Tennis A Sociological Perspective Essay, Research Paper

Young people have to devote a large portion of their time to studies and/or part-time work. As a result, many of them do not have enough time to engage in leisure activities. Some people, somehow, manage to find some spare time to engage in a number of leisure activities in order to release the pressure from boring daily routine.

Although people may be able to find time to do sports, only a very small number are found on the tennis court. This is surprising for the reason that tennis is a popular sport in many countries. Despite its popularity, there are many perceivable barriers in terms of age, race and gender.

Because of the high speed and power of the game, tennis has a great demand on physical strength. Most people who engage in tennis are in their adolescence or early adulthood. While a number of seniors find it hard to keep up the pace and eventually change to other less rigorous activities such as: jogging, swimming, golfing and bowling. 10-times grand slam champion and former world No.1, Ivan Lendl, at the age of 38, admitted to the Tennis Magazine “I have increased my interest in Golf over the past few years as I feel that my physical strength is diminishing in a rapid fashion.” The average age of a female player who is ranked in the top 100 is 21.91 while the average age of a male player who is ranked in the top 100 is 25.32. The trend of the average age of the tennis players is still decreasing. It is not surprising that all of my fellow tennis partners are in their early 20’s. Most of them are college students who manage to spend some time on the tennis court.

Race seems to be a factor in determining the likelihood of a person becoming a

1 Data from WTA web site

2 Data from ATP web site

tennis player. There are two obvious natural causes of such racial differences: climate or geographical condition and physical statue. Everyone realizes that ice hockey is largely a European and North American sport because of the cold weather and ice field accessibility. Although tennis does not need such special requirement of an ice field and skates, still, the majority people who play tennis are white. Although wealthy residences have access to tennis facilities in larger African cities such as Johannesburg, Cairo and Casablanca, many countries still do not have a standard tennis court open for public. The lack of adequate tennis court, rackets and funding in sports programs that discourage many African residences in playing tennis.

Traditionally, only a few Asians are engage in tennis. Shorter people tend to have more problems with serving and volleying than taller people do. Because of the physical disadvantages, Asians are more likely to engage in sports that do not have such apparent disadvantages. For example, table tennis, gymnastics and badminton. Though in recent years, more and more Asians are willing to pick up their rackets, perhaps inspired by the success of Michael Chang. Michael Chang is American born Chinese and he is about 173 cm tall. Chang overcame his physical disadvantage and won the prestigious French Open in 1989. He still holds the honour of being the youngest male player ever to win a grand slam title. In addition to the recent successes of Michael Chang, Kimiko Date and a few other Asian players, technological improvement of the tennis equipment also encourages more Asian to play tennis. In particular, the extra-long racket which helps shorter player to serve and volley more accurately and powerfully.

While the number of Asian tennis players has increased steadily over the past decade, the numbers of black participants remain unchanged in most countries. The lack of facility disadvantage is not the only reason for the lack of black participants.

Controversially, the racial prejudice is another huge reason. Professional athlete’s opinions about racism discourage many coloured people from playing the sport. Recent racism controversy between Venus William and Irina Spirlea has worsened the racial problems in tennis. During the semi-final match of the 1997 US Open semi-final, Irina Spirlea purposely or unpurposely gave Venus an elbow. Aftewards, they have been verbally insulted each other in a numbers of occasions. Phases like white turkey and black idiot definitely make the racism problem in tennis even more complicated. The racism accounts for the major reason on why the blacks in the United States, who have access to public tennis court, still are not that interest in tennis anyway. The lack of black’s success in major

tennis tournaments is certainly another factor for such attitude. In addition to that, black children grow up under the powerful influences of NBA. They admire star NBA players and other athletes who shine in track and field. It is quite understandable that they will try to find their way into those sports instead of tennis.

While race seems to be an important factor in determining whether a person will engage in tennis, gender may be an even a more dominant factor. Some people think that tennis is too challenging for women because of the physical demand. Therefore, girls are not supposed to engage in such rigorous sport. Besides, when people think about women tennis players, many of them have the “Hollywoood-stereotype”that some upper class girls are wearing short skirts and gathering in the tennis court regularly. Rarely do a person associate a sports figure with women tennis players. In response to the stereotype and inequality between men and women players, Monica Seles, a nine times grand slam winner and youngest ever woman champion of French Open, told the media at a press conference that,”It’s a traditional common sense, but I think a lot of traditions should change.” (Seles, 119) There is hardly any evidence to show or suggest that tennis is too challenging for women but it is still a stereotype for a lot of people. Even though more and more young women are willing to pick up a tennis racket, Women Tennis Association (WTA) points out that more than 69% of people whom play tennis are males. Also, they have found it difficult to promote the game to women, especially black women. The President of the Women Tennis Player Association and one of the greatest tennis player of all time, Martina Navratilova expresses her concern about promoting the positive images of tennis to women, especially to black women.

People who are engage in tennis are likely to be middle class in the society. It is because the cost associated with tennis. First, the cost for tennis rackets. Second the rent for tennis court. Unlike football or basketball, in which the cost of the ball is shared by a large group of people, everyone has to have a tennis racket. Also, because of the limited tennis courts in rural areas, it discourages many rural residents from participating in tennis.

Personally, I choose to participate in tennis because of three major reasons: pressure from peer group, social trend, and family’s encouragement. I picked up the tennis racket five years ago. I had no interest in the game. I did so simply to support my friend’s tennis club. They needed enough people to get funding. Furthermore, most of my friends in high school were tennis players. If I do not play tennis, I was afraid that I might be isolated. Playing tennis was certainly a need for socialization with fellow students before I finally developed my interest in the game. To some extent, I think I am also a byproduct of “Michael Chang phenomenon” as well. Because of Chang’s success in tennis despite the disadvantage of physical statue, I wanted to try this challenging game as well. While most people around me were talking about Chang and tennis, it would be to my advantage to try this game and experience the magic. Last but not least, I started this activity because I also wanted to satisfy by parents’ numerous requests for me to get more physical exercises.

One of my best tennis partners, Joshua, has chosen to engage in tennis because he thinks tennis is a cool game. He definitely thinks tennis is a trendy activity and he particularly likes the good looking outfit, tennis rackets. More importantly, Joshua thinks playing tennis can help him to date with girls because of tennis’ high status in Asian culture. In China, tennis is regarded as a high-class sport. Unlike table tennis and basketball, which are classified as common sports, playing tennis is like a sign of good taste, which improves a person’s social status or social class. It is interesting to note that Joshua has not played any tennis lately because he has changed to soccer for some more attractive jerseys and the rising popularity of soccer among girls. Sport, to some degree, and to some people, is a trendy hobby in society.

Now a days, tennis is so popular that people from different parts of the world engage in this exciting activity. Although each individual may have a special reason for engaging in tennis, people with the same cultural background are likely to have similar reasons. Significant variations tend to exist across different cultural groups.

Cultural relativism is the perception that the values of a specific culture are relatively similar and unique compared to those of other cultures. Because of such uniqueness, it is essential to adjust one’s own assumption in order to study or understand a different culture. According to an international survey done by Tennis magazine in 1993, in terms of tennis, Australians and the Swedish view it as national sports. It is like ice hockey to Canadians, basketballs to American and gymnastics to Romanians. Many teenagers choose to play tennis in Australia and Sweden because of the success of Bjorn Bjork and Roy Emerson. Bjorn Bjork, a legend Swedish player who won the Wimbledon 5 time in a row plus 4 French Open single titles. Roy Emerson, arguably the best player of all time, holds the men’s record of most single championship of grand slam at 12. Australian and Swedish kids grow up with the knowledge that world champions of tennis were born and raised in their home country and with the dream of continuing the legend. In addition, because the importance of tennis in Australia and Sweden, children are exposed to tennis in their schools. Because of the early exposure to the game and some famous legendary players in the nations’ history, the young generation of Australians and Swedish continue to see tennis as their national sports or even a tradition. In Hong Kong and Mainland China, reasons for playing tennis are a different story. There, tennis is a symbol of social status. Although in recent years, this special and somewhat erroneous feeling has been on the decline. Yet, tennis is still seen as a high-class activity in many traditional Chinese’s mind. Canadians do not have such strong cultural relativism in tennis. People play tennis for different reasons and few of them are significant or special enough to be considered as cultural values.

The good news about cultural relativism in respect to tennis is that all the values attached to tennis among different cultures are unique and important in nature. Despite the variations in social norms about tennis in different countries, there is not a culture that claims that its reason is better or more important than those of others are. Apparently, the theory of ethnocentrism does not easily apply to the cultural variations about tennis. Ethnocentrism is a thinking that one’s culture is better than others and the difficulty to accept the significance of other cultures. Ethnocentrism is always compared with cultural relativism because both theories emphasize cultural differences and ability to see or accept the importance of such differences. Because of Canada’s multicultural society, cultural relativism is a much more widely accepted belief than ethnocentrism.

To many Canadians, tennis is just one kind of sport, no more and no less. Some people enjoy the amazing feeling of hitting the yellow ball to a remote corner on the court that their opponents do not have a chance to react. To me, tennis is definitely part of my live both on and off court. From where to hit the ball in your next shot to how to promote the game to black females in rural African regions, tennis offers numerous challenges to think carefully. Besides, it is also very interesting when you think about why people may wish to engage in tennis. As you think more about it, you will notice many underlying cultural values and differences. In a sense, tennis is just like an interesting objects or phenomenon in our society. It gives us pleasure as well as many questions and problems to be solved.