

Tennis and Socioeconomic Class: The Change in Perception of the Sport

Yulin Zhai

Vancouver, Canada

Email: rain.zhai2005@gmail.com

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Abstract

From the 12th century to the early 19th century, a game of tennis was the ideal setting where aristocrats could interact. Individuals who were associated with the sport were categorized as well-refined and upper-class. However, with the rise of individualism and free-market consumerism in the mid-1980s associated with Reaganism and Thatcherism, tennis was made more available and attracted the middle class. As such, the entry of players like Jimmy Connors and John McEnroe revolutionized the game with their rebellious actions, which transformed the etiquette of fine sportsmanship into a tough, aggressive game filled with tantrums and vulgarities and the determination to win and make money above all else. Through the commercialization of tennis, the public's perception has changed; tennis is no more “a sport for kings”, but a sport for all.

Keywords

Tennis, Sport Psychology, Sport Sociology, Social Class, Sports

1. Introduction

The common perception of the correlation between socioeconomic status and tennis has shifted within the past two decades. The traditional perception of tennis players—wearing all white on Centre Court, eating strawberries and cream, while drinking champagne—is no longer the narrative. By analyzing influential political changes, the psychology behind decision-making, and the impact of income disparity, this paper will investigate how tennis has evolved from its original status as a sport of the landed gentry, into a sport for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

2. Early History of Tennis

Originating in the 12th century, in Cloisters, France, tennis was originally called

“Jeu de Paume”. It was one of a small number of sports adopted by the royal family and ultimately achieved royal status. By the 16th century, tennis had expanded its popularity and became a sport widely available to the bourgeoisie. This was evident as the etiquette of the game showed good manners, self-control, and restraint of actions. The game quickly became a closed circle based on socioeconomic class, in which both players and spectators were upper class. Unlike the working class, these participants had discretionary income and ample time to dedicate to the sport. In addition, they understood how social capital worked, how and where “power” was found, and how social networks functioned (Ferraro, 2018). At the beginning of the 17th century, this sport became openly popularized, and by the early 20th century, it had expanded its appeal into the hearts of many upper-middle-class people. As etiquette and values were an integral and particularly important part of this community, parents motivated their children to be upwardly mobile, and tennis was part of that, even with its daunting expenses (Ferraro, 2018). The general public regarded this as elitism, but innate human selfishness led to a desire to be part of such groups (Ferraro, 2018). Tennis was not just about groundstrokes and trophies: it was one of only a few sports that served as a breeding ground for the upper socioeconomic class of America (Ferraro, 2018). Thus, skill and etiquette were equally emphasized in the development of a professional tennis player. The player was molded to represent the sport with dignity, refinement, and class. Indeed, “private golf and tennis clubs are training grounds for the upper classes where youngsters are learning things like how to dress, how to act, and how to sound (Ferraro, 2018: p. 1).” It was here, in the expansion of tennis to the broad aristocracy, that tennis found its athletic appeal as both a social-elite system and a physical pastime, but the expansion of tennis was only beginning.

As the sport became more popular from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, tennis found itself in many individuals’ daily lives. However, the perception of professional tennis players and tennis as a sport took a massive hit during this period. With the global oil crisis, high inflation rates, rising unemployment, trade union unrest, and economic stagnation, tennis experienced a downward spiral into bad on- and off-court manners (Lake, 2015). However, tennis was not alone. America had increased rates of robberies, aggravated assaults, and homicide, while Britain faced periodic urban race rioting and football hooliganism. In fact, these social problems impacted much of social life and signaled a cultural manifestation of greed, individualism, and ostensible lack of public concern for others (Lake, 2015). All of this fueled the fire of this damaging social phenomena for nearly two decades, and this was equally reflected in tennis. As a result, players who were sponsored and represented by firms and management groups no longer felt obligated by duties of self-restraint, honesty, and integrity inherent in the sport’s high-class traditions, the “unwritten class codes of honor, decency, and deference”; increasingly playing according to a “win-at-all-costs” mentality that stripped them of their ethical responsibilities in the pursuit of competitive

success (Lake, 2015).

It was apparent, when the ultimate “bad boys” John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors arrived on the scene in the late 1970s, that tennis etiquette had corroded, as existing rules were manipulated and new rules were introduced to suit personal needs (Lake, 2015). They were very different from the traditional norms of tennis. For instance, Connors grew up a working-class boy in Belleville, Illinois. Both Connors and McEnroe completely ignored the perception and traditions of the game: in one interview Connors said, “I make no apologies for the way I played tennis. I wasn’t out there to win a popularity contest—I was out there to win (Lake, 2015: p. 185).” He was one of a handful of players who completely disregarded the perception and values previously associated with tennis. One memorable example was in the first challenge match in February 1974 in which Connors was pitted against the affable Australian Rod Laver, who came out of retirement to play. Before the contest had even begun, Connors behaved with customary indifference to the sport’s traditions by yelling “Fuck you!” to all the American celebrities—Clint Eastwood, Charlton Heston, and Johnny Carson—who appeared to be supporting Laver (Lake, 2015). Consequently, McEnroe and Connor were regarded by the public as selling their “bad boy” image as a successful commodity. Given the postwar democratization, commercialization, and globalization of tennis, new players from different classes and cultures thus clashed with established customs and values to create a more confusing on-court environment in place of simply “knowing how to behave.” Additionally, officials’ seeming unwillingness to punish offenders in fear of economic consequences resulted in an increase in the ruthless and assertive pursuit of success that characterized this era of new riches allowing players to both challenge and circumvent the sport’s behavioral norms (Lake, 2015). In other words, traditional established amateur values were replaced with more profitable corporate logic tied to entertainment values and free-market economic principles.

By the mid-1980s, Reaganism and Thatcherism dominated much of the European landscape, with their apparent emphasis on the importance of personal responsibility, individualism, and consumerism. Both Connor and McEnroe were opportunistic, self-interested, and financially motivated. Their actions were a reflection of the prevailing ideologies of the time. Additionally, many young people became affluent but lacked the notion of care and responsibility. Tennis commentators also praised the generation’s best professional tennis players who characterized the postwar societal reorientation to individualism, materialism, and consumerism. Overall, this time period was filled with unsavory aspects of the burgeoning secular, neoliberal, and free-market-inspired consumer cultures (Lake, 2015).

3. Correlation between Perception and Class

Though it is easy to see that tennis has clearly evolved from its birth to the present day, understanding the shift in perception of the sport is much more

complicated. One needs to examine the psychology behind this perception to gain a better understanding of why and how the perception has changed. Three distinct and inter-connected studies were conducted for this purpose. The first study aimed to determine whether when making a judgment about a sport, an individual will be influenced by the perceived distinctiveness of each sport presented to them (Nelson & Miller, 1995). The level of distinctiveness is related to how unconventional the sport seems to be. The results found that subjects selected the distinctive option significantly more often than the non-distinctive option (Nelson & Miller, 1995). For example, if subjects were presented with tennis and soccer, they were more attracted to tennis as it is more distinctive. The second study presented the same lists of sports to the subjects. However, it aimed to measure the “assumed centrality of a person’s distinctiveness and non-distinctive traits by asking subjects to identify the relative degree of interpersonal similarity between pairs of people sharing distinctive as opposed to non-distinctive category memberships” (Nelson & Miller, 1995: p. 248). In other words, researchers were seeking to measure the extent to which subjects would identify others on the basis of distinctive shared sports activities. The results suggested that subjects selected the distinctive pair of individuals 83% as often as they would the non-distinctive pair of individuals (Nelson & Miller, 1995). In other words, if an individual were to participate in both tennis and soccer, people will be more likely to associate the individual with tennis as opposed to the latter. A final study was conducted to determine whether the distinctiveness effect on a different measure of categorization than those employed in studies one and two would still hold when the perceived variability of the categories is held constant (Nelson & Miller, 1995). The results demonstrated that subjects predicted an individual would possess the propensity of others sharing their distinctive category 69% of the time (Nelson & Miller, 1995). In other words, people’s distinctive category memberships—for example, tennis—are perceived to be more central to their identities than their non-distinctive category memberships—e.g., soccer. Along with the findings of these studies, wealth and status are often seen in terms of the stereotype of an individual’s own social category. Hence, the public’s perception of working-class individuals who participate in tennis will likely associate tennis with the stereotype of their class. As tennis has been commercialized and increased in popularity and availability, it is no longer a sport just for “kings”. Rather, it is widely available to many of the public.

4. Change in Economic Prosperity

The income and financial background of professional tennis players in modern times has changed. While in the past the ability to play tennis was regarded as a luxury, today, most professional tennis players are finding themselves in tough situations, where they barely break even financially (Victoria University, 2015). For instance, Roger Federer with his lifetime prize money gives the impression that all tennis players enjoy a life of extravagance. However, this is simply not the case. In 2014, Federer pocketed a cool \$45 million in sponsorship money

alone, whereas the 92nd ranked player in the world, Michael Russel, only earned about \$210,000 (Morales, 2013). This figure might still seem a lot; however, it does not factor in the expenses incurred to play professionally. In a 2013 interview conducted by Forbes, Russel stated that he had spent \$35,000 in travel, \$75,000 in taxes, and \$300 per tournament for racket stringing alone (\$6000). In total, over 55% of his income disappeared due to such expenses (Morales, 2013). Compared to the average American household salary in which over 15% of households earn around \$100,000 after tax, the mere \$94,000 earned by Michael Russel seems less significant when one considers that Russel is one of the top 100 professionals in the world (Hall, 2016). From an economic standpoint, tennis players no longer have an easy-going and luxurious life. Rather, most professional tennis players are struggling and barely breaking even (Victoria University, 2015).

Even though tennis in many first-world countries is no longer perceived as part of an upper-class lifestyle, in developing countries like South Africa the traditional narrative still holds true. In fact, the majority of the South African population is not even familiar with the sport, let alone able to play and experience it. This is a resulting factor of the socioeconomic divide which has only widened in the past two decades (Jackson, 2006). One of South Africa's premier tennis coaches stated that "our system is very behind" (Jackson, 2006: p. 60). There are very few people competing at top levels and even fewer being able to finance their travel. The top South African players are often defeated and discouraged by the intensity and dedication of overseas players. It is not uncommon to see the number one- or two-ranked players in South Africa lose to the 50th ranked player in America (Jackson, 2006). What is even more discouraging is that only two of these 50 players are ever going to be able to use tennis as a main source of income. The economic resources in developing nations are far less than in the industrialized world, and, therefore, funding for sports is not readily available. Hence, in these lower-income nations, tennis continues to be perceived as a royal sport for the wealthy because of the poor economies.

5. Conclusion

Through the impact of politics and the rise of free-market consumerism, the game of tennis has broken with tradition and re-molded itself into a mainstream sport. Proof of this was made evident through psychological studies, which showed that the public's impression of the game is altered based on the class of the individual playing the sport. In other words, spectators from the middle class began to discern the game as being removed from its aristocratic beginnings. Thus, the perception of tennis has shifted its status to become a sport for all—now everyone can enjoy the strawberries and cream, if not the champagne.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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