



## The concept of habitus in achieving mastery in sports – tennis example

### KEYWORDS

sport performance, athletes' development, open skill sports

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**ABSTRACT** *The paper describes the concept of habitus in relation to the theory of sport training. The notion of habitus was defined by Pierre Bourdieu and is widely used to describe human behaviour in different spheres. It is defined, among others, as ability that makes "structured improvisation" or 'regulated improvisations' possible. One of the main characteristics of great athletes is that they are able to solve practical problems connecting together tactical, technical, mental and physical skills into one process, what corresponds to habitus. It is noticeable that modern training methods for tennis teaching follow the concept of Pierre Bourdieu. Understanding the habitus and the processes of habituation makes possible to comprehend many of human acts including the training process in sports. It is possible to support the value of modern training method for sports versus traditional ones using the theoretical concept of habitus.*

### INTRODUCTION

The notion of habitus was developed by a great French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (who was also a keen tennis player") and became one of the most important global socio- anthropological theories of all times (Noble and Watkins 2003). Because of its global character and implementation: the theory is widely used to describe human behaviour in many different spheres, different from sociology.

The term "habitus" is derived from the Latin habere, 'to have', and denotes the fact that capacities (which can embrace potentials, skills, and abilities) are all possessed by individuals and revealed by their exercise as dispositions to act. Habitus, according to Bourdieu, (1977, 1984, 1988, 1990), Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), Lizardo (2004) is a "generative matrix" of dispositions toward action that "makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" and through the "analogical transfer" of schemes that provides the solution to "similarly shaped problems" and which also shows the "mastery of the operations" required to achieve certain ends.

#### It can be also understood as:

- o A lasting system of durable, embodied and transposable dispositions that provides a generative matrix of classificatory and practical competences and automatisms
- o A generative structure of embodied (personified) practical action
- o The personified sensibility that makes "structured improvisation" or 'regulated improvisations' possible
- o Feature acquire increasing generality and flexibility through experience
- o The ability necessary to solve practical problems
- o A system of dispositions that have generative capacities in specific fields

The question, may occur: what habitus, as a theoretical concept, has to do with sport and tennis in particular? I found it encouraging to take up the notion of habitus and related terms (like consciousness, awareness and habituation - training) and interpret it for training science. Bourdieu (1990) argues that our being-in-the-world is largely a practical mastery (here a mastery in sports). Cognitive habitus is very close to, what practitioners call "a sport intelligence.

Understanding the habitus and the processes of habituation makes possible to comprehend many of human acts including the learning process in tennis. An example of tennis is going to be used to present a practical model linking major existing training methods under one concept called a tacti-

cal approach. In my opinion, the concept supports (or even gives a methodological base) findings of training science and modern training methodology, especially tactical approach and game based coaching.

### HABITUS AND TENNIS MASTERY

Tennis has generally open skills character but at the same time rules of the games dimensions of playing fields, typical tactical situations etc. form a kind of structure, different for each sport. During any racket sport match every incoming ball and every situation are a bit different but there are some typical situations; some rallies and tactical solutions are similar to each other, e.g. for tennis – "big" wide serve is often followed by weaker return and, as a result, forehand crosscourt winner.

One of the main characteristics of successful players is that they are able to act within these typical game situations connecting together tactical decisions, technical execution, mental confidence, physical and motor actions into one simple action. They all have own game style and favourite game patterns, but in addition, possess a special implicit ability called "the sport instinct", "feeling" or "a game sense". Because of this, they are able to make more than "hit shots over the net"; they can make unorthodox decisions, and use untypical techniques. This skill can be called improvisation and is similar e.g. to jazz musicians. This feature, among others, differs them from average players and corresponds with the term "habitus" (Calhoun 2003). Bourdieu (1990) disputes that being-in-the-world is largely a practical mastery. He calls this "le sense pratique" and likens this to a 'feel for the game'. This practical sense is specific to the field in which we are acting at that moment". Here "Habitus" means the personified sensibility (instinct, feeling) that makes possible structured improvisation, "the capacity ... to improvise the next move, the next play, the next shot" (Craig 2003).

### THE USE OF HABITUS IN SPORT TRAINING

No one begins as a masterful player; athletes are born with greater or lesser genetic potentials, but are not born with habitus. These features are developed over time and are acquired through training. Bourdieu (1995), describing boxing training, asserted "Proper practice transforms athlete "body-sense", form, patterns of movement, subjective emotional-cognitive states' that make him a competent boxer.

So, looking from Bourdieu's perspective, the goal of training process is to structure the habitus, which form a base for perfection. Habitus is developed over time, and is acquired

through enormous hard work. The content of cognitive habitus, means to "move" from the level of disposition as a tendency to the level of disposition as a demonstrable skill. A crucial part of the improvement of technique is that these skills become naturalized that is, that the reactions become automatic.

#### Interpreting his ideas for sport to become a "masterful player" it is important to:

- develop "body sense" and "feel for the game"
- naturalise technical skills - develop automatic reactions
- perfect shots' precision
- reach stability & consistency of techniques in different match -related situations
- automate on court reactions so they become instinct
- form game patterns (combinations of strokes uncomfortable for opponents) and individual game style
- develop ability to improvise

Modern training methods include developing all above-mentioned abilities. The body sense is improve, among others, with the help of coordination training (which is the most important motor ability in tennis). The idea of naturalising of technical skills for tennis "corresponds with" methods described by Schönborn (1999). He was very close to connect all training methods together introducing the concept of automation training for tennis. By automation he did not mean that strokes should be "machine like", on contrary in Schönborn's understanding automation is very close to habitus and means the ability to react "automatically" in typical game situation. The goal of automation training is to store (Bourdieu's "Sediment habituation") and master possible solutions and be able to execute them with precision. Other successful training method in tennis is called technical training in tactical situation. Its goal is to develop the ability to perform in different (typical and "preferred") match situations Pestre (1999) and is widely used world-wide. Finally by the means of tactical training it is possible to improve decision-making skills (i.e. what Bourdieu called the ability to improvise).

Bourdieu favoured the monism understanding that mind and body were attributes of a single substance and was critical to the Cartesian mind/body dualism. His approach corresponds with a concept of complex training (Schönborn 1994) and is very close to the holistic approach to coaching. Top tennis coaches believe that separating different forms of training is "more artificial than natural" (Crespo 2003) and that there is a need for further unification of training methods.

Thus experience of practitioners and works of Pierre Bourdieu are very close to each other. It is even possible to risk a conclusion that he has "discovered" many of these modern training methods before they were invented. Using the concept of habitus gives possibility to form one system which takes under its umbrella all methods mentioned above. The missing connection between theory of habitus and a training practise (i.e. above-mentioned methods) can be found in existing teaching theory called the tactical approach to coaching.

The concept of Tactical Approach (also called a Game Based Coaching, or Teaching Games for Understanding) is not new and has been widely used in Sport and Physical Education (Ronholt and Peitersen 1985, Berkowitz 1996, Griffin et. al.1997, Silverman 1997, Crespo and Cooke 1999, Okade, Yoshinaga 2000). The aim of the Tactical Approach is to enhance the overall performance of a player through developing "game sense" or "tactical instinct" together with other factors affecting tennis performance e.g. strokes' technique, motor abilities or mentality". Players working according to the tactical approach should develop games sense first, then e.g. technical or motor improvement may be needed to be intensified (Crespo & Cooke 1999, Pankhurst (1999).

According to tactical approach coaches should teach their students how to deal with different match situations which is more than just traditional way based on teaching just technical skills.

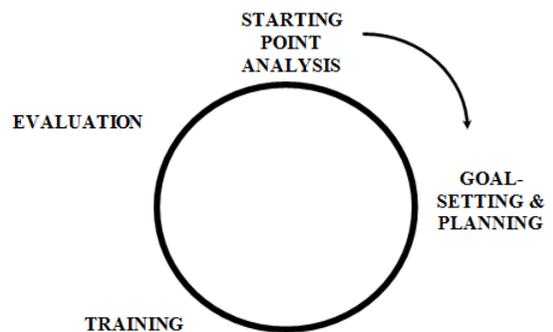
The tactical approach helps players to reach this mastery (habitus) easier and faster, it means not only learning by playing, but also incorporating "tactical thinking" more than before, to almost (all) training situations, even when practicing closed drills.

#### The main characteristics of this method organised as an interpretation of Bourdieu's concept of Tactical Approach are:

- Every drill, training session etc. has tactical purpose/goal. Even practising a closed drill, player (and coach) thinks about tactical sense (goal/function/usage) of every action,
- Using this method both a player and a coach always remember why they learn/master a given stroke, combination of strokes or game pattern e.g. "I am mastering knee-bend in order to hit an effective short angle cross-court forehand, which may be used as a passing shot."
- A coach combines teaching of tactical awareness and technical skills, usually using, above described, open-closed-open process.
- the player who works according to this method increases intrinsic motivation, because he/she knows why a boring technical drill has to be repeated several times,

Using this concept, and linking habitus with an "Effective coaching circle" (Frank van Fraayenhoven 1998) is possible to describe all major training methods (here the method useful in tennis training) as one training process.

**Fig.1 Effective Coaching Cycle/Pedagogical Model adapted from Frank van Fraayenhoven (1998)**



It can be concluded that proper, coordinated use of tactical approach will leads to tactical-technical mastery, creation of individual combat/game style and the ability for "structured improvisation, which is nothing else that Bourdieu's "Habitus".

In my opinion tennis players' development can be described by the use of ideas taken from the Bourdieu's notion. I believe that his ideas give theoretical base for a practical application for Racket Sports and support experiences of sport practitioners.

Knowing that it is just a very first approach to connect great "life" theory with training science I hope that, in the future, be likely to develop this concept and to form a sub-theory adopting the notion of habitus for sports and tennis in particular. Certainly it is possible to support the value of modern training method for sports using the theoretical notion of habitus.

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