

I Was an Elite Tennis Athlete; I Played, I Won, I'm Forced and I Left*

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Abstract

Tennis players may encounter many physical and mental difficulties on the way to becoming a performance athlete by focusing on their careers and having to sacrifice their educational experiences, work opportunities and social lives. While this situation leads to an increase in their tendency to quit sports at an early age, it also shows that there is a need for studies to determine the factors that affect sports behavior. In this direction, the aim of the study is to examine and evaluate the reasons for starting and continuing tennis, the difficulties they encounter as athletes and the reasons for quitting tennis. This research, which was conducted with qualitative methodology, was carried out within the scope of phenomenology pattern. In this study, in which convenience sampling and criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling methods, were used together, a screening was carried out according to the pre-established criteria in the process of determining the participant. In line with these criteria, the study group consists of 22 athletes, male and female, who have played elite tennis in clubs affiliated to the Turkish Tennis Federation and who have quit tennis. From the participants; They were asked to answer questions about the reasons for starting tennis, the reasons for becoming an elite tennis player, the difficulties they encountered while playing tennis, and the reasons for quitting tennis. The data obtained were coded within the framework of questions and sub-questions using content analysis, and then themes and sub-themes were determined. As a result, the majority of the participants stated that they started tennis with the support of their parents, they expected to have a reputation/status and to have social/educational opportunities thanks to tennis. In addition, it was concluded that they could not be motivated enough to train-competition due to the lack of knowledge of their trainers and they stopped playing tennis due to permanent injuries, surgical operations and mental fatigue.

Keywords: Tennis, Elite tennis player, Phenomenology, Qualitative research

Introduction

Tennis is an important mass sport, which is among the popular branches because it is a competitive branch with high spectator pleasure consisting of aesthetic movement forms and offers millions of people the opportunity to participate both as spectators and participants (Ölçücü et al., 2012). Since its inception, tennis has gained an important place in the world with many different milestones such as updates to the rules, the organization of various cups and participation in the Olympics (ITF, 2023). The increasing number of tournaments and financial rewards, especially towards the end of the 1960s, accelerated the transition from amateurism to professionalism and caused tennis to turn into a large industry that promises a full-time job for athletes in this branch (Örnek and Biçer, 2021). Although the increase in opportunities is a factor that triggers the reason for preference, the fact that tennis athletes do this sport professionally, as in almost every branch, may cause them to become individuals who sacrifice other areas of their lives.

When we look at the development of a tennis athlete, we can say that the age range of 3 to 6 is the first step towards becoming a professional tennis player. While the age of showing advanced skills is accepted as around 12 years old, it is expected to participate in regional and national tournaments at the age of 14 to 16 years old, and to play tennis in international tournaments around the age of 18, transitioning to a professional career after the age of 16. In addition to the age-based scale, a tennis athlete who aims to become a professional must not only have the right technique and a certain talent, but also be successful in many parameters such as hard work, dedication, perseverance, athleticism and social support. Although all these parameters are seen as some motivational sources for tennis athletes to continue in this branch, especially being a player in the league status or playing tennis for financial gain can be considered as the main factors that increase the success motivation of athletes (Martin, 2015; Oršolić, et al., 2023; Oruç, 2018; United States Tennis Association, 2004). Despite many different motivational factors, the reason why elite level tennis athletes quit this sport is a question mark in mind.

Looking at the literature, in a study conducted with elite athletes in the transition process after quitting tennis, it is seen that a combination of burnout, financial distress and general unhappiness on tour was the most common reason for athletes to quit tennis, in addition to many different reasons individually (Uberoi, 2012). In 2002, in another study conducted with Australian female athletes who quit tennis, it was concluded that 66% of the athletes who left the tour did not regret leaving the tour and none of the remaining athletes attempted to return despite regretting leaving the tour (Young, et al., 2006). In another study on career problems and retirement conducted with female elite tennis athletes, it was found that the athletes did not find it traumatic to leave the competitive years and even saw it as an opportunity to re-establish more traditional social roles and lifestyles (Allison & Meyer, 1998).

Considering the small number of studies in the literature on the reasons why elite tennis athletes quit the sport, this study was designed to contribute to the literature by examining and evaluating elite tennis athletes' experiences of starting and continuing tennis, the difficulties they face as an athlete and the reasons for quitting tennis in the Turkish sample.

Material and Method

Research Model

This research, which was designed with qualitative methodology, was conducted within the scope of phenomenology design. "In phenomenological studies, there are gems of essence in assumptions and shared experiences. These gems are often the main meanings understood through an experienced phenomenon. Different people's experiences are bracketed, analyzed and compared to define the reality of the phenomenon" (Patton, 2002). In this study, we tried to make sense of how elite level tennis players experience tennis, how they codify these experiences individually and collectively in their consciousness, and why they quit tennis.

The study was conducted by obtaining the ethics commission evaluation and approval certificate of Gazi University, numbered E-77082166-604.01.02-653768 and dated 12.05.2023 (Research code: 2023-648).

Study Group

In qualitative research, the researcher "carefully and rigorously seeks to understand the particular or unique in depth, rather than to find out what the general truth about the majority is. For this purpose, a single case or a small, non-random, purposeful sample is selected" (Merriam, 2015). In this study, in which convenience sampling and criterion sampling, which are among the purposive sampling methods, were used together, a screening was carried out according to pre-established criteria in the process of determining the participants. In line with these criteria, the study group consisted of a total of 20 male and female athletes who started tennis between the ages of 3 and 6, participated in national team selection tournaments at the age of 12, and quit tennis at the elite level despite achieving degrees in Turkish championships.

The ages of the athletes participating in the study vary between 25 and 36 years. For ease of interpretation in the analysis, the age variable was divided into three groups: 25 years and younger, 26-35 years and 36 years and older. The youngest member of the research group is 21 years old and the oldest member is 36 years old and the average age of the participants is 25.68. Descriptive statistics of the research group are given in the table below. In addition to the table, it was observed that the participants had been playing tennis for an average of 14 years and had been away from tennis professionally for an average of 8 years.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Study Group (n=20)

	Groups	f	%
Gender	Female	12	59,1
	Male	8	40,9
Age	25 years and below	15	72,7
	26-35 years old	3	18,2
	36 years and older	2	9,1
Education Status	Associate Degree	3	13,7
	Undergraduate	15	77,3
	Master's Degree	1	4,5
	PhD	1	4,5

When the descriptive statistics of the study group are analyzed, it is revealed that a total of 20 tennis athletes, male and female, were included in the research. There are 15 athletes in the 25 and under age group, 3 athletes in the 26-35 age group and 2 athletes in the 36 and over age group. 3 of these athletes completed their associate degree, 15 completed their undergraduate education and 2 completed their graduate education.

Data Collection Tool

A semi-structured interview form prepared by the researchers was used as a data collection tool. Semi-structured interview is a form in which the questions are determined beforehand, These are the types of questions that are filtered through information filtering, where answers can be open-ended (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013). Before preparing the interview form, the second researcher made field observations and took field notes. Based on these observations and field notes, 4 open-ended questions were formed by utilizing the relevant literature within the framework of the purpose of the research. Care was taken to ensure that the interview questions were clear and understandable, and attention was paid to the order of meaning of the questions. Then, the athletes were first contacted by phone and informed about the purpose, content and method of the study, and the athletes were informed that the interviews would be used only for this study and that voice recordings would be taken in line with their permission. Individual face-to-face interviews of approximately 30 minutes each were conducted with those who volunteered to participate in the study. In the interviews, probing questions were also asked to the athletes when deemed necessary.

Data Analysis

Content analysis (Patton, 2002) was used to analyze the data obtained from the athletes. The related codes obtained from the analysis were thematized within the framework of questions and sub-questions and transformed into findings. Excerpts from the statements given by the athletes participating in the study were used in the findings section. In the sample sentences for the statements given by the athletes in order to protect their identities, codes such as S1, S2, S3 were used instead of the names of the participants. In addition, inter-rater reliability was performed for the rigour of the study (Campbell et al., 2013). Inter-rater reliability is the process of two or more researchers independently coding the data in order to reach an agreement on the accuracy of the codes and the codes in order to check whether the coding is reproducible and therefore of high quality.

Findings

Table 1. Reasons Why Athletes Started Tennis

Theme	Sub Theme	Code	f
Reasons to start tennis	Family	mother, father, sister, cousin, uncle	15
	Social environment	friends, desire to become a national athlete	3
	Education environment	physical education teacher, obtaining a	2

	scholarship	
Visual platform	tennis matches broadcast on television, tennis athletes on social media	2

When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that the theme of the reasons why athletes started tennis consists of four sub-themes and the codes belonging to these sub-themes. The majority of the athletes emphasize that they started tennis with the support of their families. In this direction, it can be interpreted that the presence of individuals interested in tennis in the families of the athletes plays an important role in the athletes' orientation towards tennis. In addition, another factor in the athletes' tendency towards tennis is the recommendation of the friend group and the physical education teacher, in other words, it can be said that they started tennis by being influenced by the educational environment and social environment. The statements obtained from the athletes regarding this information are as follows;

- "I started tennis thanks to my mom and dad and influenced by my sister." (S2)
- "...my brother went to soccer and my sister went to tennis. I would like to play tennis with my sister." (S6)
- "...my cousin is one of the most important people here, after my father..." (S10)
- "...my friends were going to tennis in summer school. I was also enthusiastic." (S19)
- "The tennis matches my father watched on TV attracted my attention. As I watched those matches, I became curious about playing." (S13)
- "...I used to watch people playing tennis on the tennis court of the complex and I wanted to play tennis like them." (S16)
- "... my uncle loved tennis matches. I discovered this branch thanks to him" (S1)

Table 2. Motivations of Athletes to Continue Tennis

Theme	Sub Theme	Code	f
Motivations to continue tennis	Profession/Job	desire to become a tennis coach, desire to become a physical education teacher, desire to earn financial income	6
	Fame/Status	the desire to become a well-known athlete, desire to become a national athlete	6
	Social/educational opportunities	having the opportunity to go abroad thanks to tennis, hope of getting into university related to sports	8
	Health situation	to remain physically and mentally healthy throughout life, gain a good physical appearance	4
	Mood	satisfaction with achieving success, feeling happy while playing tennis, be discharged, getting away from negative emotions and thoughts	4

When Table 2 is examined, it is seen that the theme of motivations to continue tennis is divided into five sub-themes and the codes representing these sub-themes in line with the data obtained from the athletes. When the findings obtained from the athletes are examined, it is seen that the most recurring codes are concentrated in the sub-themes of obtaining

social/educational opportunities through tennis, gaining fame/status and the expectation of obtaining a profession, while it is noteworthy that the codes in the sub-themes related to health and emotional state are equally repeated. In the light of all this information, sample statements obtained from athletes are as follows;

- "...continuing tennis at an elite level with intensive training made me feel better mentally and physically every day." (S5)
- "When I was playing tennis at a professional level, I felt happier than I was. It was a real happiness. The crowd of spectators..." (S13)
- "...I get the opportunity to go abroad, even if not all the time..." (S7)
- "...Thinking that I was being watched while playing used to motivate me incredibly. When I had a fight with a friend, I would be free from the negative effects and thoughts of that incident..."(S12)

Table 3. Challenges Athletes Face While Playing Tennis

Theme	Sub Theme	Code	f
Challenges they face while playing tennis	Material conditions	lack of sponsors	2
	Training	lack/insufficient knowledge of coaches, very challenging training, lack of motivation to go to training	10
	Educational environment	inability to attend school, decline in academic success	3
	Time	not being able to participate in social activities, not being able to spend time with family members	5
	Health situation	injuries, illnesses, delayed recovery	3

When Table 3 is examined, it is seen that the theme of difficulties encountered while playing tennis is divided into five sub-themes in line with the data obtained from the athletes and the relevant codes representing these sub-themes. Considering the information obtained from the Athletes, in addition to the findings in the sub-themes of financial conditions, time and health status, in the sub-theme of "training", where the codes are the most intense, it is seen that the majority of the athletes emphasize that the lack of or insufficient knowledge of the coach increases the loss of motivation and this situation paves the way for injuries. Participant statements representing this situation and other codes are as follows;

- "...it was incredibly difficult days, not being able to leave the house for days because of the knee injury I had...I couldn't continue school..." (S8)
- "...I didn't even have the opportunity to go on a picnic with my family...it was a fact that I was an unsuccessful student, especially in science classes because I couldn't study after the trainings and I felt very tired." (S17)
- "...My parents were already living separately. I was having a hard time making time for them..."(S3)
- Tennis was an important part of my life, but I was always arguing with my coach and we usually didn't agree on anything. Over time, I moved away from tennis..."(S11)

Table 4. Reasons Why Athletes Quit Tennis

Theme	Sub Theme	Code	f
Reasons for quitting tennis	Health situation	injuries, surgical operations, mental fatigue, burnout	16
	Material conditions	economic conditions, tournaments being expensive	6

When Table 4 is examined, it is seen that the theme of reasons for quitting tennis is divided into two sub-themes and the related codes representing these sub-themes according to the data obtained from the athletes. A strong majority of the athletes emphasize that they quit tennis due to health conditions. In addition, the athletes also clearly stated that they moved away from tennis due to financial conditions. Representative statements obtained from the athletes related to the relevant theme are as follows;

- "Tournament expenses were very difficult for me and my family. I could not participate in the tournaments I was supposed to participate in, I could not recognize my opponents, my performance was negatively affected, of course, my injuries were also effective." (S14)
- "The surgeries and the recovery process afterwards, sometimes full recovery, sometimes no recovery at all..." (S15)
- "I had a surgical operation and the process was very difficult..."(S9)
- "Each tournament was a separate financial burden..."(S20)

Discussion and Conclusion

It was carried out to examine and evaluate the reasons why elite tennis athletes started and continued playing tennis, the difficulties they encountered as athletes, and the reasons for quitting tennis.

Many theories have been developed to explain the factors that motivate individuals to take up tennis. Crandall (1980) argued that the individual's personality and the situation he/she is in are effective, while Levy (1979) tried to explain tennis playing with the interaction between the individual's personality and the environment and social conditions he/she is in. In addition, Deci and Ryan (1985) defined this situation as intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation and motivation. Maslow (1943) argued that the factors that motivate an individual to play tennis correspond to the need for belonging, the need for love and the need for values in the pyramid of needs; Pintrich (2000) tried to explain this with the individual's competition with himself or others. Engeström et al. (1999) tried to explain the Activity Theory as the individual's mental, physical, or emotional readiness to compete and self-sufficiency. In addition to these, Frederick Herzberg's Dual Factor approach and Clayton Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness, and Development approach, which expresses Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a different way, have also tried to explain the factors that motivate individuals to

start tennis. Apart from these, it is also possible to explain the individual's starting tennis with physical motivators, social motivators, and psychological motivators.

When the findings related to the reasons why the athletes started tennis are examined in this study, the majority of the athletes emphasize that they started tennis with the support of their families. At the end of the research, it is seen that the participants turned to tennis with a tradition from their families. Therefore, it was seen that one or both of the participants' parents were previously interested in tennis. This situation also reveals that athletes are influenced by their families in turning to tennis. Looking at the literature, it is noticeable that there are studies that support this finding (Yılmaz & Kartal, 2022; Örnek & Biçer, 2021; Aras and Asma, 2020). As a matter of fact, in the study on the reasons for starting tennis and expectations of performance tennis players in Turkey, it was observed that the influence of mother, father, and siblings was high in the reasons why athletes started tennis. On the other hand, in the literature, Yüksel (2019) examined the relationship between the family's participation in sports and their children's orientation towards elite sports and found that parents who do sports in the family direct their children to elite sports or support them more to become an elite athlete compared to their parents who do not do sports. In the study by Tunçel (2021), in which the effect of family, environment, and society elements on the orientation of professional athletes playing in the women's volleyball first league to the volleyball branch was investigated, it was determined that the presence of individuals interested in sports in the families of volleyball players had a significant effect on their orientation to volleyball.

In addition, another factor in the athletes' orientation towards tennis is the friend group, the recommendation of the physical education teacher, and obtaining scholarships. In other words, it can be said that they started tennis because of influences from their educational and social environments. In support of this finding, Ölçücü et al. (2012) conducted a study with athletes participating in the Turkish Interuniversity Tennis Tournament and concluded that most of the athletes were trying to get educational scholarships from foreign universities through tennis.

When the findings regarding the motivations of the athletes to continue tennis are evaluated, it is seen that the most recurring codes are concentrated in the sub-themes of obtaining social/educational opportunities through tennis, gaining fame/status, and the expectation of obtaining a profession, while it is noteworthy that the codes in the sub-themes related to healthy status and emotional state are equally repeated. This finding can be explained by the dual-factor theory developed by Frederick Herzberg. The dual factor theory argues that needs are the basis of motivation (Akdeniz and Ardahan, 2020; Alshmemri et al., 2017; Okholm Kryger et al., 2015). In addition, the individual aims to protect and improve his/her physical and mental health while continuing to play tennis. Physically, they play tennis to protect and improve their health and to be more energetic and fit. Mentally, they play tennis to relax, to get away from the stress of work/school life and daily life, to renew and refresh themselves, and to protect their mental health. In the context of social motivators, the individual continues to play tennis in line with the need to socialize, establish new relationships, make new friends,

make a new partner, feel that they belong to a group, or do the same activity with the group they are in.

When the findings regarding the difficulties encountered by the athletes while playing tennis are analyzed, it is seen that the majority of the athletes emphasized that the lack of or insufficient knowledge of the coach increases the loss of motivation, and this situation paves the way for injuries. In support of this finding, Örnek and Biçer (2021), in their study conducted with twelve athletes between the ages of 16-30 who played tennis at the elite level and quit tennis, emphasized that athletes generally encountered financial difficulties while evaluating their views on the difficulties they faced while playing tennis.

When we look at the findings that try to explain the reasons why the athletes quit tennis, the majority of them emphasize that they quit tennis due to health conditions. In addition, the athletes also stated that they moved away from tennis due to financial conditions. In support of this finding, Okholm Kryger et al. (2015), in a study conducted with female and male elite tennis athletes, emphasized that athletes quit tennis mostly due to thigh and back injuries. Again, Young et al. (2006), in their study on elite tennis athletes' quitting professional tennis tournaments, reached twenty-eight women who quit tennis in Australia and applied a questionnaire. As a result of the study, it was determined that the women who quit tennis with a plan characterized this period as easy, while the women who quit tennis without a plan characterized this period as difficult.

When the results of this study are evaluated in general, it is seen that the majority of the athletes started tennis with the support of their parents and that they expected to gain fame/status and social/educational opportunities through tennis. In addition, it was concluded that the athletes could not be motivated enough for training competitions due to incomplete or insufficient information from their coaches and that they quit tennis due to permanent injuries, surgical operations, and mental fatigue.

Based on the results of this study, which was designed for the main purpose of the reasons why athletes quit tennis:

It is recommended that tennis coaches should not only train their athletes with technical information about their branch, but also make training programs in which psychological processes that will create a source of motivation are also at the forefront.

Studies can be carried out for economic support plans such as scholarships for professional tennis athletes who have financial problems so that they can continue playing tennis.

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