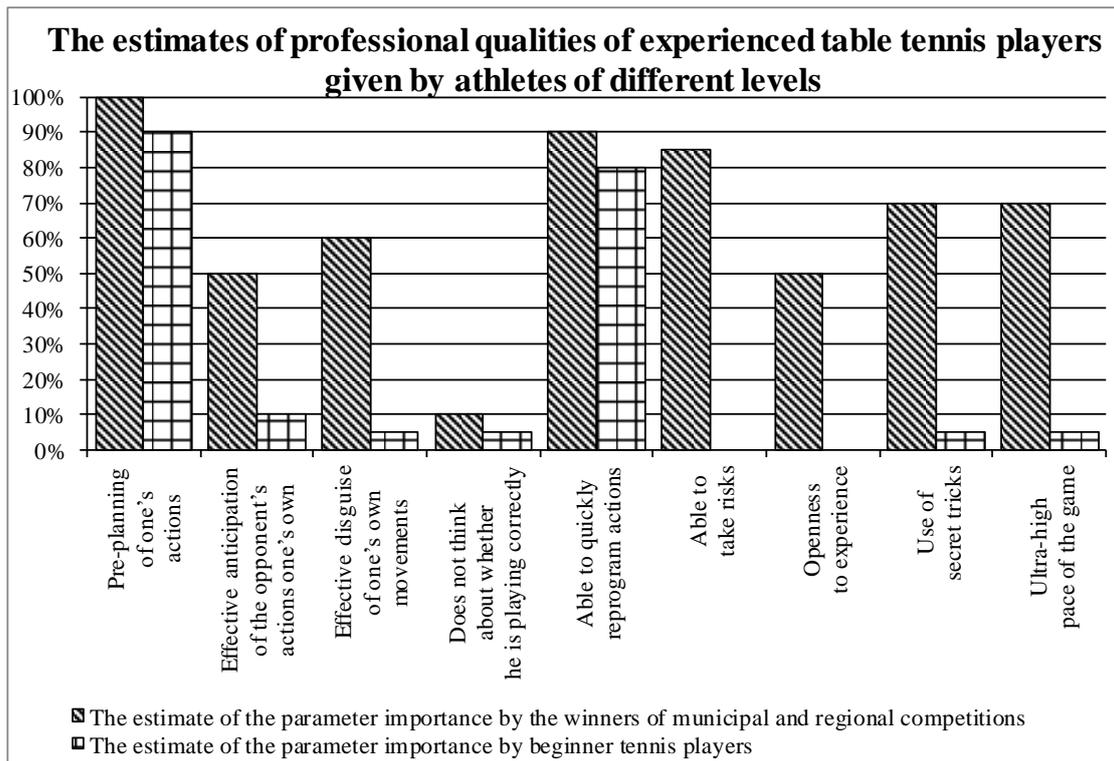
Qualities of a tennis professional	Qualities of a tennis beginner
1. Pre-planning of actions.	1. Incoherent strategy and tactics.
2. Effective anticipation of the opponent's or one's own actions.	2. Trying to do too many things at once.
3. Effective disguise of own movements.	3. Being easily distracted.
4. Does not think about whether he is playing correctly.	4. Overly concerned about winning or losing.
5. Able to quickly reprogram actions.	5. Perfectionism—one strives to be the best.
6. Able to take risks.	6. Analyzing whether he is playing correctly.
7. Openness to experience.	7. Not noticing the deceptive tricks of the opponent.
8. Use of secret tricks.	8. Cannot maintain the pace of the game.
9. Ultra-high pace of the game.	9. Does not know secret tricks.
Why do you think so?	Why do you think so?

Results and discussion

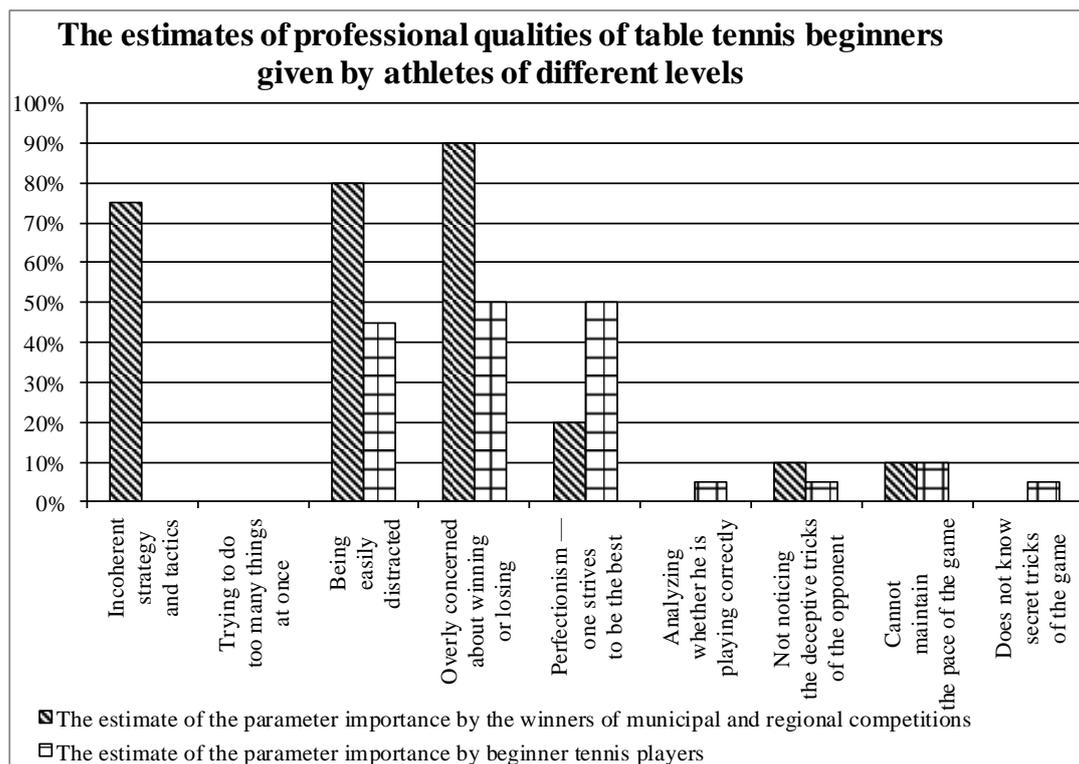
Despite the fact that the respondents were told that the lists of personal qualities of professional athletes and beginners given in the methodology had been made by elite tennis players, this did not influence the evaluation of these qualities either by the winners of regional competitions or beginner tennis players. The qualities of these groups of athletes were evaluated differently

from the reference values, both by experienced winners of regional tournaments and novices.

Bar graph 1 presents the professional qualities of successful tennis players according to the winners of regional tournaments and beginner tennis players. Bar graph 2 shows the estimates of beginners' sports qualities given by both groups of the respondents.



Bar chart 1



Bar chart 2

It should be noted that experienced tennis players gave a more accurate assessment of a professional's qualities that was closer to the reference values, whereas beginner tennis players more accurately evaluated their own level. This confirms that experienced tennis players have a better perception of their own level of professional training compared to that of beginners. It was also easier for beginner tennis players to evaluate the level of a novice athlete for the above criteria than to evaluate the parameters of a professional. From our point of view, this is one of the reasons why some experienced athletes, becoming trainers, may misunderstand the personality characteristics of a novice athlete and cannot point to the errors of a socio-psychological and personal nature. They cannot compare their current level with the previous one.

The conducted experiment showed that according to the answers of elite athletes, which were taken as reference values, the level of social reflection of the qualities that a professional needs to succeed in tennis does not generally correlate with the answers of the tennis players in our sample, whose highest achievement was a victory in regional competitions. The biggest difference was in the criterion "one does not

think whether he is playing correctly". All elite tennis players (100%) named this parameter, compared to only 10% of the experienced athletes. There was also a significant difference in such indicators as "openness to experience" (only 50% of the experienced athletes mentioned it), "effective anticipation of the opponent's and their own actions" (50%), and "effective disguise of their own movements" (60%).

As we can see, the experienced athletes from our sample had the lowest level of the qualities connected with social perception. The respondents who still named these indicators as significant came to this conclusion independently, without their coach's recommendation. For example, one of the experienced athletes said that he "had stolen" some of his personal tactics from boxers. The Chinese, as we have shown above, also use the elements of strength sports to improve the training of their tennis players. It is obvious that social perception in such cases is not systematic since it is based solely on random personal experience.

Only 60% of the experienced athletes named effective disguise of their actions as an important skill of a tennis player. However, the athletes who spoke about it also said that this ability

helped them to win some tournaments. For example, one of the experienced tennis players said that during a warm-up he had played with his left hand, but used his right hand at a competition. This confused the opponent, stirred negative emotions in him, which prevented the opponent from concentrating on the game, which resulted in his losing the game. This is an example of how an athlete “put up” a deceptive barrier to prevent his opponent from forming an accurate social perception. The use of disguise tricks not only indicates a high level of social perception development, but it allows an athlete to lead (manipulate) the opponent while maintaining self-control, that is, this is a sign of professionalism (Budyakova & Baturkina, 2018).

At the same time, there were parameters for which the opinions of elite athletes and experienced tennis players were almost or mainly the same. These are such criteria as “pre-planning of their actions” (100%), “the ability to quickly reprogram one’s actions” (90%), and “the ability to take risks” (85%). These criteria are directly linked with technical aspects of professional tennis. Russian trainers concentrate their efforts on helping players develop these qualities.

Among the tennis players participating in this experiment, novices and experienced athletes provided significantly different answers in terms of reference value and data. For instance, out of the nine factors that are vital for professional success, beginners chose only three or four purely technical qualities. This confirms that novice tennis players, who focus on developing these technical aspects during their training, do not have an accurate social perception of the qualities necessary to be a successful professional athlete. Only two qualities were chosen frequently: “pre-planning of one’s actions” (90%) and “the ability to quickly reprogram one’s actions” (80%).

“Openness to experience” was not mentioned by any novice despite it being a distinguishing characteristic of all masters of tennis—the champions. Learning this quality should be part of the socio-psychological training of any tennis player, and coaches must demonstrate and explain its significance to beginners. When evaluating the characteristics of novice athletes, almost all of the experienced tennis players who participated in our study noted that the development of technique is the most important consideration for beginners. Contrastingly, the negative qualities of beginners that were

included in the elite athletes’ proposed list were associated with a smaller role. Beginners fail to notice the developed negative socio-psychological and personal qualities, which prevents novice athletes from getting rid of these characteristics.

Additionally, our study demonstrated that certain beginner tennis players can independently identify the negative socio-psychological qualities that may impede professional development. For example, when discussing the negative qualities of a novice athlete, 50% of the beginners highlighted “perfectionism” and “being overly concerned about winning or losing”. This result is consistent with Anbarci et al.’s (2018) finding, which indicated that excessive concern about a match’s outcome can negatively affect even the results of elite athletes. Therefore, it is reasonable to draw a preliminary conclusion that, during training, players should develop their social perception skills and pursue measures to address them.

It should be noted that, due to our study’s methodological design, beginner tennis players were indirectly stimulated to evaluate qualities such as “perfectionism” negatively. In daily practice, beginner tennis players often feel uneasy about reporting truthfully on their match experiences (Thibodeaux & Winsler, 2018). Moreover, it is necessary to assist beginner tennis players in recognizing negative and unprofessional qualities and, in this way, to eliminate them. Understanding this, American coaches even engage the parents of young athletes in such work (Knight & Holt, 2014).

Our study is another confirmation that the success of a player is determined not only by their technical level, but also by social perception. Australian scientists, using fitness as an example, proved that when beginner students themselves start conducting fitness classes and become a trainer, observing the learning process of others, they develop their own skills at a much faster pace, because the level of social perception under such conditions increases too (Walsh et al., 2018).

In terms of sports, social perception helps one understand the socio-psychological reasons for winning or losing. According to Canadian psychologists, Olympic athletes have a very high awareness of how to achieve success (Fedunina, 2017), which also indicates the highest level of social perception of their professional activities.

Conclusion

1. Tennis players who won only regional competitions are more focused on the formation of technical skills, but pay less attention to social perception as a factor in the success of an athlete, which prevents them from achieving better results.
2. Experienced athletes in some cases realize the need to develop social perception to become more successful. However, this knowledge is not systematic.
3. Beginner tennis players cannot on their own realize the importance of social perception for developing professional skills in table tennis.
4. Given the lack of special training in the correct social perception of professional activity, beginner tennis players acquire negative qualities that impede successful professional development: perfectionism, being easily distracted, overly concerned on winning or losing, etc.

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