

PLAY AND STAY OR PLAY AND GO?

James Newman (ITF)



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The role of sport commitment and enjoyment in retaining recreational players

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"When you're a kid, you're a little bit of everything: artist, scientist, athlete, scholar...sometimes it seems like growing up is a process of giving those things up, one by one" – **Kevin Arnold, The Wonder Years** (1)

Whilst overall tennis worldwide continues to grow, especially in regions like Asia and Latin America, research done in 2003 in a major tennis nation showed that, 70 million people nationwide had tried tennis and over 97% had 'no interest' in playing again (7). This statistic is indicative of the challenge facing many mature tennis nations who, whilst continuing to attract reasonable numbers of players to the game, are struggling to retain them, and in some cases are losing as many, if not more.

Last year saw the launch of the ITF's Tennis...Play and Stay campaign, which aims to improve the first experiences of starter players in order to retain more players in the sport.

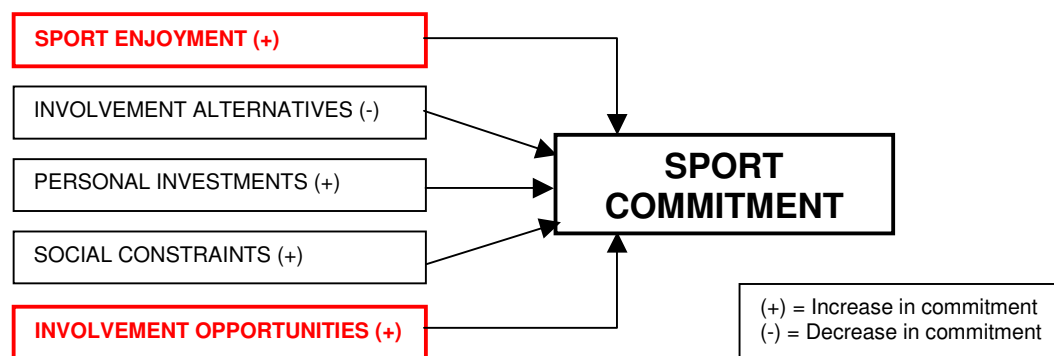
This article describes the sources of sport commitment and enjoyment, to offer readers insight into why players Play and Stay or Play and Go.

What is Sport Commitment?

Sport commitment has been defined as "a psychological construct representing the desire and resolve to continue sport participation" (4: 6). Sport Commitment is a strong predictor of participation.

The Sport Commitment Model (1,5)

The Sport Commitment Model highlights factors that influence how committed an individual is to their sport or programme.



Involvement Alternatives

Examples: Other sports, non-sport recreational activities

Brief Description: The strength of alternative activities, instead of participating in tennis

More: Higher (or more) involvement alternatives leads to lower Sport Commitment. Children often have very high involvement alternatives (football, basketball, hockey etc). Adults generally have less alternatives but also have less free time.

How can this factor be affected: It is not possible to directly affect this factor, however coaches can make the alternatives less attractive by growing 'Involvement Opportunities' (below).

Personal Investments

Examples: Time, effort, money

Description: The 'personal resources' put into the sport, which cannot be retrieved if participation ends. The greater the personal resources invested – the greater the Sport Commitment. Starter players are the most fragile under this factor as they are most likely to have low personal investments (ie they have not put much time, effort or money into the sport).

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How this factor can be affected: Key for coaches is to maximise personal investment by improving mastery and social opportunities. Those who have committed time and effort and gain a group of friends and ability to rally – will have greater Sport Commitment than those who invest the same time and effort but do not experience a positive social environment or develop skills to play the game.

Social Constraints

Examples: Perceived parental or peer pressure, only way to see friends

Description: External pressure on an individual to continue performance. The greater the pressure the higher the Sport Commitment. This factor can be negative to the individual (e.g. parental pressure) or non-harming (e.g. attending to see friends).

How this factor can be affected: Coaches should identify players under negative pressure to participate and, where appropriate, address the source of the pressure.

Involvement Opportunities (Important)

Examples: Mastery, socialising, health benefits

Description: Opportunities available only through participation in the sport/coaching programme. The greater the perceived opportunities by the individual, the higher their Sport Commitment.

How this factor can be affected: Recreational players want to play tennis. Coaches who use a game-based approach and, where necessary slower balls, smaller courts and shorter rackets, give players more chance to play the game and be more physically active, rather than more technical-directive approaches focused on closed execution (form) rather than ability to play (function). Clubs should also be friendly, active and comfortable environments that promote social interaction as a major factor of playing tennis.

Sport Enjoyment

Sport enjoyment is the biggest determinant of Sport Commitment and continued participation. Those higher in Sport Enjoyment have higher Sport Commitment, and vice-versa.

A recent presentation discussed the ‘fundamentals’, and reflected that many lessons could provide the ‘fun’ but not ‘damentals’! An important point is that fun alone may not be sufficient to improve or retain players. It is important to recognise that whilst enjoyment can be defined as “a positive affective response to the sport experience that reflects generalized feelings such as pleasure, liking, and fun” (Scanlan et al, 1993: 6), it also encompasses feelings of mastery (McCarthy et al, 2007).

Sources of Sport Enjoyment (1,2,3,4,6)

Intrinsic

Source	For	How to affect
Demonstrating mastery (attempting and performing skills)	Children and Adults	Increase player’s feelings of mastery by assisting in the learning of many skills and by creating situations for starter players to play the game from early on (i.e. serve, rally, score from the first lesson). When starter players experience success playing the game, they may feel a strong sense of mastery.
Demonstrating superiority (showing higher ability than others)	Children (age 4/5 and above) and some adults	Coaches can try to ensure all players get a chance to succeed in some element or exercise in the session.
Excitement and challenge	Important for all ages	4 ways coaches can provide excitement and challenge are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Set goals/targets in practice 2. Create dynamic but relevant activity 3. Vary exercises 4. Provide optimal challenge
Physical sensations and exertion	Very important for all ages	Young children need lots of activity (with appropriate rest). Coaches should avoid lines and include off-court activity stations when rotating players on and off court. Adults are also motivated by being active for significant periods.

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Extrinsic

Source	For	How to affect
Encouragement and social recognition of competence/achievement	Strong for children and some adults	Coaches should provide players, especially starters, with lots of appropriate praise and encouragement to build confidence and enjoyment.
Instruction, Direction, Organised Activity	Older Children and Adults	Tennis coaches can provide a logical, structured but flexible programme aimed at enjoyable progression – not aimless fun or strict teaching
Social interactions (friendships)	Important for all	Coaches and clubs should provide opportunities for players (especially adults) to make friends and socialise. Ideas such as: assigning a 'buddy' to new members, providing a free drink in the café after each lesson and organised excursions will add to the social bonds that increase enjoyment
Positive coach behaviour	Very significant to all	Coach behaviour that is positive, encouraging, and instruction that is clear but not dictatorial, is a major source of Sport Enjoyment

Sources of Sport Non-Enjoyment (3)

Intrinsic

Source	For	How to affect
Demonstrating low competence	Very significant to children and adults	Optimal Challenge is when players succeed around 75% of the time, non-optimal is where they succeed/fail all of the time. Coaches must adapt the activity to suit the player to ensure they can achieve sufficient success

Extrinsic

Source	For	How to affect
Over-involved parents or negative parental feedback	Children only	Download and give out this guide to parents
Low informational and emotional support	Significant to children and some adults	Provide clear instructions or descriptions of what you expect players to do and provide encouragement and support
Over-emphasis on competition	Mainly children	Coaches should emphasise performance and not results in competition. Provide awards for best effort, sportsmanship etc and set process and performance goals to provide achievement outside of match results
High standards	All ages	Optimal challenge and differentiation are tools to ensure players enjoy playing and learning. If the activity is too hard or coaches get frustrated at a player's inability – players will not enjoy playing
Negative feedback or low reinforcement	All ages	Starter players need regular, positive reinforcement and feedback. Generally, the amount of feedback reduces with the experience and ability of the players. Coaches should give constructive/corrective feedback, rather than negative
Opponent standard is too different to own	All ages	All players should have an International Tennis Number (ITN) that rates their ability. When all players at the club have an ITN, it is simple to group players of a similar ability. See www.ontourassessment.com

A NOTE ON AGE

Though the Sport Commitment model is relevant to both adults and juniors; children (especially those in the sampling phase of 7-12 years) have limited control over sport participation, and an extra factor of 'parental influence' exists.

SUMMARY

Sport Commitment is directly related to retaining players in sport. Coaches and administrators aware of the factors that affect sport commitment can manipulate their programmes to increase player commitment and retention. Sport Enjoyment is the most significant source of Sport Commitment.

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Often 'fun' and 'enjoyment' are used as throwaway terms. Research has shown that 'mastery', 'effort', and 'competence' (4,6) are strong predictors of enjoyment. This lends some support campaigns such as the ITF's Tennis...Play and Stay, which promotes the use of slower balls with starter players to enable them to play (begin mastering) the game from the first lesson.

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