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# Tennis and society: the past and present of tennis practice in socially oriented clubs

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## ABSTRACT

*This article explores tennis practice from a Spanish perspective in clubs whose main objective is to provide a number of services to their members, above and beyond just tennis. The word 'elitist' is analysed in relation to tennis in general with the article focusing on the characteristics of certain clubs in particular, namely socially orientated 'elitist clubs'. In addition the role of the manager in these types of clubs is explored, with finally some strategies to promote tennis participation in light of the evident challenges.*

**Key words:** Clubs, sociology, elitism, management, participation

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## INTRODUCTION

### "Tennis is an elitist sport"

The expression that tennis is an elitist sport has an external origin. It was coined from outside the tennis club arena, to describe the game of tennis viewed by those external to the club environment. Nowadays, this scenario has changed. Tennis is not solely restricted to being played in socially elite and/or costly urban clubs anymore. There are other facilities and centres available to a wider spectrum of society, typically the clubs located on the outskirts of cities or in small towns, where tennis is more accessible and thus played on a regular basis. In some of these municipal type clubs, it is possible to be a member by means of a reasonably priced 'seasonal fee' or "membership fee". These centres that are strictly speaking not 'clubs' in the traditional sense- but are referred to as such because of their facilities and courts- are typically local multi-sport or university sport centres, or private institutions that cater for the casual player. Consequently, through the development of these more accessible clubs and public sports facilities, tennis can no longer be considered an elitist sport, since people from all stratas of society have access to facilities and thus can participate in the game.

### Reconsideration of tennis elitism - "some clubs are elite clubs"

Having refuted the statement that tennis is an 'elitist sport', there does however remain an aspect of elitist structure: namely clubs of early establishment, and ones that hold a long history, often dating back a hundred years or more. Thus, we have progressed from the statement that "tennis is an elite sport" to "some clubs are elite". The clubs that continue to uphold the latter statement, are usually the traditional clubs of the big provincial capitals; The Trading Club, the Agricultural Circle, the Tennis Club, the Race Track, the Sailing or Golf club- all have traditionally represented a sports meeting place for the most affluent. These clubs still boast characteristics of elitism, that they have never been able to get rid of, and perhaps not wanted to. These clubs offer for the most part elegant sports not requiring great fitness at a social level and lacking in physical contact with the opponent, representative of the typical physical activity for high social classes. Belonging to these established clubs has certain exclusive connotations which are deeply rooted in the society we live in. An example of this exclusivity is that not only is joining these clubs very costly, it also requires a "recommendation letter", an old trait of the formal "introduction into society" of the newcomer.

Apart from actual sport practice in clubs, there is also a very active social life, considered a core aspect. Getting together for lunch or dinner as well as for tea or coffee has always been part of the clubs' activities with or without table games as an additional entertainment. Another concern has been to complement these activities with appropriate facilities for the kids to enjoy to the full: an area with amusements, a

playroom and a TV set as well as gardens to add to its attraction and fun.

This multi-faceted club lifestyle leads to different social profiles within a club. A monochrome social mass with multicolour interests that little by little starts adhering to one area or another. The administration of the club starts becoming aware of the differences: 'tennis members', that is to say, members who only play tennis, 'restaurant members', 'season members' who only show up when the pool is open, 'kangaroo members', always with their children in the playing areas. These different members make up a huge social mass, which becomes even bigger due to normal demographic growth. Another consequence of this array of social profiles lies in the fact that 'tennis dominance' is only expressed in the name of the institution. 'Tennis' is just one more and not necessarily the most important activity of a club. That is why coaches and teaching professionals are not at the top of the chart in the club. These clubs only have a manager who is also in charge of public relations and to whom the sport staff reports. This manager is responsible for the economic and administration related aspects rather than the sport related ones. In cases where there is a Sport Director, he usually reports to the manager who is usually in charge of the implementation of the "global policy of the club".



### The Sports Director in an 'elite club'

With such a huge variety of interests not related to tennis, often a top rated professional coach is lacking in clubs with a high social agenda. In some clubs, they don't even have a pro- so the manager, an excellent economic administrator, delegates certain sport competencies. These

are given to teaching pros with high levels of experience, but perhaps relatively low levels of continuous coach education and relatively low knowledge surrounding modern teaching methodologies. It must be highlighted that a sport director might not always be present in all clubs, however because of the wide diversity of the social mass of the club members, when a sports director is present, he/she will rarely give tennis a special precedence at the club.

The wide variety of agendas within one club can bring about problems when different sports or different activities overlap. Think how the organization of an Open tournament would impact on the social and kids' life, crowding the facilities with strangers to the institution, sometimes with the members looking down on the visitors because they are interfering with their routines. It is the task of the manager to cope with these different interests, and provide a balance that favours both parties.

## CONCLUSION

### How to encourage tennis practice in 'elite clubs'?

The first question to be asked is if tennis practice is to be encouraged, that is to say if the idea is to lay emphasis on the athletic aspect of the tennis club rather than on its social aspect. This athletic aspect includes teaching, coaching, and tennis related activities as well as competitions, which in 'elite clubs' are practically neglected by members since their fees are mostly used to cover the social budget. The range of services offered by the club determines the monthly fees to be paid, regardless of the number of services each member uses. In those clubs that offer little more than tennis, only tennis players pay the fees, thus the tennis school becomes the cornerstone for the budget to such an extent, that the doors are open to non-member students as well. So, in general, this sport life does not compete with other activities that require different facilities.

But there are problems that occur when certain aspects of this coaching programme overlap with people sharing the same facilities. This is a tough conflict which can only be solved with a "club policy", usually designed by the Board of Directors and deployed by the manager. Often, the long hours of the tennis schools interfere with the life of those members who expect to have free tennis courts to play on. In other words, the kids get the benefits, whilst the adults who pay the fees do not.

This is not so much so when the adults who have no free courts to play are the parents of those children attending the tennis school. But this is not always the case. Unfortunately, restricted access to courts as a result of the coaching programme is often a reality in many of these 'elite' clubs. The good will of the managers cannot interfere with certain aspects that nobody dares to change. However, tennis always prevails. Our society has been able to provide a solution to this endless spiral. For different reasons, the training deficit in elite clubs has been compensated with entities and centres that bridge this gap. Not only are there many programmes for beginners developed by the town hall or small clubs that are always more open than those hermetic traditional clubs, there are also small academies that cater for elite tennis offering an alternative quality programme. This has contributed to the development of our sport in all areas, placing it in a privileged position in the world.

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