



Lost in Transition

A successful junior career doesn't always equate to success at senior level. For **KANE DEWHURST** the experience of making that transition provided many valuable lessons. Now he's helping young players achieve their own personal dreams.

As young players, we dare to dream about the day we raise our arms in glory after clinching match point. It is our own personal piece of history that no one can take away.

What exactly are we dreaming about? Is it fame, fortune, lifestyle, peer gratification or personal satisfaction? In my opinion, truly great champions play for one reason only – personal satisfaction.

There are many reasons why talented juniors may not fulfil their potential or goals. These juniors might be in an environment of injury, poor motivation and pressure or caught up in an idealised lifestyle. These are all factors contributing to juniors losing their way in the development years.

So what happens to so many aspiring juniors whose dreams never come become reality? I call this Lost in Transition!

The Myth Of The Ideal Life

For many former players like myself, it is interesting working with elite juniors. All are pursuing the same objective but for a range of different reasons.

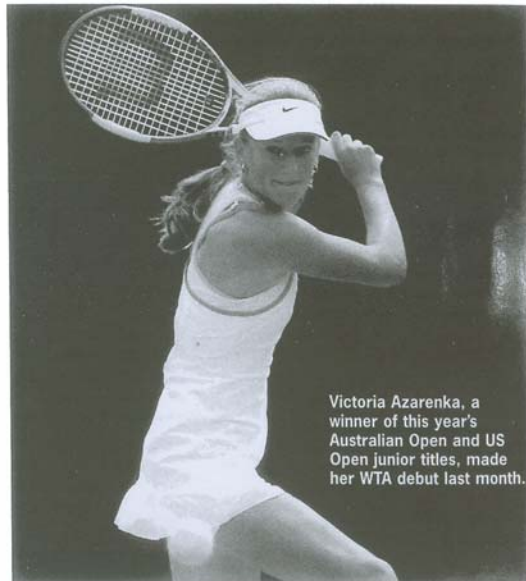
Many possess images of an ideal lifestyle that involves travelling the world, staying in nice hotels with people turning up to watch them compete. On the surface this may be true, but the public only sees images that the media portrays.

In reality, these idealised images are the end results of many years of hard work. Behind the scenes life is very different, with long days on court and many arduous hours in the gym. The blood, sweat, tears and sacrifices often go unnoticed.

Aspiring juniors are unaware of the less attractive elements that go into becoming a professional athlete. They are rarely confronted with the reality of waiting at airports, living out of suitcases, and most importantly, being absent from their family and friends.

These are the factors that hit home to our juniors within the first few months on the road. Sacrifices they thought they could handle become a lot harder. This harsh reality is compounded further when a positive support structure is also absent, and as a result juniors will often lose their way.

Throughout junior years, students are usually surrounded by their parents, coaches and friends. They train and compete in familiar environments, and more often than not, are safe in their



Victoria Azarenka, a winner of this year's Australian Open and US Open junior titles, made her WTA debut last month.

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comfort zones. So what happens when they are forced to survive alone in the harsh world of professional tennis?

Unfortunately when support is most needed they often find themselves alone and the sad reality is that more often than not, they sink rather than swim.

The small percentage of players that make it are the ones who have either been guided, and are prepared for the transitional stage, or the players who have strong support structures around them once they take the next step in their tennis career.

The Big Picture

Alvin Toffler once said: "One must always think of the big things while one is doing the little things, so that the little things have direction."

The road to becoming a professional tennis player is a long and winding one, with both stepping stones and stumbling blocks. Tennis is an individual sport and placing the aspiring player in the correct environment is paramount to their development. It is more than just hitting balls.

Creating strong work ethics, as well as developing effective habits and routines from a young age helps to ensure empowerment of the athlete. Bad training habits are extremely hard to break towards the end of a junior career, so they should be prevented from a young age.

It is a common misconception among talented young players that a good junior career will automatically lead to a successful senior one. I call this the "Hollywood mentality." Instead of getting out there, taking responsibility and making it happen, they wait for success to come to them.

The environment around the young players must continue to support them, provide a specific direction, with positive reinforcements and encouragement to continually work hard.

As a coach it is a constant battle to get junior tennis players to adapt to a necessary and committed definition of hard work. As Charlie Chaplin once said, "Great things come when you have a great desire to have them," but often the big picture seems far away and at times unachievable.

The constant setting and assessing of goals provides stability for the player. Results should not be the primary focus, rather the short-term goals that are leading to big picture.

The Right Direction

So where do talented juniors go once they are no longer juniors? It is very rare for players at 17 or 18 years of age to be ready to make their mark on the professional scene. Their game, mind, and body are still developing, but often they dive straight in the deep end.

Many players (including myself) look back at their career and say, "I wish I had done that differently!" The harsh reality is that you only get one shot at a tennis career, and you should aim to hang the racquets up at the end of it with no regrets.

It is commonly acknowledged that the mental side of tennis is the dividing factor between good and great. Therefore when a young player experiences the senior level for the first time they are often out of their depth tactically and emotionally, and have considerably less experience than their opponents in handling situations.

In the initial stages of a professional career, for example, many young players haven't developed the emotional flexibility they need to absorb losses and regain confidence immediately.

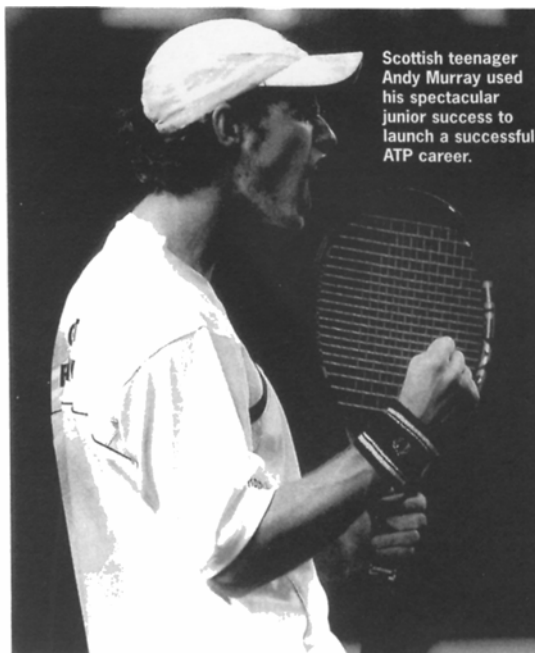
It is my belief that their junior environment must prepare them for this period. In the last three years I have spent time with elite juniors at many National and ITF events. It is far too common to hear excuses both during and after a match.

The more successful players will have already begun to use their minds to analyse and implement the lessons they are constantly learning and prepare their minds for the next step.

Players must get themselves out of their comfort zones in training as often as possible so they are more prepared for the unpredictability of a match situation. The more they prepare, the more they will be able to deal with unexpected factors as they unfold.

Physically Prepared

Junior tournaments have also highlighted to me the need for physical development from a young age. This is an aspect far too



Scottish teenager Andy Murray used his spectacular junior success to launch a successful ATP career.

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often overlooked during the developmental and transition years. At both national junior tournaments and lower level ATP events, the trainer works overtime trying to keep up with the constant aches and pains of the players.

Young bodies must be balanced and strong for a player to survive the rigours of professional tennis life.

The knowledge and habits must again be instilled at a young age so when the junior is on the court, they can execute each movement effectively and efficiently with no fear of hurting their body. It is very common to see underdeveloped bodies around satellite and future events. Again, people are a product of their environment and the habits they have created.

An Individual Environment

Each player has different needs and requirements, so the correct environment for a player will differ slightly from person to person. But the underlying rationale is that all players should continue to grow and develop their game in an holistic manner.

Many touring professionals travel with an entourage; coach, partner, trainer and friends. They try to create the best environment for them to perform. Others travel with just one support person, and some players travel on their own.

Regardless of the individual environment the young players choose, they should have come through the development years with knowledge and skills that will hold them in good stead for the many obstacles they face. They have the support network to help maintain direction, regardless of the adversities that may arise.

For all the aspiring junior players looking to embark on a tennis career, control what you can control, place yourself in an environment that will help you with the many facets of becoming a professional tennis player, not just now but will help guide you in the future, when the real obstacles arrive. Above all, remember to play for your own personal satisfaction! 🎾

Kane Dewhurst is a TCA Advanced Coach.