Anyone for tennis?

M S Turner, B M Pluim

A total of 28 000 kilos of strawberries and 7000 litres of dairy cream have just been consumed at the 2007 Championships, Wimbledon, along with 150 000 glasses of Pimm's and 17 000 bottles of champagne. The largest single annual sports catering operation in Europe has once again been a resounding success for the organisers, but what about success for the players and more especially for the nations that they represent?

Tennis is an immensely popular global sport with 205 nations affiliated to the international governing body, the International Tennis Federation (ITF), and almost 25 million active players in the USA alone.

Of all the traditional American sports, tennis is the only one that has shown a steady growth in measured sales (+10.3%)¹ and a growth in participation (+4.3%)² over the last 5 years. The 2005 USTA survey

shows an increase in the frequency of participation (559 million played on occasion in 2005, compared to 491 million in 2004) as well as an increase in the actual number of participants (+1.1 million).

So, grassroots tennis is booming in the USA but, according to those involved with the elite game, US tennis is in something of a crisis. The USA is the third most populated country on the planet (301 million inhabitants) but despite having 10 players in the Top 100 (as of 10 June 2007), no US male managed to get past the first round in the French Open this year and the US haven't won the Davis Cup since 1995.

Unfortunately for many of the other tennis nations, this lack of success (as measured by wins in the Davis Cup, Federation Cup, Grand Slams or Top 100 players) is all too familiar:

- Germany (population 82.4 million) hasn't won the Davis Cup for 14 years, the Federation Cup for 15 years and has not won a men's Grand Slam event since 1996;
- Great Britain (population 60.8 million) hasn't won a Grand Slam title for 30 years;
- Italy (population 58.1 million) has only won one Grand Slam title (Roland Garros 1976; men) and has not won the Davis Cup for 31 years;
- Australia (population 20.4 million) hasn't had a female Grand Slam winner for 27 years and hasn't won the Federation Cup for 33 years.

A large population might be seen as an advantage because Russia (population 141.4 million) won the Davis Cup in 2006, won the Federation Cup in 2005, won recent Grand Slams in men's tennis (2005) and women's tennis (2006) and has 7 men and 17 women in the Top 100 players, but China (population 1321.4 million) and India (population 1128.8 million) have so far made no major impact on tennis despite being ranked 1 and 2 in terms of global population.

Population alone cannot guarantee winners, and the emergence of tennis superstars from some of the smallest nations indicates that some other magic ingredient

is contributing to success; Belgium (population 10.4 million), Serbia (population 10.1 million), Switzerland (population 7.5 million), Slovak Republic (population 5.4 million) and Croatia (population 4.5 million) have all produced champions.

In the SPLISS (Sports policy factors leading to international sporting success) study³ de Bosscher *et al* reviewed data from six countries across a variety of sports (18–59) and identified nine factors (the nine pillars) that contributed to sporting success: financial support (from government and governing bodies), an integrated approach to policy development, participation, talent identification, athletic and post-career support, training facilities, coaching and coach development, international competition and scientific research. In this group of countries, Great Britain came out best with Flanders and Wallonia (Belgium) coming out worst; something that might be a surprise to followers of tennis. So how do you get the maximum “bang for your bucks”?

The question that vexes every tennis nation is where to invest their resources. If it takes 10 years and 10 000 h of training to bring a player to the top, do you invest in the grassroots of the sport (development) or do you wait until the cream rises to the top and focus your funding on a few elite players (performance)?

Encouraging sports participation improves the health of all the individuals concerned, and this applies in no small measure to tennis (the health benefits of tennis are covered elsewhere in this issue). In France, the costly burden of grassroots funding is the responsibility of central and local government, leaving the French Tennis Federation (FFT) free to manage talent identification, coaching and performance—something they do with great success. In France (population 63.7 million), 380 000 juniors take part in 10 or more matches every year, they have 12 men in the Top 100 and are ranked 10th in Davis Cup, having won it three times in the Open Era (tennis had a strict division between the amateur game and the professional game until 1968, when all the Grand Slam tournaments opened up their entries to both groups of players—the period since 1968 is therefore referred to as “The Open Era”. France’s last win was in 2001. They also have 9 women in the Top 100 and are ranked 3rd in Federation Cup, having won it twice in the Open Era (last win in 2003).

By contrast, Great Britain, with a similar population (60.8 million) and similar facilities (33 400 courts in France vs 35 000 in Great Britain), has less than 10 000 juniors taking part in 10+ matches every year, has only 2 men in the Top 100 (no women), is ranked 26th in Davis Cup (no wins in

40 years) and 30th in Federation Cup (no wins in 40 years).

Massive grassroots participation (popularity), with frequent opportunities to compete at an early age seems to be a winning formula—game, set and match to the French!

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