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# The Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy: A late twentieth-century history of tennis, youth specialization, and entrepreneurship

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The Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy: A late twentieth-century history of tennis, youth  
specialization, and entrepreneurship

by

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT	iii
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2. NICK BOLLETTIERI	6
CHAPTER 3. CHILDHOOD IN AMERICA	8
CHAPTER 4. YOUTH SPECIALIZATION IN SPORT	11
CHAPTER 5. PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TENNIS	14
CHAPTER 6. THE EVOLUTION OF THE TENNIS RACKET	17
CHAPTER 7. THE EARLY YEARS (1978-1986)	22
CHAPTER 8. THE GLORY YEARS (1986-2003)	27
CHAPTER 9. THE DECLINE (2003-Present)	31
CHAPTER 10. CONCLUSION	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

**ABSTRACT**

In the extensively researched field of sports history, tennis has been relatively understudied. Additionally, in the history of modern tennis, the contributions of Nick Bollettieri to the current game have been ignored. This study focuses on the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy as a center of extreme training for child tennis players. The formation of the Academy in 1978 occurred at a unique time in American and tennis history, as several factors contributed to the successful enrollment of children to Bollettieri's military-style approach to teaching. Additionally, Bollettieri's unique tennis strategy, which emphasized power over finesse, created athletes that succeeded at all levels of tennis. The unique time that the Academy opened in addition to the unique style taught to students made Bollettieri's athletes some of the most successful players in tennis history. Their success changed tennis forever and marked the introduction of the modern game: a game that focuses primarily on power. With ten world number one players and numerous major tournaments won, Nick Bollettieri should be recognized as the most successful tennis coach in history.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

On one August morning in 1983, *Miami Herald* writer Steve Sonsky witnessed a sports scene which immediately caught his attention, a top coach's exercise practice with elite tennis player Lisa Glauser. After hitting balls for twenty minutes, Glauser began to cry.

As Sonsky reported the story:

“‘I hate this place.’ Lisa is screaming. A coach keeps whacking balls at her. The coach: ‘It doesn’t matter. You’re staying here. Shut up and keep moving.’ Whack.  
‘I have something in my eye, Greg, and it hurts very badly.’  
‘Let’s go, Lisa.’ Whack.  
‘I...want...to...get...out of here. I don’t like this...this torture.’  
‘Go Lisa.’ Whack. ‘Let’s go, Lisa.’ Whack. ‘Keep moving, Lisa.’ Whack. ‘Run, Lisa...’  
Whack, whack, whack.”

Although there was nothing new about the intensity of professional athletics, Lisa Glauser was not a hardened veteran of the sport; she was a thirteen year old girl at the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy.<sup>12</sup> Created in 1978, Bollettieri’s facility was designed to drive pre-teens to success in a highly-competitive environment. Nick Bollettieri’s emphasis on youth specialization emerged at a unique time that reflected broader social trends, such as unique ideas about childhood which began during the Cold War and culminated in the 1970s and 80s. This shift highlighted the role of a modern “sports parent,” as someone who not only embraced, but insisted on excellence and specialization at increasingly young ages. Additionally, changes in professional tennis, tennis racket technology, and an increase in recreational popularity of tennis during the 1970s introduced the sport to a broader fan base and promised coaches and players larger rewards for total commitment. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Sonsky, “Courting Fame Nick Bollettieri Says His Grueling Tennis School Is the Wave of the Future for All Sports. He May be Right. But is it Right for the Kids?” *Miami Herald*, Aug. 7, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter referred to as NBTA, Bollettieri’s, or the Academy.

Bollettieri's unique style of tennis and coaching transformed the sport into what it is today. The creation and subsequent expansion of Bollettieri's during the last decades of the twentieth-century represented an important case study of specialization in youth sports, which fueled an ongoing debate over the social implications and personal costs of placing intense pressure on young men, women, and children.

In 1990, historian Steven Riess published an article in *Reviews in American History* that gave a synopsis for the field of sports history. According to Riess, sports history had long remained a relatively new field because many scholars decided to write on other types due to academic snobbery, career concerns, or the idea that sport would not expand knowledge as much as other fields.<sup>3</sup> With the rise of the new social history in the 1960s, an increase in writing the history of sport occurred. Riess noticed what he considered a troubling trend in the literature to date, however. Prior to 1990, sports historians wrote exhaustingly on baseball and boxing, devoting relatively little attention to other sports.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, most studies during this period on baseball and boxing were in the style of biography focusing on people like Joe Dimaggio, Ty Cobb, John McGraw, John Sullivan, and Jack Johnson.<sup>5</sup> In addition to summarizing sports history prior to 1990, Riess noted some important similarities across the field. Most sports historians, in an attempt to mirror sport with society, wrote about sports from the perspective of class, race, and the media. Scholars wrote about class and race extensively, including topics on inner city sports, blue-collar sports, and club sports.<sup>6</sup> The media's effect on sports also received much attention from

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Riess, "The New Sport History," *Reviews in American History* 18, no. 3 (1990): 311.

<sup>4</sup> Riess, 312.

<sup>5</sup> Riess, 314.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Mrvzek, *Sport and American Mentality* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).

scholars prior to 1990.<sup>7</sup> Modern, broader sports histories still follow this model in organizing their discussion, with the primary emphasis on race, class, and the media.<sup>8</sup>

Based on the evidence he saw, Riess offered several suggestions for future research in sports history. According to the author, “The history of sports such as auto racing, billiards, bowling, golf, harness racing, tennis, and thoroughbred racing have yet to be examined.”<sup>9</sup> Additionally, Riess stated that college sports, gender, youth, crowds, and business histories of sports were all areas that merited additional attention from sports historians.<sup>10</sup> Riess concluded, “Finally, enormous opportunities still exist in the genre of biography... Such studies will illuminate the history of sport, reflect the history of the broader society, and answer important questions about the American experience.”<sup>11</sup> As it turned out, these additional avenues of study marked the post-1990 future of sports history.

Since 1990, sports historians worked hard to widen their topics and resolve the problems outlined by Riess’ article. In accordance with Riess’ hopes, sports historians wrote more extensively on gender, colleges, crowds, and youth in sports. Finally, researchers put new energy to analyzing many previously-neglected sports, including football, golf, and soccer, making sports history a more well-rounded field.

Although over the past twenty years the field of sports history has grown, some topics still require attention. In particular, there is still relatively little scholarship on the history of

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<sup>7</sup> Examples include Joan Chandler, *Television in National Sports: The United States and Britain* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988) and Benjamin Rader, *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports* (New York: The Free Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Examples include Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, 2009) and Gerald Gems, Linda Borish, and Gertrud Pfister, *Sports in American History: From Colonization to Globalization* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Riess, 321.

<sup>10</sup> Riess, 321-322.

<sup>11</sup> Riess, 322.

tennis, especially regarding the game and its social context over the last fifty years. Many people wrote histories of tennis prior to 1980, resulting in the lack of scholarship reflecting the evolution of today's game of tennis.<sup>12</sup> Some recent articles, however, have discussed age trends, technological change, and retirement patterns in tennis.<sup>13</sup> A few articles, such as David Galenson's 1992 piece, addressed the growing prominence of younger players in late twentieth-century tennis.

Few historical works, if any, have noticed or assessed the significance of the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy in helping create and drive the success of younger professional athletes. This kind of study fulfills another of Riess's goals to advance the field of sports history, what he described as the "need to study the business history of sport." In his 1990 article, Riess asked, "Who were the prominent entrepreneurs? What were their methods? How successful were they?"<sup>14</sup> The NBTA represents an excellent case-study to illustrate the connections between the culture of sports, the business of coaching, and changes in tennis itself.

The success of Bollettieri's, which marked a new development in tennis education, changed tennis in multiple ways. It created a new style of play which helped young adults succeed on the professional tour. As the first establishment to combine a full-time boarding school with extended athletic practices, Bollettieri's changed the approach and philosophy of

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<sup>12</sup> Examples include Hellen Hull Jacobs, *Modern Tennis* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1933), Stan Smith and Bob Lutz, *Modern Tennis Doubles* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975), and Lance Tingay, *Tennis: A Pictorial History* (Pennsylvania: Putnam, 1973).

<sup>13</sup> Examples include D.W. Galenson, "The Impact of Economic and Technical Change on the Careers of American Men Tennis Players 1960-1991," *Journal of Sport History* 20 (1992): 127-150, Andy Miah, "New Balls Please: Tennis, Technology, and the Changing Game," in S. Haake and A.O. Coe *Tennis, Science, and Technology*. (London: Blackwell Science, 2000): 285-292, and Maria Allison and Carrie Meyer, "Career Problems and Retirement Among Elite Athletes: The Female Tennis Professional," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 5 (1988): 212-222.

<sup>14</sup> Riess, 322.

young tennis players, their parents, and the sport itself. His academy opened at the perfect time to take advantage of a spreading popular interest in tennis, new concepts of childhood professionalization, and technical changes that fostered a vastly different style of tennis. As a thriving business venture, the NBTA set the stage for later entrepreneurs to copy and modify his model. As a social experiment, Bollettieri's highlighted both the benefits and costs of applying adult-world pressures to teenagers. As an innovation in the sports world, the Academy turned out champions whose winning records changed the game of tennis forever.

## CHAPTER 2. NICK BOLLETTIERI

Nick Bollettieri's background proved highly influential in the creation of the NBTA. Nicholas James Bollettieri was born on July 31, 1931 in North Pelham, New York, near the Bronx. Not much was written about Nick Bollettieri's childhood, just that he was raised in a close Italian family.<sup>15</sup> Nick graduated college in 1953 from Springhill College in Mobile, Alabama with a degree in philosophy. After graduating, Bollettieri joined the army with aspirations of becoming a pilot. However, after flunking the pilot's test, he joined the 187<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division as a paratrooper, eventually achieving the rank of first lieutenant after being station in Japan for two years.<sup>16</sup> Following his discharge from the Army in 1957, Nick enrolled at the University of Miami Law School, with ambitions of becoming a lawyer.<sup>17</sup> After only one year, Bollettieri dropped out and decided to become a tennis teaching professional. The move seemed surprising, given that Bollettieri never seriously played tennis himself or had any significant coaching experience. Bollettieri's father, upon hearing the news, was furious. Nick told his father that "I may not know my ass from my elbow as far as tennis is concerned, but I'm going to be the best damn coach the world has ever known'."<sup>18</sup> Bollettieri thought he could succeed in tennis coaching without playing experience because he believed that his approach would produce the best players in the world.

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<sup>15</sup> Barry McDermott, "He'll Make Your Child A Champ. But it won't be much fun. All Nick Bollettieri want of his pupils is that they leave their parents, lead a Spartan life and give him blood, sweat, and tears," *Sports Illustrated*, June 9, 1980, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Nick Greenslade, "First and last: Nick Bollettieri, tennis coach," *The Observer*, May 8, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Greg Garber, "Bollettieri had a hand in grooming ten players to hit No. 1," *ESPN: The Worldwide Leader in Sports*, September 15, 2008,

[http://sports.espn.go.com/sports/tennis/columns/story?columnist=garber\\_greg&id=3572727](http://sports.espn.go.com/sports/tennis/columns/story?columnist=garber_greg&id=3572727).

<sup>18</sup> Greenslade.

Nick Bollettieri's first official tennis teaching job was at the Wayland Academy in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin in the late 1950s. Following that, Bollettieri worked at several different clubs, eventually becoming the tennis director at a club in Dorado Beach in the early 1970s. In addition to his yearly job at Dorado Beach, Bollettieri also taught in Puerto Rico during the winters and Beaver Dam during the summers.<sup>19</sup> But by 1977, Bollettieri's career was in trouble, his personal life was in disarray, and his professional relationships were soured. Although unfortunate, these factors allowed him to change jobs and work at the Colony Beach and Tennis Resort on Longboat Key, Florida, where his weekend classes brought in thirty to forty children from all over Florida each week.<sup>20</sup>

In 1978, Bollettieri opened his own tennis club in Sarasota, Florida, that offered his unique program combining athletics and boarding-school classes. His initial enrollment, which consisted of between thirty and forty children, exceeded the allotted space and caused extreme overcrowding; half the students lived in Bollettieri's own home.<sup>21</sup> Following Bollettieri's initial success with his Sarasota club, a team of investors gave Bollettieri funding to purchase a tennis club and motel in Bradenton, Florida. His new enterprise reflected his personal and distinct vision of tennis, which emphasized a re-invention of tennis coaching for a modern era. Bollettieri's relocation to Bradenton allowed him to build the facilities that proved necessary for students to train at an elite level.

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<sup>19</sup> Garber.

<sup>20</sup> McDermott, 29.

<sup>21</sup> Nick Bollettieri, *Bollettieri's Tennis Handbook* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2001), 2.

### CHAPTER 3. CHILDHOOD IN AMERICA

One of the key aspects that made Bollettieri's Academy successful was the shifting ideology of parenting and childhood during the mid-twentieth century. Historians such as Steven Mintz, Elliot West, and Howard Chudacoff demonstrated the significance of studying American family and childhood history. Mintz's 2004 work, *Huck's Raft*, documented the first European contact and settlement on the continent to the present, and argued that virtually every aspect of childhood changed over the last four centuries.<sup>22</sup> According to Mintz, the evolution of childhood occurred in three overlapping phases, each consisting of distinct ideas of what it meant to be a parent and child. During the first period, from early colonial life through the mid-eighteenth century, Puritan ideology treated children as adults-in-training, emphasizing the value of becoming responsible, morally sound, and spiritual beings at a young age. However, this ideal changed during the Revolutionary War period when people read written works by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau that displayed different concepts of the nature of childhood. Locke's work, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, asserted that the human mind was a blank slate at birth, meaning that parents were responsible for the formation of their children's personality. Rousseau's work, *Emile*, marked one of the first times that anybody divided childhood into distinct stages, each of which contained the emergence of different developmental and psychological processes. The influence of such theories brought on the second phase of childhood in American history, from the mid-1700s through approximately the 1970s, which treated children as malleable, uncorrupted beings. During those decades, adults portrayed ideal childhood as a

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<sup>22</sup> Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2004), viii.

time of innocence. Proof of this shift can be found in many examples of childhood labor reform that persisted during the 1900s. The third phase that Mintz highlighted, which began in the 1970s, shifted the emphasis back to treating children and teenagers as early versions of adults, pressured to develop life skills and learn to display their accomplishments. Mintz described this late-twentieth century shift as a culmination of new social fears about Communism, drugs, sex, safety, and gang activity. Mintz explained that “[d]uring the late 1940s and early 1950s, as anxiety about the Cold War deepened, many Americans doubted that the youth had the moral fiber, intellectual acumen, and physical skills necessary to stand up to Communism.”<sup>23</sup> Other fears about the well-being of children emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and gave rise to the concept that parents needed to be more involved in their children’s lives. Stories of child abductions, for example, made parents worried about the well-being of their children and ultimately altered the history of childhood.

The increased involvement of parents occurred in all aspects of childhood including education, social life, and especially play. One educator, writing in 1968 stated that “[a]s the values and goals of success have been switched from acquisition of material things to education and personal achievement, middle-class parents have become less and less patient with the ‘wastefulness of play’.”<sup>24</sup> As parents became more involved in the play of their children during the 1970s, they began enrolling them in more professionally-run programs, such as music lessons, math clubs, and drama programs.<sup>25</sup> For Americans, the “institutionalization of children’s play and games is largely a twentieth century

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 340.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Chudacoff, *Children at Play: An American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 165.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid 165.

phenomenon.”<sup>26</sup> Increased parental involvement shaped many aspects of children’s play, such as the kinds of toys produced and marketed for children.

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<sup>26</sup> G. P. Stone and H. A. Faberman, *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction* (Waltham, Massachusetts: Ginn-Blaisdell, 1970), 548.

## CHAPTER 4. YOUTH SPECIALIZATION IN SPORT

In addition to the previously mentioned areas of childhood, one aspect of children's lives that changed drastically during the twentieth century was sports. During the 2010 National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) All-Academy Symposium, a panel of experts debated the topic of youth specialization in sports and discussed its advantages and disadvantages. Jay Coakley, professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, linked the late twentieth-century concept of youth specialization in sports to several larger social influences. He suggested a number of factors that influenced the era's new emphasis on organized, competitive youth sports, including the privatization and commercialization of sport, the development of unique ideas about parenting, and intense media attention of high profile child specialization cases.<sup>27</sup> According to Coakley, the emergence of privatization and commercialization in youth sports began in the 1980s, when budget difficulties drove cities and towns to make significant cuts in funding for public parks and recreational departments. As youth public sports programs shrank, "eager parents and entrepreneurs with many of the latter wanting to establish a career in youth sports" took over the drive for training. During the 1980s, specialized sports camps emerged as growing businesses, which encouraged youth participation in tournament based sports such as volleyball and soccer, and in turn attracted significant publicity.

Like Chudacoff and Mintz, Coakley also suggested that a new attitude of American parenthood toward youth athletic excellence transformed parents in a single generation from spectators into architects of their child's athletic success. "After all, it was parents who

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<sup>27</sup> Jay Coakley, "The 'Logic' of Specialization: Using Children for Adult Purposes," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance* 81, no.8 (2010): 16.

registered children for programs, paid fees, bought uniforms, and gassed up SUVs to drive the family to practices, games, tournaments, and national championships at Disney World.”<sup>28</sup>

The more sacrifices that parents endured for their child’s athletic well-being, the more moral superiority they showed to the community. During the 2008 and 2010 Olympic games, “Johnson and Johnson, a major sponsor of NBC Olympic coverage, created a special advertising campaign called ‘Thanks, Mom’ to remind everyone that ‘Behind every Olympic Champion is a...mom [who provided] love and care... to help their children achieve their goals’.”<sup>29</sup>

More importantly, media reports beginning in the 1980s directed new attention to stories of boys and girls who achieved significant prowess and fame at young ages.

Although Coakley failed to mention specific examples, Americans who watched the Olympic Games during the Cold War era saw prominent East German and Soviet athletes whose success was at least partly attributed to the way their governments and centralized sports regimes pressured them to specialize in a sport at an early age. The success of these athletes provided Americans an early example of the rewards associated with early specialization in a particular sport.

Combined, the heightened media attention focused on specialized youth athletes, a shift in the definition of a good sports parent, and the commercialization and privatization of sports in the United States created a society that encouraged youth specialization in athletics. Consequently, in the early 1980s, the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy benefitted from all the factors Coakley stated. It gained popularity in the 1980s because of the media attention

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 18.

portraying its success. Additionally, the Academy required parents to pay a hefty price for their child's attendance, thus creating a sense of parental sacrifice for their child's athletic well-being. The creation of the NBTA in the late 1970s proved that the emergence of youth specialization not only occurred, but American parents embraced its concepts.

## CHAPTER 5. PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TENNIS

Although the history of tennis in the United States dates back to the 1800s, the 1970s brought two major changes that reshaped the sport forever. Primarily, Lamar Hunt founded World Championship Tennis in 1968, the first organized professional tour which gave the game immense popularity. Subsequently, professional tennis contributed to a “tennis boom” in the United States which saw record numbers of tennis players beginning to play on the local level.

Texas multimillionaire Lamar Hunt forever changed the sport of tennis when he introduced big prize money to tennis. This changed tennis from an amateur sport into a modern, high-paying professional sport. Although Hunt is best known for his involvement in the National Football League, where he coined the term “Super Bowl,” he also tried to make tennis a popular and commercialized spectacle. Hunt believed that American sports culture needed a new venue for people to watch top-quality tennis. In particular, he sought to create a better atmosphere in tennis for the “great pros [who] were playing in parking lots and small gymnasiums with canvas stretched over the floor for a court.” Prior to Hunt’s involvement in tennis, big tournaments did not exist and players who desired to play professional tennis scrambled to make a living with small prize winnings. In 1968, Hunt created World Championship Tennis, which intended to showcase the best talents and make the sport more financially rewarding for athletes and business organizers.<sup>30</sup> Hunt introduced the idea of offering professional tennis players incentives on a completely new scale. The 1971 WCT circuit awarded a \$50,000 prize to the top finisher in each of its twenty tournaments, a total

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<sup>30</sup> Sam Blair, “HUNT REFLECTS ON WCT’S IMPACT- Founder’s accomplishments earn spot in tennis hall of fame,” *The Dallas Morning News*, July 3, 1993.

of \$1 million. This concept of bringing big cash prizes to tennis was “so revolutionary that every single player wanted to be part of it.”<sup>31</sup> To headline the tour, Hunt signed eight of the most popular professional tennis players at the time, including John Newcombe, Cliff Drysdale, and Tony Roche. That group, nicknamed the “handsome eight,” helped popularize the World Championship Tennis circuit. The WCT reached its peak in 1972 during the WCT Final in Dallas, which featured Ken Rosewall and Rod Laver. This match drew the second highest television audience in tennis history, with twenty-one million viewers.<sup>32</sup> Although the WCT circuit eventually collapsed under the competitive economic pressure of the International Tennis Federation and Association of Tennis Professionals in the early 1970s, it had lasting effects on the sport of tennis. Nick Bollettieri capitalized on the professionalization of tennis because parents realized that for the first time their children could make big money in tennis. Some sports historians, such as David Galenson, attribute the emergence of big prize money as one of the most important factors for the emergence of youth participation in professional tennis.<sup>33</sup>

The 1970s also saw the sport drawing a wider base of recreational participants; “in 1975, tennis courts were being built by the thousands, the tennis industry made and spent into the billions of dollars, and participation stood at an all-time high.”<sup>34</sup> Many factors contributed to the increased popularity of recreational tennis, including increased television coverage of famous tennis matches, the emergence of young American champions, and players who became celebrities and made headlines off the court. Two famous tennis

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> James Martin, “The American Century,” *Tennis* November 2006, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Galenson, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Terran Palmer-Angell, “The American Tennis Boom in the 1970s: Causes and Consequences,” *North American Society for Sport History Proceedings*, 2006, 123.

matches aired in the early 1970s, both of which set audience records that remain among the highest ever. The previously stated WCT Final between Ken Rosewall and Rod Laver was but a precursor to the biggest tennis match of its era. One year later in 1973, fifty million viewers watched the Battle of the Sexes, which pitted fifty-five year old Bobby Riggs against twenty-nine year old Billie Jean King. The Battle of the Sexes match was the most watched tennis match in history, and paved the way for women to gain greater recognition in the sport.<sup>35</sup> The popularity of the WCT Final and the Battle of the Sexes resonated amongst tennis enthusiasts and the general public and created a new tennis fever that swept through the nation.

The 1970s also saw a decade of flamboyant, young, American tennis players emerge into the world tennis spotlight. Jimmy Connors, Arthur Ashe, and Chris Evert all became successful tennis stars during the 1970s. Additionally, the engagement of Jimmy Connors to Chris Evert in 1974 attracted much media attention in the United States, which added to the increasing popularity of tennis to non-tennis fans. Remembering this period, a 2006 tennis commentator observed that in 1974, the “pro game was in equally good shape, with 21-year-old Jimmy Connors and 19-year-old Chris Evert winning at love: They were engaged and the top players on their respective tours.”<sup>36</sup> High profile matches, young American talent, and tennis players making headlines outside of tennis formed the tennis culture foundation and the business underpinning for Bollettieri to establish his new youth academy in the late 1970s.

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<sup>35</sup> Amanda Covarrubias, “BOBBY RIGGS CHAMPION IN TENNIS, ’73 LOSER IN ‘BATTLE’.” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, October 27, 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Martin, 53.

## CHAPTER 6. THE EVOLUTION OF THE TENNIS RACKET

As David Galenson stated in his informative 1992 article regarding American male tennis players, technological innovation in tennis rackets accounted for a tremendous change in the sport. From the beginning of tennis to present day, tennis racket technology changed drastically, evolving from the first wooden rackets to modernized racket made from a variety of materials. The shift in equipment caused significant changes to the game of tennis over a span of approximately thirty years. Technological innovations in racket manufacturing improved the structure, playability, and durability of rackets. Most importantly, newer composite rackets allowed for players to hit the ball harder, a skill that Bollettieri's instructors encouraged and adamantly taught. According to David Galenson, "technological innovations of the past three decades may have resulted in changes in playing techniques and training methods that have lowered the optimum age of tennis players... Beginning with players who first took up tennis during the 1970s, a new style of play emerged, with techniques and strategy designed to take advantage of the power and size of the new rackets."<sup>37</sup> Without composite technology, which made rackets both lighter and more powerful, Bollettieri's teachings would not be applicable to players, especially children. The invention of new racket styles alone did not inevitably force a redefinition of modern tennis. Many factors contributed to the shift away from a game of volleys and methodical strokes toward a game dominated by power. Among the influences promoting that shift was the success of a new generation of professionals, coached in that new style by an ambitious Bollettieri. His ideology of driving players to compete at younger and younger ages could not have been as successful in the decades prior to the introduction of the composite frame.

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<sup>37</sup> Galenson, 128.

The very first tennis rackets from the nineteenth century were wooden. People constructed these rackets from bending one or two sticks of ash into the shape of a racket and fusing it together with “animal glue.” However, mechanization in the 1940s allowed for racket builders to mold thinner layers, or veneers, into the shape of a racket. Veneers allowed for racket manufacturers to bend wood easier, which meant “the natural variability in wood could be ‘averaged out’.”<sup>38</sup> The resulting rackets posed a big problem to tennis players, however. Increased durability, which was an important factor with the new wooden frames, meant that a racket would be significantly heavier than previous models.<sup>39</sup> For example, the Jack Kramer Autograph tennis racket, the most popular wooden tennis racket sold in the postwar era, weighed as much as fifteen ounces unstrung.<sup>40</sup> These rackets were very heavy by today’s standards, especially for children. Tennis legend Pete Sampras remembered, “when I started playing it was still the wooden-racket era, and Robert [his coach] taught me to hit properly... For a little kid, that was tough.”<sup>41</sup> Additionally, since wood is a pliable material, if a tennis player played a “hard hitting game,” the racket would eventually become unplayable.<sup>42</sup> Wooden rackets remained the default for most players until approximately the early 1970s, when manufacturers produced and successfully marketed metal rackets to the general public.

The concept of using metal to make a tennis racket was not a new idea to racket companies in the late twentieth-century. Prior to the 1970s, racket manufacturers could not

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<sup>38</sup> “Racket History,” *ITF Tennis*, November 9, 2011, <http://www.itftennis.com/technical/equipment/rackets/history.asp>.

<sup>39</sup> Howard Brody, *Tennis Science for Tennis Players*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), 54.

<sup>40</sup> “The Rackets of the Woody,” *The Woody Tennis Championships*, November 9, 2011, <http://www.thewoody.net/webpages/racquets/kramerreview.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Pete Sampras, *A Champion’s Mind: Lessons from a Life in Tennis* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2008), 13-14.

<sup>42</sup> Brody, 55.

figure out how to string rackets that possessed sharp metal edges. Retired French tennis star Rene' Lacoste solved this problem in 1953 when he invented the first grommet, a protective piece that prevented tennis strings from rubbing against the sharp edges on the frame. After Lacoste's invention, the Wilson Company marketed the first commercially successful metal racket, the Wilson T2000, in 1970s. The success of the Wilson T2000 prompted other racket companies to experiment with different metals, additional parts, and different designs in an effort to increase stiffness and strength.<sup>43</sup> For example, "although the idea of enlarging the width of the head has been around for many years, and a patent on such a racket was granted in 1974, the first successfully marketed wide-headed racket was Howard Head's Prince in the 1970s."<sup>44</sup> Although metal rackets offered players increased durability, they were still heavy by today's standards, with the Wilson T2000 weighing 13.2 ounces.<sup>45</sup> Although this weight was significantly less than the Jack Kramer Autograph racket, it was still heavy to wield, especially for children.

By 1980, racket manufacturers began to experiment with composite materials, especially glass fiber and carbon fiber. The purpose of mixing materials in racket production was to obtain a certain flexibility, strength, weight, and other properties that a single material could not provide. Additionally, since only a thin layer of composite materials created a more durable racket, rackets had a higher strength-to-weight ratio than previous models. Therefore, composite rackets could be bigger while still maintaining a lower weight.<sup>46</sup> The new specifications maximized the playability of rackets for professionals as well as children.

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<sup>43</sup> "Racket History."

<sup>44</sup> Brody, 39.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 56.

Composite rackets represented an important factor for the success of the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, which taught children a style that emphasized power.

Composite materials made Bollettieri's teachings applicable to the game because of the new rackets' length, width, stiffness, and light weight. A lighter racket added several advantages to a tennis player, including the possibility of obtaining a greater racket head velocity.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, a larger, or wider, head on a racket allowed for players to make acceptable shots while hitting the ball off-center.<sup>48</sup> Combined, these two improvements in racket technology meant that tennis players could swing faster with less fear of producing an off-center shot.

The new specifications of rackets also made them more powerful, an important feature considering Bollettieri's style focused on power. Increased stiffness and longer heads produced rackets that contained greater potential for power. A racket that contained a longer head produced an area on the strings that maximized power which did not exist on older rackets.<sup>49</sup> This area, often misinterpreted as the "sweet spot," was a spot on the racket where the ball rebounded from the strings with maximum speed.<sup>50</sup> The characteristics of composite rackets made power tennis possible and caused some authors to state that "male players [have] outgrown the structure of the game."<sup>51</sup> Although racket technology was a factor in the introduction of the power strategy of tennis, its importance has been overstated by previous scholars.<sup>52</sup> Technology alone did not create power tennis. The new power philosophy grew out of multiple changes in the game, including the role of the NBTA's teachings.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Miah, 285.

<sup>52</sup> Examples include articles by Galenson and Miah.

Bollettieri's role as the innovator of the power game needs reexamining, as many scholars have overlooked his immense contributions to the modern game of tennis.

## CHAPTER 7. THE EARLY YEARS (1978-1986)

Bollettieri's style of teaching did not stay the same throughout his coaching career; indeed, his philosophy of tennis changed dramatically from 1978 to the present day, both reflecting and shaping the broader evolution of the sport. To help understand this, it is useful to analyze the history of his academy as three separate stages, which I will call the "early years" (1978-1986), the "glory years" (1986-2003) and "the decline" (2003-present).

All of the factors previously discussed (the changing attitudes of childhood, tennis racket evolution, etc.) made the late 1970s the ideal time to open an elite tennis academy in the United States. Additionally, Bollettieri had created a name for himself through his earlier work at tennis academies in Wisconsin, Puerto Rico, New York, and Florida. While there, he gained a reputation that enabled him to attract promising juniors to the NBTA from the beginning. Bollettieri's Academy accepted approximately forty to fifty children, who came to the Academy based on word-of-mouth advertising. His curriculum during the late 1970s was similar to the current format, with nearly three hours of intense tennis training, one hour of performance training, and five hours of academics a day, nine months a year. In addition to the daily practice routine, the students often competed outside of the Academy. Bollettieri urged them to enter prestigious tournaments such as the Orange Bowl (located in Coral Gables, Florida) and also arranged extra opportunities for his athletes to compete at a high level. In 1979, Bollettieri's athletes scrimmaged against the University of Florida men's tennis team and won 9-0.<sup>53</sup> Bollettieri did not make money directly when his students won, however, since they only competed at the junior level. The NBTA relied solely on tuition money. Prior to 1986, parents paid approximately \$12,000 a year to have their kids train at

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<sup>53</sup> McDermott, 28.

Bollettieri's.<sup>54</sup> This figure rose significantly in the years following to as much as \$68,495 a year.<sup>55</sup>

During the “early years,” Bollettieri established a distinct coaching strategy for the athletes under his tutelage. He created a military-style curriculum which stressed continuous competition and discipline. Both of these factors accentuated Bollettieri's treatment of children as if they were professionals. Bollettieri believed that exerting constant pressure on his pupils served as the catalyst for success. Commenting in later years on his philosophy of training, Bollettieri said that he built the Academy on lessons he learned from “my years in the paratroopers...if you put people in one location who feel they're the best and want to compete with the best, as we thought we were in our outfit of the paratroopers, I thought ‘well gosh, if we put people like that together you have a chance of really raising the level of anything that you did, whether it be in business or sports or anything in life’.”<sup>56</sup>

Specifically, the NBTA implemented an approach that he called the “farm system,” which continually ranked and re-ranked students into groups according to their match results. This system forced players to perform during practice as if under tournament pressure, creating an everyday atmosphere of constant competition.<sup>57</sup> *The Bollettieri Tennis Handbook*, published in 2001, dedicated entire sections to his belief in the importance of constant challenges during training.<sup>58</sup> Over subsequent years, other leading tennis coaches and NBTA alumni copied Bollettieri's techniques and echoed his sentiments regarding the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Danielle Rossingh, “Next Sharapovas Cost Parents \$400,000 as Teen Champs Disappear,” *Bloomberg*, January 26, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-26/budding-sharapovas-cost-parents-400-000-as-teen-tennis-champs-disappear.html>.

<sup>56</sup> “Nick Bollettieri on Trans World Sport,” *YouTube*, 2006, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?vDWpF0s7ZMj0>.

<sup>57</sup> Bollettieri, *Bollettieri's*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 294-295.

value of pressure during practice. Brad Gilbert and Paul Annacone, who respectively served as coaches of tennis hall of famers Andre Agassi and Pete Sampras, each declared that when good players competed head-to-head in practice, the high expectations produced top professionals.<sup>59</sup>

From the beginning, Bollettieri also made discipline a cornerstone of his academy. Coaches kept students' lives fully scheduled from 6 A.M. to 10 P.M., including long hours of tennis practice, school, meals, and specific times for sleep and waking up.<sup>60</sup> NBTA rules governed multiple aspects of student behavior, categorically banning any "use of drugs or alcohol, smoking or chewing tobacco, leaving campus without permission, intimate contact with a member of the opposite sex, mandatory curfew violation, and profanity."<sup>61</sup> Boys or girls who violated these regulations received warnings of expulsion from the Academy.

The NBTA's curriculum taught a traditional style of tennis during the "early years," encouraging youngsters to adopt the same all-court mode of play that had been the staple of tennis players for decades. Tennis greats such as John McEnroe, Jimmy Connors, and Billie Jean King learned to play with an all-court style, which primarily trained them to attack the net and volley whenever possible. The 1923 book, *How to Play Tennis*, captured this model that would dominate the game into the 1980s. Author James Burns told players to never attempt to "kill a ball when an easy one would do," as "many players have a bad fault of trying to make a point in one shot."<sup>62</sup> The guide promoted net play as the primary strategy for success, saying that "the greatest players favor the net" because that style of play was

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, 422.

<sup>60</sup> "IMG Bollettieri Tennis Academy Frequently Asked Questions," *IMG Academies*, April 11, 2011, <http://www.imgacademies.com/nick-bollettieri-tennis-academy/tennis-department/faqs/>.

<sup>61</sup> "Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy Informational Packet," *IMG Academies*, 2010, <http://www.sportscollegeconnection.com/brochures/tennispacket.pdf>.

<sup>62</sup> James Burns, *How to Play Tennis* (New York: Outing Publishing, 1923), 22.

“the best point maker.”<sup>63</sup> Burns wrote that a player should not “favor either his forehand or backhand strokes. He should learn to execute one as well as the other.”<sup>64</sup> Bollettieri taught this traditional style of tennis, which felt comfortable for many students. For example, Jimmy Arias remained a serve-and-volley player throughout his career because he entered Bollettieri’s as so. According to Bollettieri, “In the beginning, my own lack of knowledge was the root of my success, as well as some of my problems. I let kids fall into their own personalities and play with the grips that felt best for them, because I really didn’t know any better.”<sup>65</sup>

During the first eight years, some of the Academy’s students gained substantial fame in tennis, adding glamour and recognition to the NBTA. In 1983, Jimmy Arias, who had been a student at the Academy since nearly its 1978 opening, reached the semifinals of the U.S. Open as a nineteen year old professional.<sup>66</sup> Arias’ success brought the prestige the Academy needed to “attract players with higher rankings and greater potential.”<sup>67</sup> Two other players trained by Bollettieri, Kathleen Horvath and Carling Bassett, joined Arias in the early 1980s in reaching the world’s top ten rankings. Another of Bollettieri’s earliest pupils, Anne White, gained fame for a different reason, however. During her 1985 first round Wimbledon match, White wore an all-white, one-piece Lycra jumpsuit, which sharply contrasted with the more traditional feminine dresses of other players.<sup>68</sup> White’s eye-catching attire “put her photo on the cover of every tennis magazine in the world,” and brought new attention to the

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 39.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>65</sup> Peter Bodo, “The Kinder, gentler Nick,” *Tennis*, September 1995, 24.

<sup>66</sup> “Jimmy Arias,” *ATP World Tour*, April 11, 2011, <http://www.atpworldtour.com/Tennis/Players/Ar/J/Jimmy-Arias.aspx>.

<sup>67</sup> Bollettieri, *Bollettieri’s*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Janet Graham, “What Ever Happened to Anne White and the Original Catsuit,” *Tennis Life Magazine*, October 10, 2007.

Academy.<sup>69</sup> Those players gained fame and attracted publicity; *CBS* ran a 1982 “60 Minutes” television story about the NBTA that intrigued parents of promising young players.<sup>70</sup> In 1983, Andre Agassi moved from his native Las Vegas to Florida to enroll full-time at the Academy, and in 1984 Floridian Jim Courier began training under Bollettieri. The increase in enrollment and business for the NBTA enabled Bollettieri to purchase more land and buildings, including twenty-two more tennis courts, a dining hall, and a swimming pool.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bollettieri, *Bollettieri's*, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Andre Agassi, *Open: An Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 70.

<sup>71</sup> Bollettieri, *Bollettieri's*, 3.

## CHAPTER 8. THE GLORY YEARS (1986-2003)

From 1986 until the early 2000s, Bollettieri continued to expand the size and scope of his academy. During this period, his approach attracted international attention among parents and others in the tennis world. In 1986, the high-profile Yugoslavian player Monica Seles came to the U.S. to train with Bollettieri alongside American pupils. She joined Agassi and Courier as dominating forces in professional tennis, drawing new attention to Bollettieri's academy.

Significantly, Agassi, Courier, and Seles arrived at the NBTA just as Bollettieri's philosophy of tennis began to change dramatically. While earlier students at the NBTA had learned the traditional all-court game, Bollettieri shifted during the "glory years" to stress power and mental game planning. The NBTA promoted the idea of developing a "Killer Forehand," "Boll-istic Backhand," "Sonic Serves," and "Right-Back-Atcha Returns."<sup>72</sup> As tennis reporter Brad Wolverton explained, "the operative philosophy [was]: Who needs to volley when you can blow away opponents from the backcourt or hit a full-swing winner from inside the service line, a la Agassi and Seles?"<sup>73</sup> The success of this generation of players reinforced Bollettieri's concepts of the power style and mental game planning, making it the norm for subsequent generations of tennis players.

The novelty of this power approach was radical. Mike Agassi noted that his son had entered the Academy with a prominent serve-and-volley style.<sup>74</sup> Bollettieri quickly replaced that traditional finesse-style with an emphasis on power hitting. According to reporter Cindy Shmerler, during Andre Agassi's Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 2011, Mike Agassi

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<sup>72</sup> Bollettieri, *Bollettieri's*, viii.

<sup>73</sup> Brad Wolverton, "The Dream Factory," *Tennis*, September 1999, 106.

<sup>74</sup> Mike Agassi, *The Agassi Story* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2004), 110.

could be heard whispering “He should have taught him to volley; Bollettieri never taught him to volley.”<sup>75</sup>

Bollettieri’s rigorous emphasis on mental strategy during this period enhanced the power style of tennis. Agassi, Courier, and Seles all succeeded in finding their own powerful “weapon” that hurt their opponents. For example, Jim Courier’s forehand was one of the best the game had ever seen. To enhance this “weapon,” Courier shifted where he stood on the court to maximize the number of forehands he hit per match. Agassi, Courier, and Seles each went on to be ranked number one in the world, with the three of them together winning twenty-one major singles championships in addition to Andre Agassi winning an Olympic gold medal.<sup>76</sup> The success of these athletes already made Bollettieri one of the most successful coaches in tennis history.

Agassi, Seles, and Courier were some of the first and most identifiable of Bollettieri’s alumni, and their successes continued to bring the academy new publicity and business. During the 1990s, Bollettieri’s program attracted a new generation of athletes who continued the tradition of competitive excellence. Venus Williams, Martina Hingis, and Marcelo Rios all trained with Bollettieri and turned pro in 1994. Venus Williams’ younger sister, Serena, became a pro in 1995. These four players each eventually became world number one players and combined won twenty-five major singles championships.<sup>77</sup>

Bollettieri reinforced media attention with word-of-mouth publicity in the tennis world and actively recruited young talent from outside the United States. After Bollettieri saw Monica Seles play at the most prestigious world junior tournament, the Orange Bowl, he

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<sup>75</sup> Cindy Shmerler, “Andre Agassi,” *Tennis*, Nov/Dec 2011, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Statistics were gathered from the Association of Tennis Professionals and the Women’s Tennis Association websites. [www.atpworldtour.com](http://www.atpworldtour.com) and [www.wtatennis.com](http://www.wtatennis.com).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

persuaded her to move to Florida from Novi Sad, Yugoslavia.<sup>78</sup> In 1991, Slovakian Martina Hingis entered the NBTA at eleven years old and quickly became a star in the tennis circuit. Hingis went on to break records as she was the youngest player to ever win a major junior title and the youngest to win a major tournament match at the age of fourteen in 1995.<sup>79</sup> Soon after, the Academy received its first high profile foreign male tennis player when German Tommy Haas entered the NBTA with a perfect match record throughout his entire junior career. After Haas, in 1994, Marcelo Rios, a nineteen year old Chilean tennis prodigy came to Bollettieri's to maximize his already impressive tennis skills. Before coming to the NBTA, Rios had already won a U.S. Open Junior title and became the first South American to reach the junior world number one ranking. Bollettieri called him "the most talented athlete, player, that I have ever worked with."<sup>80</sup> The final foreign, high profile tennis player who entered the Academy during its "glory years" was Maria Sharapova, who came to Bollettieri's from Siberia at the age of nine in 1996. Former professional Martina Navratilova had discovered Sharapova at a tennis camp in Russia and suggested that the young girl attend the Academy.<sup>81</sup> The introduction of these foreign players marked a significant shift in the NBTA, as their addition added to the already successful group of alumni.

During the NBTA's "glory years," Agassi, Seles, and these others earned numerous titles and millions of dollars in prize money. Bollettieri kept recruiting and attracting top-level junior players, and nine NBTA alumni from the "glory years" reached the ranking of

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<sup>78</sup> Monica Seles, *Getting a Grip: On my Body, My Mind, My Self* (New York: Avery, 2009), 22.

<sup>79</sup> "Martina Hingis's Career in Photos," *BBC News*, April 11, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport2/hi/tennis/7073957.stm>.

<sup>80</sup> "Nick Bollettieri on Trans World Sport."

<sup>81</sup> Paul Kimmage, "The Big Interview: Maria Sharapova," *The Sunday Times* (London), January 13, 2008.

number one in the world. However, only approximately 1% of Bollettieri's graduates became successful professionals; the vast majority stopped short of star level. Bollettieri was proud that after completing their studies at the NBTA, nearly 90% of all his graduates received a college scholarship offer.<sup>82</sup> This statistic showed the immense success that NBTA alumni had at all levels of tennis.

The Academy continued to attract substantial national publicity during the “glory years,” including television pieces on *20/20*, *60 Minutes*, and the *NBC Evening News*. With the increased attention and new business, Bollettieri expanded his facilities many times throughout these prosperous years. In 1987, International Management Group (IMG), the largest sports management company in the world, expressed an interest in purchasing the Academy from Bollettieri.<sup>83</sup> Bollettieri sold the Academy to IMG, but remained as president. With the money gained from IMG's acquisition, the NBTA grew, adding another pool, a recreational facility, a performance training center where athletes created unique conditioning programs, a Sports Medicine Therapy Center, and a conference center.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> “Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy Informational Packet.”

<sup>83</sup> Bollettieri, *Bollettieri's*, 3.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 4-5.

## CHAPTER 9. THE DECLINE (2003-Present)

By the start of the twenty-first century, the Academy claimed to be one of the world's foremost state of the art tennis facilities, featuring video cameras on every court and video analysis uploaded onto the internet. Its staff included not just traditional coaches, but also specialists in the areas of sport psychology, performance, and nutrition.<sup>85</sup> Bollettieri and his supporters continued to proclaim the excellence of his training methods. But the results tell a different story. After 2003 his graduates no longer dominated the tennis circuit as much as they had during earlier decades. A statistical analysis of the major championships showed that during the period between 1986 and 2003, players who trained with Bollettieri won a total of forty-one major singles titles. After 2003, Bollettieri's athletes won thirteen majors, ten of them claimed by just two players, Venus and Serena Williams.<sup>86</sup> All thirteen majors, however, were won by players who turned pro during the "glory years." There has not been a major winner from Bollettieri's who has turned pro since 2003. Additionally, 2011 marked the first year since 1995 that a Bollettieri trained athlete failed to win any major. The decline of the Academy can also be reflected by viewing the world rankings. Currently, the highest ranked Bollettieri graduate on the ATP Tour is Xavier Malisse at number forty-six, followed by Kei Nishokori at number sixty-one.<sup>87</sup> One of the most telling signs that the NBTA is experiencing a decline is the lack of depth in the Academy. The most impressive aspects of the Academy during the "glory years" was the fact that young talent was always present; when a group of players retired, there was a group of young, talented players to take their spot. Now, as Venus and Serena Williams' careers are nearly over, and Maria Sharapova is

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<sup>85</sup> "Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy Informational Packet."

<sup>86</sup> Statistics were gathered from the Association of Tennis Professionals and the Women's Tennis Association websites. [www.atpworldtour.com](http://www.atpworldtour.com) and [wtatennis.com](http://wtatennis.com).

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

experiencing health problems, there seems to be no Academy player close to becoming a dominant player.

Three key factors could account for the apparent decline in Bollettieri's success since 2003: the opening of other specialized academies, the popularity of prominent two-sport athletes in tennis, and the negative publicity that Bollettieri's Academy received in recent years. Critics increasingly questioned the costs that Bollettieri's intense training imposed on his students, and such concerns increasingly scared top players and their parents away from the NBTA.

By the 1990s, rival academies similar to Bollettieri's opened, which undermined his monopoly on top-level training and drew away some of the most talented young players. The most notable competitor of the NBTA, the Sanchez-Casal Tennis Academy, opened in 1997 in Barcelona, Spain. The Sanchez-Casal Tennis Academy attracted talented boys and girls, including Andy Murray, who enrolled there at age fifteen and proceeded to reach number three in the world rankings.<sup>88</sup> Similar academies, which promised to develop talented but raw children into successful players, also opened in Florida.<sup>89</sup> As more top-level academies opened across the United States, many families preferred to have sons or daughters train closer to home rather than move to Florida. Rising American tennis star Donald Young, who turned pro at the age of 14 in 2004, rejected many offers of a full scholarship to attend Bollettieri's and chose instead to stay and train with his current instructors at home.<sup>90</sup>

Additionally, over recent years, players and outside observers alike challenged the assumption that the only way for tennis players to reach the top was to begin intensive

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<sup>88</sup> "Tennis Academy Sanchez-Casal," *Tennis Academy Sanchez-Casal*, March 8, 2011, <http://www.sanchez-casal.com/>.

<sup>89</sup> Examples include the Evert Academy in Boca Raton and Saddlebrook Academy in Wesley Chapel.

<sup>90</sup> Andrew Friedman, "Home Blown? Donald Young Opts for his Parents over the USTA," *Tennis*, April 2010.

specialized training at an early age. Media attention increasingly highlighted the success of two-sport athletes. *Sports Illustrated* noted pointedly that both Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal were soccer prodigies as children, both choosing to concentrate on tennis near the age of thirteen. Both Federer and Nadal specifically declared on several occasions that the skills they learned in soccer helped them become great tennis players.<sup>91</sup> This idea, that a broad foundation of athletic experience can be valuable in training for tennis, shaped the approach of some recent NBTA competitors. When starting his own tennis academy in 2008, tennis legend John McEnroe deliberately decided to apply these early diversification principles. In 2010, McEnroe commented, “Most people are under the impression that to be a success you have to send the kids away, give up everything else, and focus solely on tennis from a very early age... Mine [academy] would follow a different philosophy where, God forbid, you would have a bit of a life, and continue to play some other sports for a while, because I know that playing basketball and soccer benefited me.”<sup>92</sup>

McEnroe’s comment reflected his belief that a Bollettieri-style immersion actually harmed young men and women, both by depriving them of experience with other sports, and also by exposing them to a high-pressure, even inhumane, type of coaching. Beginning in 2005, some of Bollettieri’s most successful retired athletes published tell-all autobiographies, where they spoke first-hand about the unhappy side of their life at the Academy. Although research has shown that most professional tennis players experience some stress during their

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<sup>91</sup> David Wallace, “Roger Federer as Religious Experience,” *New York Times*, August 20, 2006, and Christopher Clarey, “Rafael Nadal’s Early Career Choice Pays Early Dividends,” *New York Times*, April 20, 2005.

<sup>92</sup> Chris Murphy and Greg Duke, “McEnroe brothers go head-to-head in fight to revive American tennis,” *CNN*, April 11, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2010/SPORT/tennis/09/17/tennis.mcenroe.academy.usta/index/html>.

careers, such criticism suggested that by applying high pressure to youngsters and demanding their early specialization in sports, Bollettieri's approach had extra detrimental effects.<sup>93</sup>

Despite Bollettieri's stern discipline, a number of his students reacted to extreme stress by experimenting with drugs. Among Bollettieri's notable alumni, Andre Agassi, Boris Becker, and Martina Hingis were all caught or admitted to using drugs recreationally during their playing careers. Agassi admitted to testing positive for crystal meth, a psycho-stimulant, during the 1997 season.<sup>94</sup> Boris Becker used sleeping pills in 1987 when he "couldn't stand the pressure anymore." His dependency became so extreme that Becker eventually turned to a combination of whisky and sleeping pills to fall asleep at night. In addition to this addiction, Becker abused pain pills, which became such a problem that in 1991, he admitted to becoming drowsy during his final match in Stockholm against Stefan Edberg.<sup>95</sup> Martina Hingis abruptly retired in 2007 after reports surfaced of her cocaine addiction. Such problems were not inevitable or universal in top-level tennis; between 2003 and 2009, only .38% of professional tennis players tested positive for banned drugs.<sup>96</sup>

Public accounts by NBTA alumni also suggested that the continuous mental stress at Bollettieri's had contributed to the development of eating disorders among some of its graduates. Although Carling Bassett-Seguso, an early NBTA pupil, admitted to having bulimia in 1992, her story received little attention from the media or tennis fans.<sup>97</sup> Bassett-Seguso's story resurfaced in 2009 after Monica Seles' autobiography said that throughout her

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<sup>93</sup> Allison.

<sup>94</sup> Andre Agassi, 256.

<sup>95</sup> Boris Becker, Robert Lubenoff, and Helmut Sorge, *The Player: The Autobiography* (London: Bantam, 2005), 103-105.

<sup>96</sup> Javier Maquirriain, "Epidemiological analysis of doping offences in the professional tennis circuit." *Journal of Occupational Medicine and Toxicology* 30, no. 5 (2010).

<sup>97</sup> Michael Neill, "On the Rebound," *People Magazine*, April 27, 1992.

time at the Academy, stress had led her to struggle continually with eating disorders. Seles wrote, “the stress of all the recent upheavals in my life was starting to catch up with me. Then, one afternoon in the cafeteria when I was getting seconds for lunch, I met peanut butter.”<sup>98</sup> Although Seles hid her eating problem from Bollettieri (or the staff chose to ignore the issue), until after she graduated, her eating disorder continued throughout her professional career, especially with high calorie foods such as peanut butter..<sup>99</sup> As a celebrity, Seles drew popular attention for such confessions, creating more negative press for the NBTA.

Bad publicity and the personal stories of NBTA alumni also highlighted the physical toll of youth specialization and high-intensity continuous training. Recent research has suggested that early specialization could account for up to 50% of all sports related pediatric injuries.<sup>100</sup> Some of Bollettieri’s leading graduates, including Andre Agassi, Monica Seles, Maria Sharapova, Venus Williams, and Serena Williams had careers distinctly marred with injuries. Many of those players themselves recognized and publicly acknowledged the correlation between overuse during youth and injuries during their adult life. In 2000, ex-professional player Todd Martin said, “It wasn’t until I was 25 or 26 years old that I began to realize I was starting to pay the price for all the things I did when I was a kid... I was exercising two or three hours a day. Now, we’re asking ourselves to do a lot more as adults. You have to remember that our primary activity is strenuous exercise.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Seles, 34.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, 2-3, 35-36, 99-101, 130-131.

<sup>100</sup> Joel Brenner, “Overuse Injuries, Overtraining, and Burnout in Child and Adolescent Athletes,” *Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, June 1, 2007.

<sup>101</sup> Charles Bricker, “THE GAMES IS TOO POWERFUL, THE SEASON TOO LONG, AND IF YOU DON’T PLAY HURT YOU’LL DROP IN THE RANKINGS. WITH INJURIES ON THE RISE, ARE THE PRO TENNIS REACHING THE BREAKING POINT?” *Sun-Sentinel* (Key Biscaine), March 22, 2000.

As critics noticed, injuries even forced some top players to retire early, most notably Anna Kournikova. When Kournikova began training at the NBTA at the age of ten in 1990, her almost-obsessive passion for tennis impressed Bollettieri immediately. At the time, he commented, “I’ve seen them all, but this one actually frightens me...She knows everything—what she wants to do and how she’s going to get there. She’s not only the youngest real prospect I’ve ever had, but the best. We’ve had Andre. We’ve had Courier. We’ve had Seles, but I can say without hesitation that when I see how this girl can play, at age 10, I’m shocked.”<sup>102</sup> At the age of fourteen, Kournikova received a Wild Card to play in the International Tennis Federation tournament in Moscow. Only one year later, she turned pro and quickly jumped in the rankings from number 261 to fifty-seven. Kournikova achieved her highest singles ranking in 2000, when she became number eight in the world. Beyond that, she excelled at doubles, winning two major titles at the Australian Open, and achieved a number one ranking in 1999. However, in 2001, frequent retirements and absences interrupted Kournikova’s season. A stress fracture in her left foot forced her to withdraw from twelve tournaments, including the French Open and Wimbledon. Two years later, she experienced reoccurring back problems that forced her to retire from several more tournaments. Following a match in early 2004, Kournikova officially retired at the age of twenty-four.<sup>103</sup>

Although Kournikova’s story is an extreme example of the consequences of over-training at Bollettieri’s, evidence suggests that players who trained at the NBTA tended to be more injury prone than other tennis players. A statistical analysis of Bollettieri’s ten most

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<sup>102</sup> Robin Finn, “Tennis; The Molding of a Tennis Prodigy,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1992.

<sup>103</sup> “Anna Kournikova,” *WTA*, [http://www.wtatennis.com/player/anna-kournikova\\_2257889\\_4285](http://www.wtatennis.com/player/anna-kournikova_2257889_4285).

successful players versus other world number one players during the 1990s and 2000s showed that Bollettieri's pupils missed 7% more major tournaments due to injury.<sup>104</sup>

Although this does not seem like much, over a ten year career this would mean that a NBTA athlete would miss three more majors than other, healthy tennis players. Since the tennis season only consists of four major tournaments, missing 7% more would be equivalent to missing almost an entire year. Martina Hingis missed the highest percentage of tournaments due to injury, defaulting or not playing in 27% of majors in her career. That absence rate was significantly higher than that of any other number one ranked tennis players during this time period, underlining suspicions that the intense training given at the NBTA led to a greater incidence of injury.<sup>105</sup>

Those personal and professional negatives attached to the careers of prominent NBTA graduates contributed to a seeming backlash against Bollettieri in the world of sports. In 2011, a selection committee in charge of naming significant figures to the Tennis Hall of Fame rejected Bollettieri for the Contributor Category, which served to recognize non-players who supported the sport by contributing in other ways. This deliberate shunning of what some considered the most successful tennis coach in history shocked commentators. One ESPN analyst wrote, "Ten students from his academy have reached No. 1 rankings. They've won major titles; they've inspired fans and generations of players; and they've

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<sup>104</sup> This percentage was calculated by comparing Bollettieri's ten number one players (Andre Agassi, Jim Courier, Martina Hingis, Venus Williams, Serena Williams, Monica Seles, Boris Becker, Marcelo Rios, Maria Sharapova, and Jelena Jankovic who averaged missing 15% of majors) with other world number ones during the 1990s and 2000s (Stefan Edberg, Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Lleyton Hewitt, Pete Sampras, Gustavo Kuerten, Andy Roddick, Marat Safin, Juan Carlos Ferrero, Steffi Graf, Justine Henin, Lindsay Davenport, Caroline Wozniacki, Amelie Mauresmo, Dinara Safina, Kim Clijsters, Jennifer Capriati, Ana Ivanovic, and Arantxa Sanchez Vicario who averaged missing 8% of majors). These players represented the top twenty world number one players from the ATP and WTA tours based on number of weeks ranked at number one.

<sup>105</sup> Statistics were gathered from the Association of Tennis Professionals and the Women's Tennis Association websites. [www.atpworldtour.com](http://www.atpworldtour.com) and [wtatennis.com](http://wtatennis.com).

helped transform the game from what it once was.”<sup>106</sup> One possible factor behind Bollettieri’s controversial status in the tennis world may be due to the way critics challenged his philosophy on training in recent years. These criticisms seemed more troubling because some of the deepest concerns came from NBTA alumni.

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<sup>106</sup> Tom Perrotta, “What does Nick Bollettieri’s omission say about Hall?” *ESPN*, March 2, 2010, [http://espn.go.com/sports/tennis/blog/\\_/name/tennis/id/4960005](http://espn.go.com/sports/tennis/blog/_/name/tennis/id/4960005).

## CHAPTER 10. CONCLUSION

It is without question that Nick Bollettieri's unique tennis philosophy allowed him and the students he trained to change the game of tennis forever. During the "early years," Bollettieri's military-style training allowed him to maximize the playing potential of many great tennis players; however, it was not until the "glory years" that Bollettieri's emphasis on power and mental strategy forged great champions. The combination of the military style training and emphasis on power formed a new style of play that was drastically different than previous decades. Since Bollettieri is proven to be the "architect of the New Power Game," it is fair to say that his academy had a tremendous influence on the predominance of the style of tennis seen today, a fact that is proven by the fact that a serve-and-volley player has not been in the top ten in the ATP tour since 2005.<sup>107 108</sup>

Among tennis reporters and fans, the shift from a variety of styles to the domination of power tennis has had mixed results. While some reporters have heralded the current era's athleticism and style, others have stated that power tennis has many downfalls. For example, according to *Tennis Magazine* reporter Stephen Tignor, the WTA tour is experiencing a crisis because all the women play the exact same way. Tignor's nostalgia for past decades hinged on the fact that previous generations of tennis players had unique players with personalities that reflected their style of play. The "virtually identical" style of play seen in the WTA today has, according to Tignor, frustrated fans looking for their "tennis served in different

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<sup>107</sup> Peter Bodo, "Power Surge," *Tennis*, June 1995, 84.

<sup>108</sup> "ATP World Tour," *Association of Tennis Professionals*, March 12, 2012, [www.atpworldtour.com](http://www.atpworldtour.com).

flavors.”<sup>109</sup> Although Tignor stated that the men’s tour is not experiencing the same “crisis,” it is evident that the ATP’s athletes play with identical styles as well.

Whether a person believes Nick Bollettieri’s style benefitted or hindered the game of tennis, he achieved much business success and fame, both inside the tennis world and among the general public. The rise of the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy marked a significant shift in sports history. Despite the abundantly documented downfalls associated with youth specialization in sports, parents are still willing to send their children to Bollettieri’s and similar academies due to their promise to create excellence.

Recently, the Bollettieri style of youth coaching has spread to sports besides tennis. IMG, the company that bought his academy, quickly expanded its’ scope to include similarly-intense training programs for youths in basketball, golf, football, soccer, lacrosse, and baseball. In these new programs, IMG replicated Bollettieri’s theories of coaching and model teaching style, including emphasis on hard work, dedication, physical fitness, and recruitment of young athletes. IMG’s multi-sport academy trained many successful pro athletes during the 1990s and 2000s, including Michael Beasley of the NBA, Darren McFadden of the NFL, Nomar Garciaparra of the MLB, and many professional soccer players and golfers.

Although sports history saw many new works since the 1960s, tennis has still received little attention from historians. With the exception of biographies, there have been few scholarly works devoted to tennis. The lessons learned from the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy demonstrate how telling non-biographical stories can benefit the entire field of

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<sup>109</sup> Stephen Tignor, “Personality Crisis: The Women’s Tour is Loaded with Engaging and Unique Personalities. So Why Do They All Play the Same Way?” *Tennis*, August 2009, 26.

sports history. From observing just one successful tennis business, sports historians can learn a great deal of information about society and sports. In only thirty-four years, the NBTA changed a sport and attracted a great deal of negative attention from youth specialization critics while at the same time reinforcing youth specialization principles for sport success. Bollettieri's will continue to be at the center of the youth specialization debate because of its success in tennis and its influence on other sports. The history of the Academy, and other institutions like it, is crucial to sports historians for understanding current societal issues.

According to Steven Riess' 1990 article, "The New Sports History", the business of sports required more attention from historians. The history of the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy represents just one example of how sports business history can be researched and written about. Many more businesses need to be examined, both in tennis and all sports. While the story of Bollettieri's barely scratches the surface of what still needs to be accomplished in sports history, it is a start. Additional work on other institutions needs to be done to fulfill Riess' recommendations for developing a balanced field of sports history. For example, how has the United States Tennis Association changed American tennis, or how has the National Football League Player's Association influenced the NFL? Histories about organizations such as these can expand on the scholarship of sports history as well as provide important information about society as a whole. The story of the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy's profound influence on tennis, as well as its ability to show the broader themes in American society, can serve as a model for future historians writing about the business history of sports.

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