

REFORMING THE CHINESE SPORTS SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY OF THE HEBEI  
PROVINCIAL TENNIS TEAM - THE PERSPECTIVE AND ANALYSIS  
OF A FOREIGNER WORKING IN THE SYSTEM

By

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my players in Hebei who struggle everyday to find meaning in their athletic pursuits. Also to my family and friends who have endured my absence from their daily lives and granted me understanding while I work and study abroad.

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To my brother, Shaun Haugen, who has shown me what it truly means to think outside of the box. I hope you never lose your passion for creativity and free thought.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a case study of the Hebei tennis program, which works under the auspices of the Chinese governmental sports system. The research is intended to take the reader on a chronological journey through the Chinese sports system, beginning with the infrastructure of the program, the identification and selection process of players, the methodology of education, training, and competition, the benefits and hardships, and its future as a state-controlled entity.

It is a multidisciplinary thesis that uses the Hebei tennis program and my job as the head coach to provide analysis and perspective of daily life in the Chinese sports system. In the process, I offer suggestions for reforming the Hebei tennis program while taking into account the cultural, social, political, and ideological challenges and differences of working as a foreigner within the system.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CSS	Chinese Sports System
GAOS	General Administration of Sport
CTA	Chinese Tennis Association
WTA	Women's Tennis Association
ITF	International Tennis Federation
IMG	International Management Group
NSMC	National Sport Management Center
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renminbi (Chinese currency)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

A short time ago, China was not considered a major player on the international stage. However, over the past forty years much has changed as China rapidly industrialized. Beginning in 1978, the Chinese government initiated monumental economic, political, and cultural reforms affecting nearly all facets of life. Now China's vast countryside is modernizing in all directions. These changes have given the Chinese people new freedom, opportunity, and choice to shape their lives and build toward a more independent future.

However, one system, the state-sponsored sports system, seems firmly rooted in its former communist model. It is resistant to change but continues to turn out phenomenal results year after year. Due in part to China's recent success in the Olympics and international competitions, the sporting system has been one of the last to reform.

Yet ever so slowly, the state-sponsored sport system is modernizing and pushing forward with change that is in line with capitalistic ventures occurring all across the country. My own experience is an example of that change. I am an American currently serving as the head men's and women's tennis coach for the state-sponsored Hebei province team.

In this study, I give the reader an overview of the Chinese sports system (CSS) and its goals regarding sports policy through the lens of my own experience as the head tennis coach of Hebei province. The nuances of the Hebei tennis system are addressed,

including its organization, recruitment of players, training techniques, benefits and hardships, and its future as a state-controlled entity. The study focuses on proposed reforms that may improve the Hebei tennis program and to what extent these changes face opposition from the centralized system. I incorporate first-hand accounts from the individuals involved in the Hebei tennis program, paying particular attention to how their daily involvement in this unique system affects their perspective and my perspective of the CSS.

Through my interaction with the Hebei tennis program, the research shows the advantages and flaws of the CSS. In the process I examine how outside forces may or may not be able to affect reform in the system and suggest ways in which I think the Hebei program ought to adapt to better suit China's changing sporting climate.

The research is a case study of the Hebei tennis program set in the context of ongoing national and systemic changes. In recording and giving detailed consideration to the continuing development of the Hebei tennis program, I am providing an in-depth look into the daily operations of a Chinese government sports organization. The research chronicles the events, trials and tribulations, progress and setbacks, reforms and stagnations of the system. Although I am focusing on only one example, the suggestions that I give provide a platform on which reform may be applied to other government-sponsored sports programs and to the CSS as a whole.

Due to my position as a coach embedded within the CSS and in particular the Hebei tennis program, I selected a narrative and auto-ethnographic design for the research that chronicles and gives meaning to the stories of my everyday experiences.

I enter the research as a participant and acknowledge the fact that I have biases grounded in the theory of Western methods of coaching, teaching, and studying. While I use my own background and knowledge as a method of introducing ways that the Hebei tennis program ought to be reformed, I understand that the cultural implications of my suggestions may be difficult to implement in the structure of the CSS. The following writing is a story of my time as head tennis coach in Hebei. It chronicles whether a fusion of cultural ideologies, East meeting West, can work harmoniously together to create a new and innovative approach to teaching and learning in the CSS.

## CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Behind this story is a wealth of knowledge that goes into understanding the intricacies of not only the CSS, but also the cultural attitudes that have laid the foundation on which the system is built. Over the past two years, I have been able to refine my view of the CSS through reviewing many published studies related to the issue of its structure and the reforms taking place. This has given me a sharper focus into the inner workings of the system and what has made it so successful and controversial over the past decade.

The following published studies of the CSS has lead me to discover five themes that give the narrative of my everyday experience in the Hebei tennis program a logistical and chronological flow. The readings have helped eliminate some of my previous biases and have given me a more knowledgeable platform on which to construct and introduce reform to the Hebei tennis program.

The five themes used to recount the story of the Hebei tennis program and the CSS are: 1) infrastructural organization; 2) athlete identification, selection, and recruitment; 3) training techniques and methods of competition; 4) benefits and hardships experienced; and 5) future as a state-controlled entity.

These topics provide insight into the intricate components that make up daily life in the CSS. Additionally, other articles pertain to the role of tennis in China, the policies, superstars, coaches, and future goals for the sport. My fusing of general information about the CSS, by relating it to the sport of tennis and by having first-hand accounts from

participants within the system, allows for a well-informed thesis and also assists me to work as a coach within the system.

### **The Chinese Sports System Infrastructure and Organization**

When examining the CSS, it is imperative to understand that sports in China play an important role in bolstering the status of the nation in the eyes of the international community. The truth is that sports in China play a very political role: “Sport is a powerful prism through which national identity gets refracted; it effects how a nation sees itself and the image it wants to portray to the rest of the world. Victories can represent the validation of one’s place in the world or symbolize a national aspiration” (Cha, 2009, p. 40). For China, victories in the athletic realm affirm the progress of its citizens and political system.

China’s overarching goal for its sport system is to win gold medals in the Olympic games, the pinnacle of all international sporting competitions. To accomplish this, China’s “...solution was to bring elite sport into the existing planned economy and administrative system, which could assist in the distribution of the limited resources of the whole nation to medal-winning sports” (Hong, Wu, & Xiong, 2005, p. 512-13). The system, “...called *Juguo tizhi* in Chinese and translates as ‘whole country support for the elite sport’ . . . effectively produced hundreds of thousands of young elite athletes in a short time in pursuit of ideological superiority and national status” (Hong et al., 2005, p. 512). China’s success in the 2008 Beijing Olympics is a prime example of its successful pursuit of this ideology.

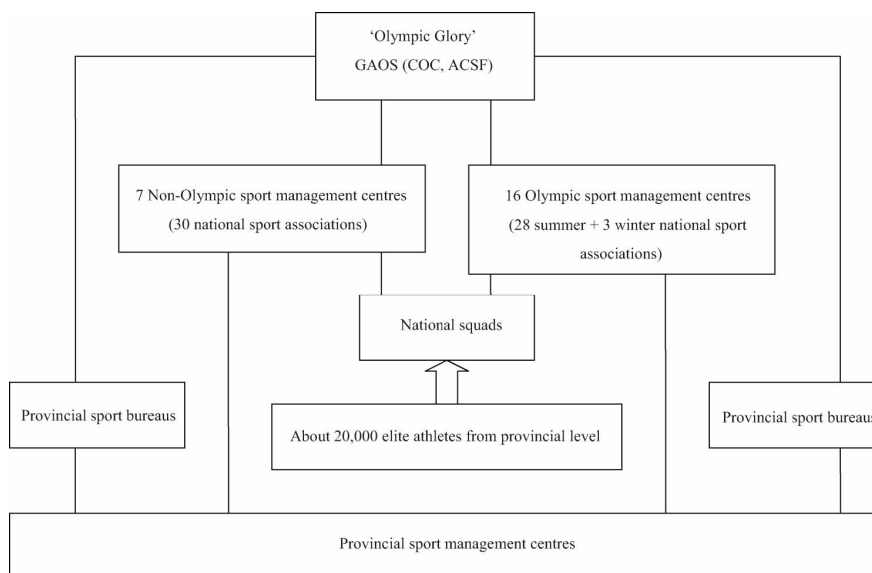


As seen in Figure 1, the system is a powerful centralized structure of the Chinese government. The General Administration of Sport (GAOS) directs the system from the top down.

GAOS which delegated its authority in relation to national elite sport selection and training and competition, to 23 quasi-autonomous organizations, i.e. national sport management centers (NSMCs), and focused on strategic policymaking for sport development . . . The primary concern of these centers is to oversee and manage the training and monitoring of national teams. At the provincial level there are also sports bureaus and management centers with responsibility for producing elite athletes for selection into the national squads. (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 317-18)

Chinese athletes, coaches, and management directors alike are concerned with one task: to ascertain upward mobility within the hierarchy of the CSS.

In this process, the best and the most talented athletes must be indentified, selected, and put through a rigorous method of training in hope of creating athletes that are prepared to succeed at the highest level of international competitions.



**Figure 1 China's Centralized Sports Structure (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 318)**

### **Chinese Elite Athlete Identification, Recruitment, and Selection Process**

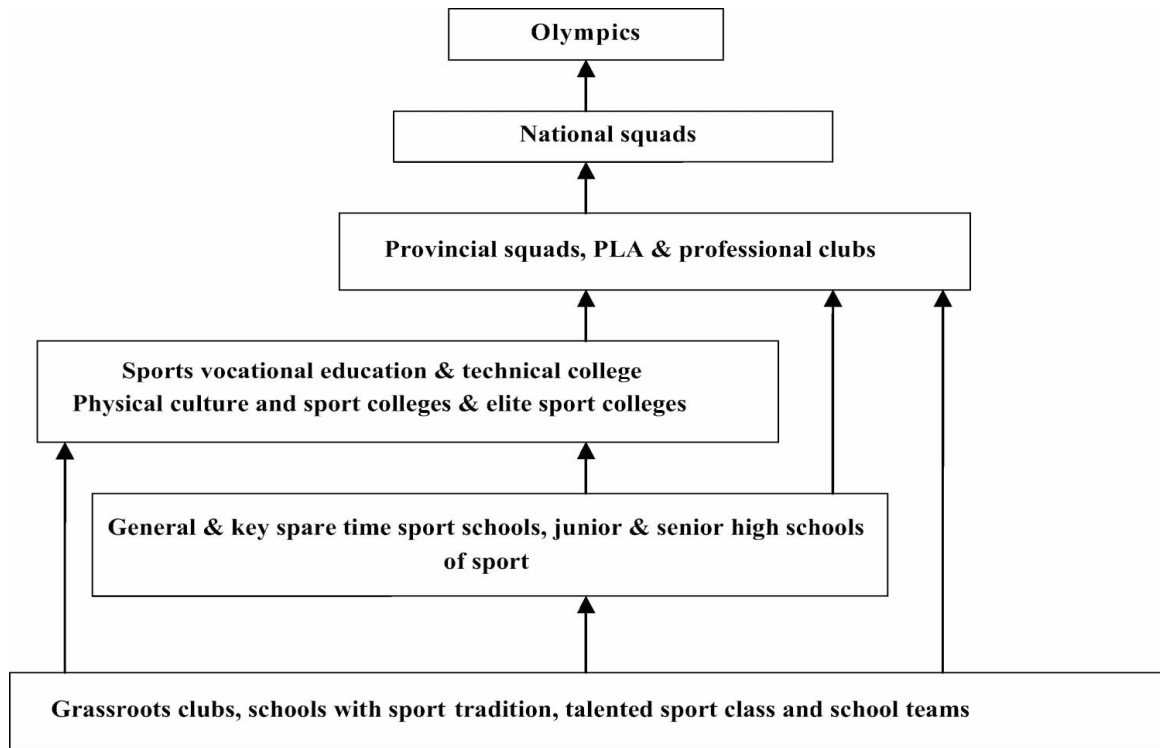
In 1952, the Olympics were held in Helsinki, Finland, and it was the first time in which the Soviet Union competed in the games. These games,

...opened the Communists' eyes and they started to understand the importance that sport could play in a vital role on the international stage to win recognition of the New China, the PRC. Furthermore, the Soviet Union success at these Olympic Games provided the Chinese Communist with a best example of how a socialist country could beat capitalist countries on the international stage. (Wei, Hong, & Zhouxiang, 2010, p. 2382)

Soon after, it was proposed to, "...the Chinese Communist party that they learn from the Soviet Union to strengthen the leadership of sport and develop a sports policy and centralized system to meet China's political and diplomatic requirements" (Wei et al., 2010, p. 2382). What followed in China was the introduction of a powerful,

centralized and hierarchical state organization of elite sport learned from the Soviets that would recruit and train professional athletes.

Currently, “China has one of the most effective systems in the world for systematically selecting and producing sports stars from a very young age” (Hong et al., 2005, p. 516). Figure 2 shows the current process used to identify and promote athletes. Hong et al. (2005) goes on to state that at the country and city level the identification system is set up to recognize young boys and girls, ages 6-9, with athletic talent for selection into local sports schools. Thus, the identification process is begun, and the most talented athletes are promoted through a ladder of upward mobility starting with spare time sports schools, to city teams, on to provincial teams, then national teams, and culminating with the Olympic squads. As the athletes are promoted through the system, their period of training also increases.



**Figure 2** China's Sport Selection System in 2007 (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 322)

### Chinese Methods of Training and Competition

To train their athletes, the Chinese use a method of strict regimen of singular purpose, centered discipline, and ultimate effort.

...the People's Army's methods – 'hard, disciplined, intensive training and practice according to real battle' – were adopted in 1963. In 1964, however, a new training method was invented. It included 'three non-afraids' – not being afraid of hardship, difficulty or injury – and 'five toughnesses': toughness of spirit, body, skill, training and competition. It has become a legendary Chinese sporting method and continues to influence China's training system

in the twenty first century. Nevertheless, since the late 1980s the emphasis has been on more scientific methods, including coaching techniques, sports science, sports psychology, sports medicine, better facilities and equipment. (Hong et al., 2005, p. 517)

The scientific process for monitoring an athlete's training can further be described as a process in which the "...whole team (including coaches, scientists, technicians and doctors) can not only develop optimal training programmes (e.g. routines, volumes, intensities) for each athlete, but also provide the athletes with personalized fitness recovery, nutrition supplements, psychological consulting and medical and information services" (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 323).

Additionally, in sports void of domestic proficiency, "...China from the late 1990s began to import foreign expertise in training methodology by hiring successful foreign sports coaches from all over the world. In the 2000s, the number of foreign coaches who serve in the national and provincial teams grew rapidly" (Wei et al., 2010, p. 2396).

Success in international competitions is the overarching focus of the CSS. In order to prepare their athletes for the international stage, in particular the Olympic games, the CSS has developed a wide range of competitive events for its athletes to participate in:

In order to motivate provincial governments to support the Olympic strategy, the government refined, substantially, the country's competition structure. This was especially so with the national games, which were the main driving force for achieving Olympic glory. To achieve Olympic success through this

competitive system, China not only mirrored the rules and regulations of the Olympics for national city games, national games and most of the provincial games, but also regarded all the games in this system as arenas for selecting, training and preparing Chinese athletes for international competition, and especially for the Olympic Games in Beijing. (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 325)

The Chinese believe that organizing more domestic competitions will give its athletes the knowledge and experience necessary to succeed at the international level.

The CSS has created a management system, recruitment process, and training regimen that have produced world-class athletes. This success has created an environment in which the athlete can thrive and benefit socially but often not without experiencing some struggles and hardships along the way.

### **Opportunities, Benefits and Hardships within the Chinese Sports System**

Adopted in 1995, the Sports Law of the People's Republic of China "...fails to articulate any rights for athletes; human rights do not qualify for competition with nationalist aspirations in the bold new program of Chinese sports. Nor does the law explicitly protect a right to challenge decisions of the newly empowered sports associations" (Nafziger & Wei, 1998, p. 465). The athletes in the CSS have little opportunity to challenge the authority of superiors and "Much of the law is in the style of a declaration, modernizes and codifies extant rules and procedures within an established framework of bureaucratic control" (Nafziger & Wei, 1998, p. 472). The bureaucracy and codification of the CSS makes it difficult for athletes to control their career.

The CSS gives little choice to athletes when it comes to how and whether they can proceed with independent athletic careers or pursue opportunities outside the realm of

sport. Decisions are made by the state and are often predicated upon an athlete's propensity for success in national and international competitions. Positive results often lead to social advancement but failure might leave an athlete with few prospects for upward mobility. However, the CSS "grants allowances and bonuses in amounts that correspond to ranking of individual athletes and ensure college enrollment and job security. These privileges, along with strengthened recruitment efforts, are intended to improve China's future athletic performance" (Nafziger & Wei, 1998, p. 470).

As Tan and Green (2008) say, athletes training at the provincial and national level often receive a monthly income, though it is dependent upon their achievements in competitions. They go on to state that there have been recent amendments to the system in regard to athlete education and career support. For example,

...GAOS encouraged provincial governments to upgrade their physical culture and sport colleges to sport vocational and technical colleges (age 14-20) to allow elite athletes to train and study at the same time, but with a focus on sport training and performance. Students can be awarded a three-year associate bachelors degree after finishing three or five-year courses. Students who graduate from elite sport colleges can enter sport universities, especially in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Wuhan, Shenyang and Chengdu. For some medalists in the National Games, Asian Games and Olympic Games, automatic qualification for entry into universities is possible. In addition, each provincial government provides retirement funding to assist athletes in the transition from elite sport to life after sport. Accordingly, the amount of funding for each athlete is awarded in relation to the period of time in her/his

respective provincial or national team and performances during her/his sport career. (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 329-30)

Despite having these provisions in place for the athletes, Hong argues that it is not enough, and most athletes leave the state-sponsored system with inadequate education, funding, or career development to support lifecycles in a highly competitive Chinese market. “Chinese culture highly values single-mindedness. It believes that success in almost any endeavor calls for total concentration and the focusing of all energies on the task at hand. It is taken for granted that anyone who has achieved greatness in any activity has done so because of their complete devotion” (Hong, 2004, p. 348). Since singular devotion is practiced, “only those who endure the most hardship can make it to the top” (Hong, 2004, p. 343) of their profession, thus allowing them a socially beneficial position once their careers have ended. Hong says the focus is placed on training long hard hours and does not leave any time for academic endeavors. Even if they do receive academic education, it is insufficient for them to succeed in a normal university setting. Once an athlete retires, they have few options to succeed outside of the sports arena. “...Child athletes are being exploited or over-worked, or deprived of their rights to health and education” (Hong, 2004, p. 343); they have little opportunity to succeed outside sports.

As China continues to change, so too will its citizens’ attitude toward how the state-sponsored sport system can provide a secure future for elite athletes. Further economic change and market forces might steadily change the focus of the nation’s sporting environment.



### **Future of the Chinese Sport System**

As reforms continue to shape the future of China, there is no doubt that they will soon reach the CSS. Geng (2001) believes that because China has accomplished so much so quickly within the area of sport, especially at the Olympic games, reform will be a slow process. Geng supports the idea that market-oriented systems will bring sponsorship and individual businesses to the forefront of the sports movement and will eventually move from a purely Olympic-driven state-sponsored system for elite athletes toward one that is integrated with market forces focused on sport for China's mass populous.

Huan (2007) believes that the state-sponsored era of sport has led to the elimination of many grassroots programs and is centered on creating elite athletes rather than giving mass society an avenue to pursue leisure and sporting interests. Huan predicts that as people's income increases, sports will take on a more decentralized nature, responding to individual business initiatives rather than state-oriented systems to train China's next batch of athletes. Individual lifestyle will be the driving force for the next era of sport and freedom of choice and the urban lifestyle will become more important than competing for the nation. Thanks in part to an open market economy, "...Chinese citizens have gained autonomy to decide whether, when, and how to participate in sport. With relative freedom, Chinese people have unleashed previously suppressed emotions, expressed previously hidden desires and pursued interests not previously allowed" (Huan, 2007, p. 459). These previously withheld emotions will spur new developments in the Chinese sporting culture. Because of the huge costs associated with the elite sports system,

The central government will again start to ‘push sport to the market’ (*tiyu shichanghua tiyu shangyehua*) with determination . . . will pay more attention to promoting sport throughout the nation at the grassroots level and bringing healthy sporting activity to the lives of many ordinary people . . . China’s Olympic medal fever will break. As an old Chinese saying goes, a thing is valued only when it is rare (*wuyixiweigui*). To become the winner of the Olympics has been the dream for generation after generation of Chinese. Once their dream comes true it will cease to be a dream. The Chinese will move to more practical and urgent social and economic issues and will be more interested in their living standards and working conditions. Sporting patriotism will lose its important position in Chinese people’s lives . . . When the Chinese no longer believe Olympic gold medals mean everything to them, the ‘whole-country support for the elite sport system’ (*Juguo tizhi*) will come to an end. (Hong et al., 2005, p. 525-26)

Some sports may provide an example of how a new era of sport can emerge in China. Tennis is a sport in China that has already experienced monumental reforms at the highest level of its organizational infrastructure within the CSS. The reform has provided a spark for change to the CSS while maintaining the integrity of the elite system of sport, and athletes can compete at the highest international levels.

### **Tennis Literature Review**

In 2010, the *Beijing Review* reported: “As an emerging tennis market, China is now drawing the attention of the entire tennis world thanks to its large potential and rising players in the sport” (Yin, 2010, para. 3). Chinese tennis has begun to succeed on

the international stage and has gained notable stars that have increased the popularity of the game. Yin reported that in 2004 the women's doubles duo of Li Ting and Sun Tiantian won gold in the Athens Olympics. More recently women's tennis star Li Na won the 2011 French Open singles title, the first grand slam for any Chinese (or Asian born) tennis player, male or female; her ranking reached a career high world ranking of #4 in June 2011 ("Na Li", 2012).

Tennis is just one of the many Olympic sports that is overseen by the national and provincial sporting bureaus and management centers. According to Yin, "Today the CTA (China Tennis Association) is still using the state supported system to train its young athletes. Under the system, the young players' are managed by the CTA and cannot have private training and competition schedules to support their individual needs and physical conditions" (Yin, 2010, para. 41).

Despite the rise of tennis in China, some see the state system as a possible hindrance to training its athletes. As reported in the *China Daily* newspaper, a prime example of this view is Carlos Rodriguez, coach of former woman's world #1 player, Justine Henin. He recently opened a tennis training academy outside of Beijing and is quoted as saying, "I see a huge potential here. You almost have everything to succeed in tennis, including the talented teenagers, the financial and social support. The only thing you lack is experienced coaching. That's why I am here and what I've brought" (Sun, 2011, para. 2-3). "He regarded China's state-supported system, which assembles and trains the players together and which works at grassroots level as 'a way of sharing experience,' but said it did not suit the best players" (Sun, 2011, para. 11).

Tennis in China is growing exponentially, and there are increasingly more foreign coaches and enterprises sprouting as market forces slowly push the system to reform and change. *The Wall Street Journal* published an article with the following information, “Sports marketing giant IMG Worldwide Inc. said it has received the necessary clearance to operate a joint venture with China Central Television and will kick off its 20-year sporting-event partnership with the state broadcaster in organizing two tennis events (Chao & Feng, 2009, para. 1). Robert Kuhn an IMG representative stated, “We see that the sports industry in China will become gigantic—the largest in the world” (Chao & Feng, 2009, para. 4). Not only does IMG stand to benefit by co-sponsoring the events, but it has also built some of the world’s largest training facilities for elite athletes. By coming into China, they gain an avenue to tap into a massive market of up and coming sports stars in China looking to maintain their autonomy from the state-sponsored system.

In one sense tennis is more unique than any other sport overseen by the CSS. The CTA has recognized this push toward individualism and the necessity for change within the system. Yin (2010) noted that in December of 2008, the CTA in a policy dubbed “Fly Alone,” released the nation’s top four women’s players Li Na, Zheng Jie, Peng Shui, and Yan Zi from state control. These players are now able to control which tournaments they play and whom they train with, and are able to form corporate sponsorships and keep a majority share of financial winnings from competitions. After Li’s 2011 French Open Singles title, Sun Jinfang, an official with the CTA, was quoted saying, “We took a lot of risks with this reform. When we let them fly, we didn’t know if they would succeed. That they have now succeeded means our reform was correct. This reform will serve as a good example for reforms in other sports” (Associated Press, 2011). However,

the fact remains that other than these four players, nearly all other aspiring talent is currently training within the state-sponsored system.

### **Discussion**

While there is no denying the recent success of Chinese athletics, the CSS remains flawed. It imposes governmental control over its most famous athletes, a control that filters down to even its youngest aspiring prospects. This centralized system continues to maintain a monopoly when it comes to administering, funding, and training the majority of China's world class and budding athletes. The hardships within the system outweigh potential benefits for the athletes. The Chinese central and local governments may provide the necessary infrastructure and resources to win international competitions but for so many competing within the system, the independent and autonomous element of sport is lost. Increasingly, the athletes see their role in the system as a job, and for many, the passion and love for the sport they play is dissipating.

For China, sports are an important gateway to the international community to showcase its progressive new era of communism as a successful and effective project. After examining the literature on this topic, the purpose of my own research became clearer. In this thesis, I investigate whether my role as the Hebei tennis coach can truly serve a model of reform within the CSS, and if the changes I bring to the Hebei tennis team can begin to bridge a diplomatic gap of misconceptions between China and the international community.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This is a case study of the Hebei tennis program written in the style of a first-person narrative. Through the examination of my experience in the CSS I include descriptive analysis of my interaction with the individuals that make up the Hebei tennis program. I chose a narrative approach to the research because it can "...story life events into order and meaning," and provide "...a framework for understanding the subject and interview data in qualitative research" (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 161). In my narrative of the Hebei tennis program, "...events are selected and then given cohesion, meaning and direction; they are made to flow and are given a sense of linearity" (Sandelowski, 1991, p. 163). The narrative approach to research,

...constitutes a kind of: a) casual thinking, in that stories are efforts to explore questions of human agency and explain lives; b) historical (as opposed to scientific) understanding that events cannot be explained except in retrospect; c) moral enterprise, in that stories are used to justify and serve as models for lives; and a kind of d) political undertaking, in that individuals often struggle to create new narratives to protest perceived storylessness in the old ones.

(Sandelowski, 1991, p.163)

The stories of the Hebei tennis team provide a first-hand explanation of how participants' lives are affected in their role with the CSS. By providing an understanding of the events that take place on a daily basis in Hebei and presenting a realistic model of

how life functions within the Hebei tennis program, I provide a political voice and opinion to accounts that without this study may not be heard.

Through this story and in collaboration with many participants, I strive to furnish depth, accuracy, persuasiveness, and realism in this account of Hebei tennis. I provide the readers with both a personal experience and auto-ethnographic approach to the research, "...work in which the researcher is a full member in the research group or setting" (Anderson, 2006, p. 375), to understand the cultural underpinnings of the CSS. Furthermore, an auto-ethnography,

...produces evocative stories that create the effect of reality; celebrates concrete experience and intimate detail; examines how human experience is endowed with meaning; is concerned with moral, ethical, and political consequences; encourages compassion and empathy; helps us know how to live and cope; features multiple voices and repositions readers and "subjects" as co-participants in dialogue; seeks a fusion between social science and literature... and connects the practices of social science with the living life. (Ellis, 1999, p. 669)

Auto-ethnography helps to capture the personal elements of the story created between the foreign participant (myself) and others involved in the Hebei tennis program.

In the study, I reflect and analyze my role as a tennis coach for the Hebei provincial team. My experience with the Hebei tennis program entails a variety of complex interactions with my directors, assistant coaches, players, and others associated with the state-sponsored program in Hebei. The research takes into account my general

experience, different roles, purpose in decision-making, awareness of effect on others, linguistic and communicative abilities, and social and cultural interactions.

Essentially, this is a story constructed to show how the system affects the daily life of all those involved. The narrative touches on a variety of subjects important to explaining how an efficient system is or might be organized to accomplish the goals and aspirations of the administrators, the players and myself. While not all of our goals may be the same, the story shows the collaboration of ideas and convergence of culture between East and West that make this situation a truly unique experience.

I write about a variety of subjects that help explain the day-to-day operations in the Hebei tennis system. The research explains how the system is run and organized. I provide insight to athlete recruitment from grassroots organizations to promotion to the state team. I touch on the regimen of athletic training expected in the Hebei program. Also to be discussed are the future opportunities, any benefits, and the hardships of being involved in the state program. Finally, I address what the future looks like for the Hebei system. Will it continue down a road of reform, or will it maintain its strict communist structure?

Data collection takes into account my personal experiences and the experiences of the administrators, assistants, players, and outside observers involved in Hebei tennis. A detailed account of the system is given through observations, interviews, field notes, journaling, and email exchanges, which serve to provide an in-depth look into the role that each individual plays in making up the Hebei tennis system. Throughout the thesis, pseudonyms are used for the interview subjects to protect the individuals' confidentiality, as they remain everyday participants in the CSS. Collecting data through these methods



demonstrates the importance that the daily communicative exchanges between staff, players, administrators, and myself have on the cultural relationships necessary to make Hebei a productive tennis program. Through understanding the cultural attitudes that have shaped their system and training in the past, I can take into account what methods of coaching I can institute and suggest ways in which I think the Hebei program can adapt to better suit China's changing sporting climate.

I examine and supplement my experience with academic and journalistic accounts to provide the reader with an accurate understanding of the cultural attitudes that pervade Chinese athletics. I also hope to show how my personal experience, illuminated by symbolic interactions with a Chinese culture that has a long history, may border on providing reform to a sports system and serve as a model for future changes to the CSS.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE OF HEBEI PROVINCE

### TENNIS

#### **Introduction to the Landscape of Tennis in China and Model of Reform**

The international landscape of tennis has been the driving force for change to the CSS. With the success in international competitions by 2011 Women's French Open Champion Li Na and China's other top female players, there has been a demand to continue to develop the sport's future stars. China has seen a boom in the popularity of tennis, and more and more young children are starting the sport every day.

Tennis in China is unique relative to any other sport in the country. Li Na, Zheng Jie, Peng Shui, and Yan Zi nicknamed "The Four Flowers," started a revolution of sorts in the Chinese sporting world by officially being allowed to break away from their government teams to pursue independently controlled careers. They went outside of the system to hire foreign coaches with the expertise to help them develop new training regimens. For the first time, they were able to determine their own tournament schedule, formed corporate sponsorships, and were able to keep the majority of their tournament earnings. By breaking away, they have set the stage for reform within the Chinese tennis system. Their actions provided not only the framework for change but also acted as an astounding wake up call for many within the government system to change their existing structure or face losing future international stars.

In China, tennis is a sport that lacks domestic coaching expertise, and there has been an influx of foreign coaches looking to capitalize on the opportunity to train the next

Li Na. However, foreigners working as tennis coaches in conjunction with the Chinese government sports system are few and far between. Few coaches want to be subjected to the rigid controls and training methodology that has permeated the government system for so many years. Most of the foreigners working in the Chinese tennis industry want to remain free and independent of the system to make their own decisions regarding the players they train.

### **Welcome to Hebei**

I accepted the position of head tennis coach of Hebei province with some apprehension. The training ideologies that surround the government-run programs turn most away. From my prior experience of coaching with an independent firm in China, I had knowledge of the government structure and understood the political climate I was entering. However, I saw this not as a hindrance but rather as an opportunity to infuse the sports system with change similar to the economic and cultural reforms that have transformed the face of China. Furthermore, the fact that a provincial team was willing to reach out to a foreigner for expertise to run its tennis program was, in my mind, the first step to embracing change to the government system. I believe that Hebei and its directors have the foresight to see that the tennis environment and its social conditions are on the brink of change in China and are willing to reinvent its program. If they were willing to take a chance on reform by bringing a foreigner into their system, then I was willing to take on the challenge.

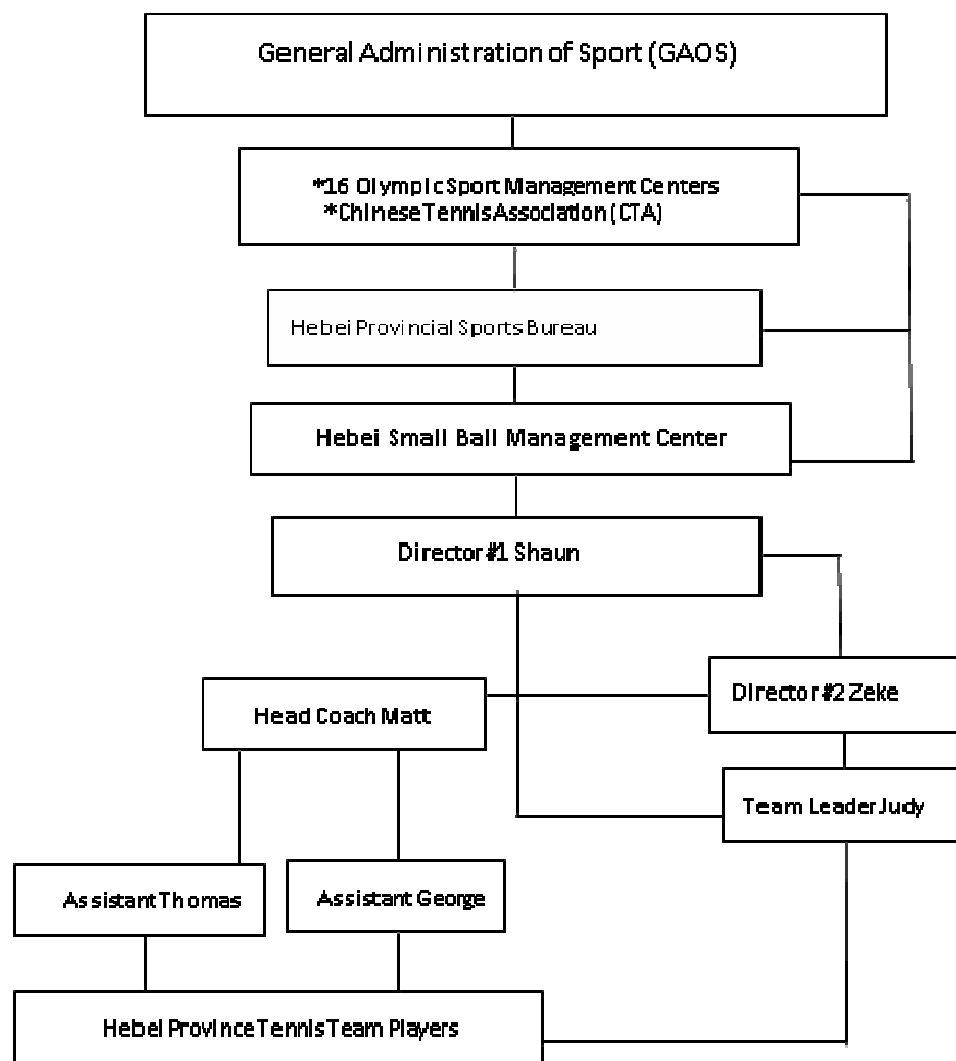
### **Institutional Structure, Chain of Command, and Decision Making**

In any well-run system, there is an organizational structure in place to facilitate daily operations. Policies, rules, and regulations are presided over to ensure the welfare and wellbeing of the establishment. The Chinese system of sport is no different. The General Administration of Sport (GAOS) is at the head of the sporting infrastructure. GAOS is a national administrative organization of the Chinese government and is similar to a cabinet department or agency in the U.S. Federal system. GAOS directs all policy making in the arena of sport, "...to 23 quasi-autonomous organizations, i.e. national sport management centres (NSMCs) and focused on strategic policy making for specific sport development" (Tan & Green, 2008, p. 317). Policy making for tennis is under the jurisdiction of the China Tennis Association (CTA). The CTA manages items such as national team selections and policy pertaining to training and competition.

At the provincial level, sports bureaus and management centers also work in conjunction with the 23 quasi-autonomous organizations to focus on similar objectives of provincial team selection, sports policy, competitions, and training. Every provincial training center serves as a breeding ground for athletes to develop the skills necessary to move onto the national teams. Provincial tennis programs use the infrastructure put into place by the CTA as its method to compete, rank, and test their athletes' ability.

The Hebei province tennis team is under the management of the Xiao Qui Yun Dong Guan Li Zhong Xin (Small Ball Sport Management Center). In addition to tennis, the center is also responsible for overseeing operations for the sports of golf, baseball, handball, and, believe it or not, American football.

The Small Ball Management Center's director, Mr. Shaun, is responsible for making decisions that affect the Hebei tennis team. Although Shaun is at the head of the sport management center for tennis and the aforementioned sports, his superiors at the Provincial Sport Bureau must also approve any major decisions regarding the team. Our tennis team has two more directors in the chain of command. Mr. Zeke is considered the number two director and can make small decisions in accordance with only the tennis team. Shaun and Zeke generally consult on more important decisions, but Shaun always has the final say. Our "ling dui," Mrs. Judy whose title means group leader or team captain, handles the daily financial accounts and any small decisions or problems that may affect the coaches or players. For example, if a player has a problem with their dormitory accommodation, Mrs. Judy will handle the situation without having to obtain the approval of Director Shaun or Zeke. This is the general hierarchy of the decision making process that manages the Hebei team. Initial questions and problems are handled by Mrs. Judy, passed to Zeke, then onto Shaun; then, if necessary, upward to the directors at the Provincial Sport Bureau. Figure 3 below shows the general structure of the Hebei tennis program in relation to the CSS, GAOS, and the CTA.



**Figure 3 Organizational Infrastructure of the Hebei Tennis Program**

While the structure seems fairly straightforward, it can actually be the opposite. Often simple questions get passed along to Mr. Shaun as the lower directors are apprehensive to usurp the decision-making power of the director above them. This makes what should be a quick turnaround for a question turn into a long and convoluted process. To complicate matters, Mr. Shaun, in addition to managing all small ball sports in Hebei, is also in charge of the Shijiazhuang City Tiyuguan (Gymnasium). This job

entails organizing public facility usage for tennis, swimming, badminton, basketball, and weightlifting. Director Shaun is often forced to make difficult choices when it comes to how to manage the tennis facility while keeping in mind his obligations to the provincial team and to the public. Furthermore, Mr. Shaun, at the completion of the National Games in 2013 will be either elevated, demoted, or remain in his current position dependent upon the results of the Small Ball program. He has indicated that it is his wish to move to a higher position within the CSS, so he focuses on short-term results for the Hebei tennis program that culminate with the 2013 National Games.

Another complication when working with our directors is their lack of knowledge about the sport of tennis. Both Director Shaun and Zeke come from a weightlifting background. The way that they were trained for weightlifting is completely different than the way tennis players are trained. Their lack of understanding about the game of tennis has advantages and disadvantages. Since they know little about tennis, they receive my voice and advice for the program sincerely and give me an open platform on which to speak my mind. However, on occasions, they disagree with me and, in my opinion, make misinformed judgments about the game of tennis based upon their experience as weightlifters in the CSS. Whoever is right or wrong is of no real consequence, and I am willing to make concessions as long as the decisions we make can lead to positive outcomes for the Hebei tennis program.

### **Method for Change**

My job in Hebei, quite simply, is to make the players and our team better. To accomplish this goal, there are changes to the existing structure that I feel are needed. As coach, the directors have given me some direct authority to make changes to the practice

schedule and training method without their consultation. However, other decisions that need to be made must first go through the chain of command and can take a long time for an affirmative answer.

I have been very calculating in my suggestions to reform the Hebei tennis program. Had I walked into Hebei, demanding wide-scale changes to the way things have been previously run, it is quite likely that my ideas would not have been received openly. I never demand that a change must be made; I merely suggest what I think will work. I want to let the directors feel as if they had come up with the idea, made the decision, and implemented the change to the program. The directors in actuality have total control, so it is best that they initiate change. I am just a pawn trying to maneuver decisions that I believe will be a benefit to the team and its players. I have slowly built a level of trust with the directors so that they listen to my ideas, have faith that it will yield positive results, and then implement the change slowly, step by step.

Once the first reform to the program has been accomplished and smoothly implemented into the daily routine, I then begin to suggest the next idea to change the program. This has been my method—slow and calculated moves built on the foundation of trust and proven results. I try to remain culturally conscious about the decisions that I make and how it might affect my players. There are four main goals or reforms that I have in mind while coaching in Hebei. Some are tennis related, but the others keep in mind the quality of life and potential future benefits for the players.

My first goal and the main reason I was invited to coach in Hebei is to improve my players' tennis. My methods involve trying to integrate Western coaching values and



techniques and fuse them with the disciplined training environment that most Chinese athletes adhere to.

My second initiative is to have the students enroll in part-time school. I believe that to be a successful tennis player, you must train the mind and body together. This allows the players to rest their bodies a couple of days a week, train for the mental aspect of the game, and become more well-rounded individuals equipped with the knowledge to succeed after their tennis career.

Third, I want to give my players a chance to travel to international tennis competitions. Not only would this act as a training device to improve the level of their play, but it would also give them a chance to engage culturally with people and players from other nations. I believe it would help open their minds to new possibilities and be influential in bridging the cultural gap between myself, my players, and other international tennis programs.

My last goal involves reaching out to the community in Hebei. The players are given an unbelievable opportunity by the Chinese government to play for their province and their country. I do not want them to take this for granted, and I hope to show them how fortunate of a position they are currently in. By engaging in some community service projects, I hope that it might give the players a sense of pride and responsibility in their current positions as provincial team players.

I understand that my ideas and motivations for coaching and teaching are fundamentally different and are not in line with what is generally practiced in the CSS. I am always aware of the cultural ramifications and possible backlash when trying to bring about reform to the Hebei tennis program. Slowly I hope to create a structurally different

idea of what is expected of an athlete during their time on the Hebei team. Thus far the method has been an effective way to make changes in the program, and in the succeeding chapters I will write more about the structure of the Hebei tennis program, what changes have been made, and how they have been received.

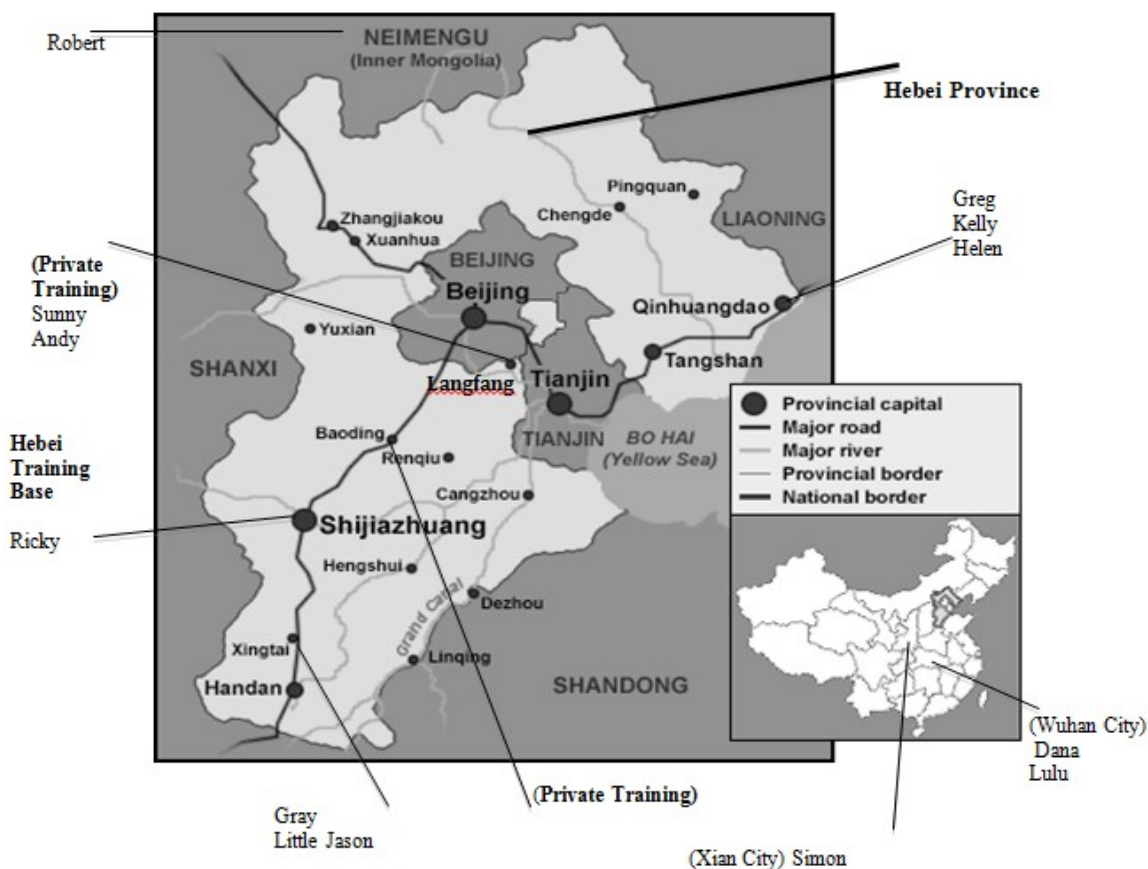
### **Successes, Challenges, and Difficulties Reforming the Administrative Structure of Hebei**

Reforming the administrative structure of Hebei tennis is too much for me to take on. I can only hope to work with the directors and others involved in the program as best I can within the guidelines of the CSS. Oftentimes, it is not pretty or efficient but is part of the daily challenges I face living as a foreigner in China. I have come to the realization that at this point in time, one year into the job, that there are some things that I may never be able to facilitate without help from my Chinese friends. The same can be said about my role as a coach here. I will never be able to fully assume control of the way that things are decided, so my best option is to form good relationships with those in position to help out the team. I go out of my way to say hello to the bosses from the provincial bureau when they come to play tennis and give them a few pointers on their game along the way. I try to remain as objective as possible and keep many doors open while building trust with those around me.

The people that I regard as the most important part of my coaching project and most important to gain their trust are my players. They are the ones that I interact most with on a daily basis. As seen in the next chapter, no two players on our team are alike; their circumstances are different, as has been their journey through the CSS and how they have become a part of the Hebei provincial tennis team.

## CHAPTER FIVE: ATHLETIC IDENTIFICATION AND SELECTION PROCESS FOR HEBEI PROVINCE TENNIS

No two players have taken the same route in the selection process and upward progression to the Hebei team. They come from different walks of life, have different ambitions, and different ways of thinking about their time spent in the CSS. Regardless of their former and ensuing paths, they currently share a common place in Shijiazhuang on the Hebei provincial tennis team. Figure 4 below shows the current members on the Hebei team, and designates either their home town or where they had previously been training before arriving in Shijiazhuang, the Hebei programs training base.



**Figure 4 Hebei Province Players Hometown Cities and Training Facilities**

### Athlete Identification

The athlete selection process in the CSS is a systematic structure that commences by identifying potential athletic talent at an early age and continues with a hierarchical promotion through the ranks based upon skill and results. Generally, the method of identification begins at a very early age as boys and girls between the ages of six to nine recognized with athletic talent are placed into part-time training programs. Players that show promising capabilities can continue to rise in the hierarchy of upward mobility and may be selected to join city teams, then onto a provincial team, a national team, and at the top of the pyramid, the Olympic squads.

Typically, the selection process is not as straightforward as noted above. There are many idiosyncrasies that arise in the Chinese tennis culture that may lead a player to a certain provincial program or down another path entirely. In particular, the Hebei tennis program has many structural deficiencies when it comes to identifying and selecting talented players for its team.

This chapter explains the identification structure that is in place in the capital of the Hebei province, Shijiazhuang (also the training base for the provincial team). Examples of how current Hebei province players ended up with our team are established and in the process I provide some background information about the team members and their journey through Chinese tennis. Additionally, I assess Hebei province's strengths and shortcomings in regard to attracting talented players for its program and make suggestions for areas that need to be reformed.

### **Early Identification Programs in Shijiazhuang, Hebei**

The earliest assessment method of prospective athlete identification is based upon family lineage. In China, genes matter; if a child is born to parents that had previously been members of a state athletic program—basketball, track and field, tennis, etc.—then the red flag has more than likely been raised. In most of these cases, the parents will have a vested interest and feel an obligation to their country (due to their previous involvement) to discover whether or not their child also has athletic talents. To my knowledge, none of the current Hebei team members have been identified by this method. However, one of my former students was placed into a developmental center because both of her parents had been professional basketball players in China. Most of Hebei's current players have been identified through the process that I will describe next.

One day near the end of our afternoon practice at our training facility in Shijiazhuang I heard the sound of fifty or so pairs of small feet pounding the pavement of the tennis court as they rushed past me. Shortly thereafter a tall, well distinguished man dressed in coaching gear strolled by. It was early September and the local primary schools had just started. I watched intently as the children ran wildly around the court. Quickly the coach established order and had them promptly lined up military fashion, ready for roll call—tryouts were about to begin.

The boys and girls were no older than seven years of age and had come from a local primary school. Over the next two weeks they were put through a series of tests to assess their tennis ability. They were given footwork drills to test coordination and quickness. The children were timed, graded, and coach Han (a primary school physical education teacher and tennis specialist) meticulously took notes on his clipboard as the children performed each exercise. After the first week, tennis rackets were brought out and the children with minimal instruction were tested on whether or not they had any form, could make contact with the ball and, if really lucky, hit it over the net.

Every day for two weeks I watched, got to know the children's faces, and had some interaction with the coach. He informed me that out of the 50 or so children they would select five boys and five girls to join the spare time sports program. At one point, coach Han asked me to take part in evaluating the students; without giving much thought to the ramifications, I quickly pointed out two to three children who I thought had better coordination than the others, not realizing until now that I may have had a direct influence in determining their future.

In Shijiazhuang, once the kids have been identified with athletic talent, they are then placed into the spare time sports program. The tennis program in Shijiazhuang works as follows. During the day, they follow normal protocols set by the state for primary education. The difference, however, is when most other children would be going home, these students head off to training facilities to practice their specified sports. The tennis players in our program generally arrive at the courts around 3:50 P.M. and then train until 5:30 P.M. Players in this program range in age from 7 to 13. Coach Han directs the youngest in their training. His main task is to teach the students proper basic technique, keep them on task, evaluate their progress, and designate assignments for the other coaches working with him. In Shijiazhuang, there are currently about 40 players participating in the spare time sports program. In addition to the players that are selected, the program is also open to the public. The main difference is that those selected will have the cost of the program waived, while others that still wish to take part will pay a monthly fee.

Throughout this program, the head coach, and the coaches that work at the Tiyuguan facility continually evaluate the students. Those that show progress will continue to have their fees waived and other promising players might also have this benefit. However, just as easily, a player can be demoted from their full-time status. This can create pressure for a child, especially from parents who begin to entertain the idea that the athletic path might become the child's future route in Chinese society.

In Shijiazhuang, upward mobility continues beyond the spare time sports schools. In the spare time sport program, the students are generally playing modified tennis. In this case, they use softer balls that bounce higher, and smaller courts, which allows the

program to accommodate more players in a limited space. If a child continues to show promise and is one of the best in the program, they can be promoted into two arenas. One method of promotion is to move to a higher-level group, with another coach (coach Xiao), a graduate of a local sports university. Here they begin working with regular balls on a regulation-sized court. This group of players is generally a mix of younger children selected to join by our small ball management center and other players who continue to fund their tennis practice through the public avenue.

### **Hebei Province City Teams**

The other method of promotion is to become a member of the Shijiazhuang City team. This team is run in conjunction with the Hebei Small Ball Management Center. In this program, the players' coaching fees are waived or reduced, as well as some of their tournament competition fees. Coach Liu, also a graduate of the Hebei Sports University, manages this program and works with the players at a nearby facility. These players are normally in the 12-17 age range and are practicing about four days a week for about two hours after their school has finished. These players are normally more serious about their tennis and some begin to engage the thought of dropping out of school to train full time. This choice often depends on a player's ability level. Generally speaking, these students compete only in provincial tournaments that are held in Shijiazhuang and various cities throughout Hebei. The amount of organized tournaments in Hebei province is limited to only three or four events during the calendar year. If they are performing well in competitions, selection to a provincial team is typically the next step in the process. Others on the city team, if their skill is only average, may continue with their training and education until it is time to enter university and in many cases will enroll in a university



specified for athletic studies. The Shijiazhuang city team is not highly developed nor does it have very skilled players. The majority of the players on the Shijiazhuang city team are not considered for selection to the Hebei team and most will go on to pursue opportunities at area sports universities.

Programs such as the ones that I have described are taking place in the major cities all throughout Hebei province and for that matter all across China. The city programs that have most recently produced the best players in Hebei are Tangshan, Qinhuangdao, and Xingtai. Shijiazhuang, despite being the capital of Hebei and the training base for the Hebei team, is near the bottom in player development, possibly because the emphasis in Shijiazhuang is to manage the provincial team.

The player identification and development programs described are taking place all across the province of Hebei and in cities throughout China. These city programs are entities of the state-sponsored sport system and are funded by the government with the hope to find China's most skilled young athletes. These programs are run with the expectation that the athletes will stay involved in the system and not venture into the independent realm of Chinese sports. But with the sheer number of participants in the programs, in part due to China's booming population, athletes become expendable. For every athlete that drops out or is cut from the program, there are ten more behind him or her looking for an opportunity. China factories produce not only goods but also athletes.

Five out of the twelve current players on the provincial team were cultivated in the Hebei development system. Ricky our oldest male at 19 is a local from Shijiazhuang city and got his start playing tennis under coach Han who runs the 6-9 year old development team. Ricky was elevated to the city team and then to the state team and

has been a full contractual member since 2006. Ricky is currently playing on the professional futures circuit but currently has no world ranking; his national men's ranking is #56. Gray is a 17-year-old young man from neighboring Xingtai city and has been with the Hebei team for nearly two years. Gray earned his professional contract status this past year and at the time of writing was ranked #1415 on the world junior circuit. We have two females on our team from Qinhuangdao City in Hebei. Sixteen-year-old Helen and 19-year-old Kelly both have been with the team since they were 15 and both have full-time contracts. Helen has a Chinese national ranking of #216 in the 16 and under division. Kelly began playing women's professional tournament this year but at the time of writing has no world ranking; her highest junior world ranking was #787.

### **Hebei Province Private Teams**

Currently for as many state-sponsored city teams that run in Hebei province there are almost as many privately sponsored programs. Most notably in Hebei, the private teams in Langfang and Baoding have made a name for themselves and have developed many good tennis players. Thirty years ago you would have never heard of a privately run sports team functioning outside of government control; however, with the opening of China, privatization is occurring in all business arenas, including sports. These private organizations can often offer a different type of training environment from what is found in the state system. Players involved in the private sector are searching for independence, better coaching, and the freedom to set their own training agenda. While this might appear to be an easy choice for most parents to make for their children, there is also a financial cost associated with these programs. Often the family must have a moderate to high source of income to be associated with private organizations. On the other side of

the spectrum, the city and provincial programs run by the government can offer an opportunity for social advancement by competing for the state and often without monetary cost involved.

The Hebei provincial team currently has three players that have come via a private club in Langfang. Hebei's most promising prospect, 15-year-old Sunny is currently ranked #165 in world junior rankings and is a top three player in his age division in China. Sunny signed his contract at the age of 14. Andy, age 17, is currently ranked #1750 in world juniors and was signed to a six-year contract to play for Hebei this past year. Robert, age 16, also from Langfang, is in a trial period with the team and is hoping to obtain a full-time contract.

### **Selection Structure and Movement into the Hebei Province Tennis Team**

These two types of development programs, one state run and the other a private entity, account for how the majority of players become involved with tennis in China. Both of these programs focus on early development of the student's tennis up until the age of about 14 to 15. This is especially true of the city teams, when most of its top students will begin to look into their prospects for provincial team placement. The private clubs may be able to retain its top students for a longer period of time, but also may lose its best students to China's state-sponsored system.

The reason for this is quite simple. Until about 13 to 14 years in age, most players are still involved in some sort of educational schooling in addition to athletic training. The balance of school and tennis depends largely on the player and their family. If a child shows tremendous promise in the athletic field, more often than not educational involvement is slowly replaced by more training time. Or the opposite may occur; if the

child's athletic results are average, more emphasis will be placed upon education. Due to the highly competitive nature of nearly everything in China, the education system has a rigorous testing system for placement into the best middle schools and the sports system has a strenuous selection process based upon athletic results. It is rare that a family will try to pursue both avenues. In most cases, by the age of 14 or 15 a child's family will decide where to focus its resources, either into sport or education.

When a family decides to pursue a sports career, often the most logical choice in China is to join a state-sponsored team such as the Hebei province team. Even for players who had previously been involved in private programs, the prospect for social advancement by playing for province and country is often too prosperous to pass up. Normally, a well-funded infrastructure is already in place at the provincial level and can provide the student with the makings of a solid future if the child can succeed on the playing field. Equipment, training and tournament fees, housing, food, salary, university placement, and retirement bonuses can all be a part of the package with a provincial program. Whereas if a student continues with a private tennis program, very little is guaranteed. Families looking to make a decision regarding their children's future, more often than not choose the state-sponsored program because of the possible social benefits for both the child and parents to be associated with the government.

Once a family decides to pursue a career in athletics, the player begins to look for a provincial team to enroll with. Conventional wisdom would suggest that the student would enroll with the provincial program they grew up in, or if they had previously been on a city team the player would then feed into the province program the city was located in. However, this is rarely the case. There is more than one way for a player to enroll

with a province team outside of their residence. One way is for the player to claim they have family in another province; another is to relocate the family. But the easiest and most accepted method is for the provincial team to provide official government paperwork allowing the player to enroll as a resident of that province. This is a common practice and has become an accepted part of the CSS. What often ends up happening with most Chinese tennis players is essentially a free-for-all sweepstakes in which players visit many provincial programs, entertain offers and find the program they believe is the best fit to continue their career.

A player and their family may travel across China in search of the best package deal. Which provincial team a player ends up with often depends on a myriad of unpredictable circumstances. Although generally speaking if the player is one of the best in the country and has the results to back it up then provincial teams often go out of their way to provide as much as possible in hopes that the player will sign a contract with their program. In theory, this system is similar to what prospective high school athletes in the United States might encounter as they search for university scholarships.

Hebei currently has three players with official contracts that came via cities outside of the province. Simon, age 18, ranked #674 on the world junior circuit is originally from Xian city but was a member of the Jiangmen city team in Guangdong province before coming to Hebei. Our final two female team members Dana and Lulu both come from the Wuhan city team in Hubei province (former provincial team of Chinese superstar Li Na).

The last way for a player to earn a spot on a provincial team is to earn a contract with hard work, improved skills, and proven results. This method is usually required of

players that have a low ranking in China. In this case, a player would register for the province but would only be guaranteed a place to practice and a chance to climb the hierarchical ladder within the program. Currently, the Hebei team has three players in this position, two 15-year-old boys from Hebei province, Little Jason, from Xingtai city, and Greg, from Qinhuangdao City via a private team in Baoding. Seventeen-year-old Robert comes from the Province of Inner Mongolia via the Langfang team mentioned earlier in the chapter. Little Jason has been with the team for nearly two years and is currently ranked about #1300 in the world junior rankings; he is on track to earn a long-term contract by the end of the year. At the time of the writing, Greg and Robert have been with our team for less than a week and are currently in a trial period. While training in Hebei, these boys pay for their own tournament fees and equipment; their food and accommodation are discounted.

### **Inequalities with the Selection Process**

Generally speaking, provincial programs with the best infrastructure in place (budget, coaches, practice facilities, accommodation, etc.) have the pick of the litter when enticing players to join their program. Additionally, players on city teams that reside within a province with a well-established state team do not usually seek out other teams to play for. Since the tennis system is structured in this manner, what predominately occurs is what I call the “New York Yankee Effect.” The most established provincial teams, with the best infrastructures and biggest budgets, are able to offer more perks to the best players. Currently, the provincial programs that have a stronghold on recruiting the best tennis players are Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, Hubei, and Jiangsu. Hebei at this point in time does not fall into the category of elite provincial programs.

Hebei's tennis infrastructure is lacking in many places; the budget is small and facilities are poor. The Shijiazhuang training base has only four outdoor courts that are cracking and are constantly covered in dust due to local environmental conditions. Hebei is unable to persuade its best local products to stay within its system and has a difficult time convincing outside players to enroll with the province. Basically, Hebei tennis has been stuck in a continuous cycle of mediocrity and must overcome many obstacles if it hopes to break this cycle. The first hurdle has to do with the fact that the Chinese government provides funding to programs based upon results in the National games, which are held every four years. If a team does well, the funding from the government will increase. Currently, Hebei is ranked 16th in the country out of 27 participating teams. This puts Hebei too far down the line to expect any significant funds from the government that might be able to help improve its infrastructure. The Hebei tennis team starts with players that have lower rankings than other top tier teams, thus defining the challenge the program faces in closing the gap in athletic achievement. Hebei can provide less for its players compared to the top programs that have a larger budget. Most of the Hebei teams' resources are invested in its top two or three players leaving the other players on the team with even less. Currently, Hebei can attract players that are middle-of-the-road athletically and must rely on its coaches to try to develop them into more solid players. Unless Hebei can make some major changes to its infrastructure or increase its funding, this cycle will be difficult to break. The reality of the situation is most players that grow up training in Hebei want to train with teams elsewhere.

### **Reforms to the Selection Process**

The task of making reforms to the selection process in Hebei is an extremely difficult undertaking for a foreign coach like myself. To singlehandedly initiate the change would be nearly impossible. To take this on requires a well laid out plan and mutual cooperation not only from the Hebei Small Ball Management directors, but also their superiors in the Provincial Sports Bureau.

Recently, I had a meeting with my directors to discuss this very subject. At the moment, the tennis players in Hebei are average compared to the current level in China. Many of the Hebei players are in the middle to latter stages of their development. Given only two years to reach the short-term goals the directors have set for our team requires a well-defined plan of action, an innovative approach to methods of training, and a full competition schedule. To improve in the long run, the program must find ways to attract talented players to Hebei at an earlier age so that they can more effectively utilize the developmental avenues and competitions that Chinese tennis currently offers.

To make this a reality, Hebei tennis needs to redesign its infrastructure, which is not a quick fix. Some of the suggestions I've provided to the directors I hope can lead them in the right direction. The most efficient way to start the process is an in-house program in Shijiazhuang tailored to meet the needs of younger players. Essentially, I suggested that Hebei begin a team for 10-12 year old boys and girls, a team for 13-17 year old boys and girls, and then its professional provincial men and women's team age 18 and up. Each team would have a head coach and an assistant in charge of organizing the training and tournament schedule. The hope would be that the coaches work together to upwardly promote within the team. The provincial head coach would help provide the



framework for technical development in the program, so that the players would have a solid foundation in which to work from and build upon as they are inwardly promoted. The Hebei team ought to invite the top juniors from city teams in the province for developmental camps and to scout talent. This should take place before players reach the age of 14. At an earlier age, the coaches can foster sound tennis techniques and begin to mentor the players' character. It would allow the Hebei team to form better bonds with the players, create a training environment built upon trust, and promote from within its own system.

By the time a player reaches the age of 17, the program could decide whether or not to sign them to a provincial team contract. The hope is that the students would also be provided with a quality education up until this point and would be able to make a distinction between those students that have a chance to play professionally and players that should find an alternative route. If the players have been given a proper education, (including intensive English), then it is possible for the average player to follow three different routes. One would be to continue trying to succeed professionally on the tennis court, another would be to start the process and tests necessary to place into an academic or sports university in China, and the last would be to utilize their tennis and academic skills to find an opportunity to play and go to school in an American universities.

To accomplish something of this magnitude would take a complete overhaul of the infrastructure in Hebei and my directors explained that at this point in time they do not have the resources or backing from the Provincial Bureau to do this. This program would entail building more courts, hiring more coaches, having the proper accommodations in place, and providing the necessary schooling for the younger players.

In short, the Hebei program would need a much larger budget to create this type of environment for the players and coaches.

For the directors at the provincial Sports Bureau to embark upon a large-scale transformation and invest in such a project they first would want to see better results from the current players on the Hebei tennis team. As I alluded to, the government will provide additional funding and assistance to programs that succeed, and at this point in time the Hebei tennis government funding is small. Given the tennis climate in China and in Hebei, to obtain the necessary results set by the provincial bureau to receive additional funding will be no small feat. The only other course of action the Hebei team might be able to take is to find an unaffiliated corporate sponsor willing to invest in the tennis program, I will go into more details about this option in chapter 8.

So, for the time being, reform to this part of the system is set aside for later discussion and the Hebei team with my help will continue to try and improve the players that are currently on the team. If my coaching techniques and changes to their training regimen are effective enough to reach the provincial sports bureaus goal, it might then be possible to reform how players are identified and selected to the Hebei province team in the future.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE TRAINING SYSTEM IN HEBEI CHINA

The Hebei tennis program is in a predicament; the management has aspirations of being one of the top programs in the country but currently does not have the infrastructure or enough high-level players in place for this goal to become a reality. If Hebei has the players to reach the goal set by the sports bureau, then the program can receive funding and change its infrastructure. However, without good players, Hebei cannot reach the goals the directors have set, nor receive additional funding to change its system. The Provincial Sports Bureau and the Small Ball Management Center has set a target for our team: in the 2013 National Games held in Shenyang, Liaoning Province they hope that Hebei can reach the quarterfinals in either the men's or women's team tournament, men's or women's singles, men's or women's doubles or mixed doubles.

This is where I come into the equation. As the coach, I was presented with a task to accomplish. Within a time frame of a little less than two years, I must prepare the current Hebei team members to compete against the best players in China and reach the quarterfinals in one of these events. This is no easy task as I try to navigate the many cultural differences between Western and Chinese philosophies of teaching, learning, training, and competing. This chapter describes the methods that I have used to bridge the cultural gap in hopes of creating a productive learning environment. In explaining how my coaching techniques differ from traditional Chinese methods, I lay the groundwork for why I believe training in this manner will help the players improve. In

the process, I show the different compromises and concessions that the management, myself, and players have had to make in order to put together an effective training regimen intended to achieve the goals of the Hebei team.

### **Education in China and Training Corollaries**

Before implementing a coaching plan in my new Chinese environment and instead of applying a totally foreign philosophy with my Chinese players, I felt that it would be helpful to understand their style of education. Most of my players have not had a traditional educational upbringing. The majority of them stopped formal education at the age of 14 and before this they were in spare time sports schools. Despite this fact, all of the players were at one time or another in primary schools and from a young age were taught using a traditional Chinese curriculum set by the government.

Education tradition in China has long been cemented in the ideologies of one man, Confucius. In fact, "...the whole Chinese social system, or rather what may be called Chinese civilization and culture. . . is saturated with the teachings of Confucius" (Regan 2005, p. 138.) Confucius believed in the concept of the good man, and that the good man,

...will seek to develop what are called the "Five Constant Virtues": right attitude, right procedure, right knowledge, right moral courage, and right persistence. Taken together, the practice of these virtues would lead to a new society based upon justice and wisdom. (Regan, 2005 p. 139)

These virtues were taught through a strict moral upbringing based upon the hierarchical relationships of society. One of those relationships was that between teacher

and student. This relationship is based upon mutual responsibility but not of equality (Regan, 2005). The teacher is the leader in this system and methods used to instruct were quite rigid due to the imperial examination process used in the Chinese educational system. This examination methodology still functions today and is an important part of the educational hierarchy in China.

“Education was key to Confucius’ view of how the ideal social order could be achieved” (Regan, 2005, p. 141). For Confucius, education served a very pragmatic function, “Education should identify those of talent and help them to become better men fit to rule over others . . . although the Confucian system in practice, ‘reinforced the rigidly hierarchical social class structure,’ of imperial China, it nevertheless did permit limited social class mobility based upon talent” (Regan, 2005, p. 141). In its end, however, “...educational thought and practice in China reflected the social class structure of society” (Regan 2005, p. 150), by maintaining hierarchy and stratification.

Most of the Hebei players have had exposure to the traditional education in China, “...with regard to basic education and teaching for the imperial examination, rote learning was the method”; but this pedagogical practice has flaws as students “...no longer paid much attention to the content of learning anymore” (Gu, 2006, p. 177-78). These methods have lead to the unintended consequence of “...namely putting the outcome of knowledge transmission above the process of learning. Students only knew but never knew why” (Gu, 2006, p .178). Today, many Chinese students are still being instructed in this manner and it has suffused many aspects of daily society.

This model has also shaped the way that athletes are expected to train and how coaches have instructed their players. Athletes in China are accustomed to authoritative,

coach-centered, non-confrontational practices that lack an atmosphere of creativity and questioning. Athletes are highly scrutinized, expected to conform to the sports system but have limited mobility to climb their sports' social class structure based upon talent.

### **Training in Hebei**

When I first arrived in Hebei, I asked to observe practice for a few days so I could have a feel for how the players trained and what they were accustomed to. I saw a practice schedule based upon routine, clocking in and clocking out at the end of the day, and during practices checking out of any real mental engagement. Six days out of the week and eight hours of training a day the players had the same routine. They would wake up at 6:00 A.M., stretch and run for about one hour, breakfast at seven, then arrive at the court by 8:30 A.M. for drills. The practices consisted of the coach standing behind a basket of balls feeding one forehand after another, or countless backhands until the players had the right "feel." This went on until 11:00 A.M. when the students would break for lunch. After lunch, the players all slept until 2:00 P.M. and would arrive back at the courts by 2:30 P.M. At this time, they would hit for another two hours and possibly play some points. Practices always entailed the coach directing the players on where to stand, how to hit, where to hit but rarely why. Their afternoon on-court session was followed by an hour of physical training and practice was finished by 5:30 P.M. The players performed the same task day in and day out like mind-numbed drones set on autopilot. The practices never seemed to engage the players in any creative thought or questioning about the strategy of the game.

What the Hebei players were engaged in was long hard days of "mind-blocked" practices in which they were conditioned to withstand three hour-plus training sessions,

which emphasized quantity, repetition, and technique. Essentially the players were being trained like an athlete who participates in a closed skill sport, for example, diving or gymnastics. In a closed skill sport, athletes can train methodically on technique and repeat the same routine over and over in hopes of making it perfect because there are no other environmental factors involved. “For closed skills, motor patterns are the skills; it is critical that the performer be able to reproduce consistently and reliably a defined, standard movement pattern” (Allard & Starkes, 1991, p. 127). This model is intentionally similar to the way that the Chinese have structured their education system, which is based upon rote memorization and knowing a solitary correct answer to earn a high score on the test. It’s really no wonder that the Chinese, year in and year out, have the best gymnasts and divers—their routines are flawless. In the 2008 Olympic games, China won 18 medals in gymnastics, eleven gold, two silver, five bronze; and 11 medals in diving, seven gold, one silver, and three bronze (Medal Tracker, n.d.).

Tennis is not a sport that should be trained for in this manner. After watching the Hebei players train, I decided that the focus of my practices would try to engage the players in constructive thought processes on the court. They needed, “...workouts that stressed the importance of quality and variability rather than quantity and predictability,” (Moore, 2001). I needed to change the way they thought about tennis.

### **Progression from Closed Sport Training to Open Sport Motor Learning Principles**

The significance of the coach-driven, routine-centered training that I witnessed my first few days in Hebei led to some very basic assumptions about why so many of the Chinese players are having difficulty succeeding in a game such as tennis. Much has to do about the nature of the game and the creative flow that takes place during every point.

“Tennis is considered an open skill sport, one in which the athlete must make numerous split second decisions because the environment is unpredictable and ever changing” (Moore, 2001). In tennis, a player must be able to problem solve when they are on the court. In an open skill sport, it is “...the effectiveness of a motor pattern in producing a particular environmental outcome that constitutes the skill . . . it is possible for an open-skill performer to have a consistent motor pattern that simply does not work to produce the desired environmental consequence” (Allard & Starke, 1991 p. 127). In Hebei, we have players that can hit technically sound shots but do not know how to use them.

Given my players previous training environment, I didn't think they were sufficiently prepared to adapt and make changes based upon the different variables that arise in a typical tennis match. Much of their training was not only based upon routine and predictability but were also authoritatively driven by the coach. Not only do they not know what decision to make because the environment was always changing but they also second-guess their decision and wait for the coach to tell them if it was right or wrong.

Thanks in part to my training under former University of Texas women's head tennis coach, Jeff Moore, I decided that the Hebei team needed, “...a realistic practice design based upon research-driven motor learning principles that encouraged the players to constantly problem solve and prepare them for the reality of match play” (Moore, 2001). Since the Chinese education systems neglects educational theory based upon problem solving, motor learning principles can be used to initiate,

...a three step process which can be applied to the two challenges that tennis players face when attempting to execute a shot during a match—“what is coming at me and how do I respond to it.” In the stimulus identification stage



the player seeks to indentify the degree of spin, pace, trajectory, etc. of his/her opponents shot. In the second stage, the response selection, the player uses stage one identification principles to select an appropriate response based upon their own court position and the court position of their opponent. Finally in the response programming stage and all in the matter of a split second the player executes the proper response. (Moore, 2001)

Seeing that tennis is a sport that demands players to constantly problem solve, and because my players are less adapt at applying this skill in their athletic endeavors, the teaching and learning relationship becomes stressed. “When one considers that every shot in a match involves this process and that a player encounters a different scenario each time, the coaches challenge to prepare the player seems imposing” (Moore, 2001). Furthermore, players not only need to know their own game but also need to be able to effectively break down and exploit their opponents’ weaknesses. This becomes increasingly difficult due to the fact that at most levels of tennis, the coach is not allowed to interject once play has commenced. The player must become their own coach, must make a decision for each unpredictable shot and a plan for each unique scenario. Tennis tests a players’ mental ability more than any other sport because it’s an individual game played without the reliance on a coach or teammate to bail the player out if they get into a tight spot during a match. To succeed in tennis, the importance for a player to be able to problem solve and make effective decisions necessary to win should not be undervalued.

Using Moore’s strategic design and my own experience training with him, I implemented his plan, breaking each skill set into a tactical area that explained the different stages of the point. I hoped that this would help the Hebei players make

strategic decisions based upon what they were able to identify as each point took place. However, I did not want to totally eliminate all Chinese methodology for fear of disrupting what they had been accustomed to, so I found a way fuse the two methods.

Every day of the week we practiced a different skill set. In the morning, we integrated a little bit of the Chinese methodology in which the players made technical improvements and found a good rhythm for the shot of the day. In the afternoon, the goal was to use the shot of the day to implement a strategic mindset based upon the unpredictable tactical situations they may face in a match.

In our practices, my goal is to stress the relationship between a particular shot and the strategic purpose for the shot dependent upon what a variety of tactical situations might call for. On Mondays, we practice serves and returns as a way to effectively start the point and possibly take an early advantage. Tuesdays we work on forehands and backhands as the second stage in a point and how to use patience to tip the scale of neutrality if no player had gained an advantage from the serve or return. Wednesday is used to work on the net game (approach shots, volleys, and overheads) as the third stage and as a way to finish the point after a player has received an advantage from their groundstrokes. Thursday we practice game scenarios and play matches. Friday is set aside of doubles strategy and match play.

In implementing the practice plans, we place much of the emphasis on the learning being student driven. It is in fact the players' unique style of tennis that we are hoping to improve; so individual questions about their game were welcomed and encouraged. We have put into place various classroom sessions, goal-setting sessions, and have tried to give the players every opportunity to become their own coach.

In theory the plan sounds good. One would think that a player who had been playing tennis for more than eight years could equate their previous experiences on the court and to build upon their knowledge base. However, there are many underlining academic, cultural, and psychological factors that have made implementing this type of practice routine challenging.

### **Successes, Challenges, and Difficulties Reforming the Training Regimen**

I am conflicted as to whether I have been successful in helping the team improve its practice regimen. On some levels, the players seem responsive to the new method of coaching, but in other ways do not seem to work hard in implementing the techniques into their games. As a coach it is frustrating to impart a new strategy, make concessions with the old, and yet see little effort from the players to rise to the challenge that this new style of learning presents.

This is a product of the way they have been taught in the past. The students have been instructed, socialized, in a certain manner and it is hard for them to break their habits. My players have come to rely on the need for the perfect “feel” and believe that this comes from having great technique. They believe that a player who can hit 51 balls in a row without missing is inherently better than a player that can hit only 50. The players find it hard to think strategically on the court, ask few questions, and seem mentally complacent. They wait for a coach to tell them what is right and what is wrong. Again, I think this is in large part due to the traditional methods used to educate the Chinese.

The biggest difficulty to overcome when trying to implement change to their training is methods of communication. It is not surprising that so many of the

idiosyncrasies, the details, the deeper understandings can get lost in translation. After nearly a year, my Chinese is not bad for a foreigner who previously studied Spanish and finds less and less time to incorporate daily Chinese lessons into his own routine due to the demands of the job. Additionally, because of the emphasis that has been placed on the players' athletic education rather than academic, my students' English ability is lacking.

Using Chinese, I can get my point across, arrange lessons, and can have basic conversations with my players, but what is really missing are the subtleties in communication that go a long way in building a good player-coach relationship. There are always deeper meanings that a coach tries to convey with the inflection of their voice or with a few choice words or in a players' interpretation of praise, constructive criticism, or even a simple scolding. By now all my players understand my meaning, but we still do not know each other.

I have help from two assistant coaches, Thomas and George. These two really go out of their way to help with communication and drive home the nuances. They do their best to translate the subtleties and secondary meanings of my teaching to the players but even their English has severe limitations, as does their understanding of my system. I will often catch one of the two coaches translating incorrectly or reverting back to Chinese methodology as they lecture rather than answer questions.

Day in and day out, we are all faced with the dubious task of organizing meaningful practices that challenge the players' mental thought process. However, at the end of the day, the accountability must fall with the players and how willing they are to learn and implement new ideas. I believe that productive learning comes from both

teacher and student; it's a two-way street that takes effort from both sides to produce effective results.

One of my professors, Dr. Roberto Bahruth, once told me that if a student wants to learn a second language, they must be willing to do three things: have a strong desire to communicate, be willing to learn with vagueness, and be willing to appear foolish. If a student really takes this to heart, they will embrace the social attitudes necessary to listen and learn (Bahruth, personal communication, January, 26, 2011). My techniques and methods of coaching are like a second language to my players and on top of this I truly am speaking in a foreign language and broken Chinese to communicate my ideas. It's not an easy task for myself or the other coaches, but it seems to me that most of my players don't have a strong desire to communicate and are unwilling to accept this joint challenge that we have embarked upon to be willing to fail before we can truly succeed.

### **Competition Structure Domestic vs. International**

My coaches and I work every day to refine, reshape, and transform the way that the players go about their training. We do this with one goal in mind: to obtain better results in competitions. To make significant changes to the Hebei tennis program, it bears repeating that our players, coaching staff, and management must first prove to the Provincial sports bureau that the program deserves additional funding. The Chinese Tennis Association (CTA) has a system in place that gives our players numerous opportunities to compete in domestic tournaments.

The Hebei Provincial tennis program is predominately concerned with our results in domestic competition. For most of the directors, coaches, and players, positive results in domestic competitions, and in particular the National games, will determine whether or

not they will climb the social hierarchy of Chinese sports society. As mentioned, the goal set for my team was a quarterfinal birth in at least one competition. For all of those involved, there is a lot of pressure to perform and gain a favorable result as upward mobility in Chinese society depends on it.

The CTA currently has a competitive system in place that allows players of every level to compete in domestic tournaments. The CTA has developed a domestic junior circuit with three age divisions: 10 and under, 12 and under, and 14 and under. Its 16 and under circuit is run in conjunction with Nike, a corporate sponsor. The 18 and under tour and its professional events are run by the CTA but governed by the International Tennis Federation (ITF) an organization that oversees all international tennis competitions worldwide. In the later two tours, players from any nation are allowed to participate and can compile points toward an international ranking.

Since 2008, the domestic tennis events and tours have become more developed and have provided more opportunities to the increasing number of tennis players in China. For example in 2008, the ITF Junior Circuit had two tournaments in China. In 2011, China held 16 ITF junior tournaments. This year the ITF Junior circuit also has 16 events but has increased the grade level of half of its domestic tournaments from level 5 (lowest) to level 3 (mid level). The CTA has done this with two strategic purposes in mind. The first is to allow Chinese players a better chance to obtain higher international rankings. Secondly, by hosting higher-level ITF tournaments, the CTA can entice more international players to compete within China's borders.

Past sports policies in China forbid many players to compete in international competitions. However, with an increasing emphasis on the Olympic games and because

success in international competitions by Chinese athletes is associated with wealth, progress, and nationalism, Chinese officials have sought ways for its athletes to gain more international experience.

By providing more opportunities for international players to compete in China, the CTA does not have to worry about the social cost of allowing as many of its elite tennis players to go abroad for international experience. These tournaments have seen a steady increase of Asian players and are even beginning to bring in some Europeans. By doing this, the CTA also recognizes the importance of creating international exposure for its elite players that have hopes of breaking into the top 100 international professional rankings.

However, by Chinese standards, most of its players will only have a chance to compete domestically. Only its best, most skilled tennis players will be given a chance to play international events abroad. This is because, with the exception of the National Chinese team, most of the Provincial teams, Hebei included, are not concerned with developing the next international star but are mainly concerned with their domestic results. As a coach, my directors have given me some leeway to use whatever competitive events I feel necessary to improve the ranking of our team.

Currently, I feel that given my players' predisposition to focus on the technical aspect of the game, the best way to prepare our players is to play as many tournaments as possible. In particular, I feel that if the Hebei players can gain more experience in international events it will give them a competitive edge when facing their domestic counterparts.

However, just like trying to implement a new training regimen with the players, this is not as simple as it sounds. I have encountered challenges when trying to implement a tournament schedule that I feel will give our players the best chance to improve in the short time before the 2013 National Games.

### **Successes, Challenges, and Difficulties Reforming Hebei's Competitive Structure**

For a country with such a large population, the Chinese competitive system of tennis is a small, close-knit group of people. Especially within the state system many of the elite players have been competing against each other in the same tournaments since the age of twelve. Due in part to the small elite tennis community, there has also been an established, natural pecking order as everyone recognizes and reveres the top players.

Over the course of one year, I have traveled to more than 16 tournaments held in various cities all over China. I've been to men's and women's professional events, ITF junior circuit events, the National City Games, and Hebei provincial tournaments. At each tournament, I encounter the same 60 to 100 players. However, the feeling I get at these tournaments is not so much a combative attitude, as players get ready to go to battle, but more of a social picnic gathering between friends and family. Not that this is such a bad thing (it is nice to see and I've been able to build good relationships with different players and coaches around China), but it just doesn't quite have the competitive fire that I am used to. It all feels just a little too comfortable.

To break this cycle, I suggested to my bosses that more international competitions abroad would help bring a different mentality to the Hebei players. A mentality built upon a nationalistic pride in which they want to compete and win for their country. This was particularly true in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, as gold medal success was



equated to the progress that China has made over the course of the last 30 years. This nationalist pride displays China's superior dominance as the country looks toward becoming a world superpower this century. I was hoping that I could capitalize on this type of attitude with my Hebei players and bring this sense of pride to their domestic competitions.

In February of this year, I was able to arrange an exchange program with the Lawn Tennis Association of Thailand to train with its national team for three weeks. In truth, it was the best three weeks of practice that my players have had since I arrived in Hebei. Their effort, attitude, and competitiveness all increased as they sparred day in and day out with their Thai counterparts. It was great not only for my students' training but it was the first time that all except one of the players or coaches had ever been outside of China. It was somewhat of a marvel to see the players flourish outside of their normal environments, and to open their minds to new experiences and opportunities. Essentially, this is the same attitude that I am trying to create in their practice sessions, but unfortunately after the three weeks we had in Thailand, the training and intensity has not been matched. I had hoped to incorporate more overseas training exchanges, however, due to Hebei's limited budget and because of the aftermath that I later describe, I fear I will not be allowed to incorporate this option into my training methods despite my belief that it is essential to the success and future results of the Hebei team.

As quickly as the light came on in Thailand, it turned off as soon as we arrived back in China. We went directly to two tournaments—back-to-back weeks in Chengdu—and our results were less than flattering. Once back in China, in a comfortable environment, the complacency arose once again in the players, almost as if

they were saying: “We are back to the same system, and we are willing to settle for the same mediocrity and the same results we had in the past.”

There seems to be a “second rate citizen” attitude surrounding the players on the Hebei team; an attitude that makes them not believe in their ability to compete at the highest level in China so why work hard? This is true in all tennis to a point—a pecking order based upon ranking and how this affects players’ ability to compete with confidence against those they perceive as being better. The players’ results and the way they trained immediately after returning from the Chengdu tournament reflect this mentality.

There was a lack of motivation to work hard during practices. In a certain sense, the players seem content with their job as professional players in the Chinese system. It often feels as if the players come to practice with the mindset that a productive day is one in which they get by with minimal effort. Or perhaps they have just played tennis a long time, are burned out, don't like the game anymore, but have signed contracts and are obligated to continue their training with no recourse.

Whatever the reason, the directors and myself do not look upon this mentality favorably. Our players are receiving benefits and are paid by the Hebei Provincial government to play tennis; in a small sense of the word, it is their job. Furthermore, because Hebei has difficulty attracting top talent in China, it is not easy to “fire” our players and we do not currently have the infrastructure in place to move forward with new players who might be ready to take the place of ineffective ones. The bottom line is that the Hebei tennis program does not have the budget to waste its resources on players unwilling to accept the responsibility to play for the province.

After some discussion with the other coaches and my directors, we all agreed that the players were lacking accountability. Leading up to the Chengdu tournament, any contractual Hebei player was completely reimbursed for all expenses that they accrued at tournaments. To move forward and create accountability within our program at Hebei, the directors thought this system must be changed and I somewhat reluctantly agree. I would like to give every player as great an opportunity to succeed as possible, but if the effort and the attitude are not present, why waste the team's resources that could be used for more productive purposes?

In the future, Hebei players will be reimbursed on a sliding scale dependent on tournament results. If the player loses in the first round, they will be responsible for all of their expenses; if the player reaches the second round, the office will pay 25% of their expenses; if they reach the third round, then 50% of their expenses will be paid; if they reach the quarterfinals, the office will reimburse all of their tournament expenses; if they are a semifinalist, all their tournament expenses will be paid and they will receive a bonus of 500 RMB; if the player reaches the final, they will be completely reimbursed and will receive a 1000 RMB bonus, and if they are champion all expenses will be paid plus a 2000 RMB bonus. Additionally, the Hebei Management Center will pay for a one-way train ticket to the tournament site and everyday provide them with 30 RMB for food or living expenses (the same daily cost of living while training in Shijiazhuang).

While this may seem harsh, the directors, coaches and I feel that this is more than reasonable for players that receive a monthly salary, accommodation, food, equipment, and training at no cost. We hope that this will give the players some incentive to become more professional in their attitude toward training and competition. The players now

have the ability to receive bonuses with the new sliding scale and must keep in mind that they are playing for Hebei Province and within the Chinese sport system. Moreover, the players understand there are additional social benefits that can be obtained based upon positive results during their careers with Hebei.

This new method may not be ideal or completely fair but I think what our players have failed to recognize is the fact that their government has invested a large amount of money on them and given them ample opportunities to make their jobs as a professional athlete a meaningful experience. It is up to them to make the most of the resources that have been provided for them. I know for a fact that there are many Chinese boys and girls who would love to be in the same position as my players. There is a fine balance between the hardships and the benefits of the Chinese sports system; but in the end, it mostly depends on what players are willing to invest as to what they can get out of the experience.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: BENEFITS AND HARDSHIP IN THE HEBEI TENNIS PROGRAM

The 2008 Olympic games held in Beijing was China's much anticipated public unveiling of political strength and social progress to the world. Although China has been more open since Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the Olympics was China's first real public display in which it opened the doors to the international community for all to see what it could offer on the world stage. The overwhelming opinion was that the games were a huge success and many people recognized China's ambition to take on a new leadership role in world affairs. While it was mostly a time for accolades, China did not escape without some questioning or criticizing of China's government policies. Because a sporting competition was at center stage, many outsiders had a chance to closely examine the CSS for the first time. The CSS received its share of scrutiny from those calling it a controlling and authoritative system that lacks basic human rights for its athletes. While the CSS may not be an easy system to train under, as its methods are strenuous, unyielding and harsh, the athletes are still given certain benefits and many opportunities to succeed in the system. So much depends on the athlete, the role of the directors, and the management center. Not every athlete is treated the same, and not every training center provides the same benefits. The benefits and hardships of the system ought not to be generalized and should be examined on a case-by-case basis. One only has to look at the example of the Hebei tennis program to understand this fact.

### **Social Benefits of the Chinese Sport System**

When examining the benefits of the CSS and in particular the Hebei tennis program, it is important to clarify that all benefits are largely potential benefits. Nothing is guaranteed in this system. As easy as something is given, it can just as easily be taken away. The Hebei tennis program like so many other programs in the CSS is a system based upon hierarchy and stratification. Those at the top of the pyramid are given the most, while those at the bottom must earn their way to the top.

So what is the attraction for athletes and families that make the choice to join a state-sponsored team? The reasons are two fold. First, there is a nationalist and patriotic feeling for those who believe their son or daughter can achieve greatness and win gold medals for their country. This pride was compounded leading up to the 2008 Olympics because Beijing was hosting the games. The second and more important reason has to do with the potential social benefits that can be earned from an athlete's success within the system; these are mostly financial benefits. Unlike the many private sports programs that have sprung up across China, the CSS is a government-funded program that has invested a lot of money to identify, train, and promote China's next Olympic athletes. By investing millions of Renminbi (RMB) (the Chinese currency is currently valued at 6.3 RMB to \$1) into national training centers, provincial training centers, city teams, and spare time sports schools, China has given many families and athletes a chance for a better life.

If a child is identified and given an opportunity to succeed in the realm of athletics, it often becomes a choice driven by economics rather than skill. Children who are selected and excel are provided with free training, equipment, accommodation, food,

competition fees, monthly salary, university placement, job placement, competition bonuses, and a retirement stipend. Some families faced with the prospect of providing all of this for their child decide that starting a career in a government sports school means access to better education, health care, and nutrition than they might otherwise receive. Consequently, if an athlete can succeed in the CSS, they have an opportunity to earn enough money to help support their parents and provide a better future for their family.

Many families decide to join a sports school because of the structure of China's education system. Traditional education in China is extremely competitive. After each level of schooling (elementary, middle, and high school), a child must take an exit examination before progressing to the next level. A child's score on this examination determines what school he/she can attend next, and their level of financial responsibility. The government only provides a compulsory education for nine years; after that a family must privately fund high school. Since many Chinese believe that to become successful full attention must be placed in a singular endeavor, there are very few children that pursue both academics and athletics. Therefore, if a child has been identified with talent in a particular sport, many times a family is willing to hedge their bets on an athletic education rather than a formal one.

Many families believe an athletic education will give their child the best opportunity to succeed and a chance for a better life. They are willing to trust that enrollment in the CSS will lead to athletic accolades for which they will be appropriately compensated once their career is finished.

### **Benefits of the Hebei Tennis Program**

As mentioned, benefits in the CSS are not the same for every player. It is also important to note that not every team or province can provide the same level of support; there is no golden standard in this stratifying system. It is a simple fact, teams with lower levels of government funding are not able to provide as much as teams at the upper echelon in their sport. Therefore, Hebei's tennis program is at a disadvantage when it comes to what it can provide for its players.

Every player on the Hebei team is provided with different scales of funding and benefits are dependent upon their status with the team. Each player has a different motivating factor for playing on the provincial team and must be realistic with what they can expect to receive once their careers are finished in Hebei. Starting with the top of the pyramid, I will provide examples of the benefits received for a few of the current players on the Hebei team and how this effects their motivation for playing.

Sunny is the crown jewel of the Hebei program—a misfit on a team with substandard results. Sunny's current ranking is #165 on the ITF world junior tour and he is ranked in the top three of his age division in China. Due to his outstanding play, he has been afforded benefits and opportunities that most of the other players can only hope for. He is a member of the U16 junior national team, and has been given the opportunity to play in international competitions such as the Junior Davis Cup in Australia, the Asian Championships in India, and he has been invited to participate in national training camps. Last year, Sunny played in a total of sixteen tournaments across China. In addition to his affiliation with the Hebei team, he also has a private sponsor from an individual that helps with expenses not covered by the Hebei team. While training in Langfang, his



parents were provided with an apartment to live in. The Hebei team provides him with more opportunities to play international competitions in hopes that he will qualify to participate in one of the Junior Grand Slam events: Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, or US Open. His monthly salary is the highest on the team at 2000 RMB (\$320) a month. He is not bound by the reimbursement program that Hebei recently initiated for competition because the team or his sponsor pays for his tournaments regardless of his results. In comparison to many athletes in China and in our Hebei program, he has put himself in a good position to continue advancing within the system. On the horizon for him is selection to the national team, placement into a top tier university, and a solid retirement bonus. As one might imagine, his motivation for playing tennis is quite high as he has attractive benefits and plenty of opportunities to improve his status in the CSS.

Two of Hebei's players Ricky and Kelly, fall into the second category and have fewer opportunities. Ricky is 20 years old and has another two years left on his contract with Hebei. More than likely he will retire in October of 2013 when the Chinese National Games are finished. Ricky is currently playing men's professional tournaments in China but has no professional ranking and his current men's national ranking is #53. Last year he played in a total of six tournaments, not nearly enough to be competitive with the best players in China who are averaging twenty to twenty five tournaments a year. Ricky comes from a below modest socio-economic background and his monthly salary of 1500 RMB (\$240) goes to help his family. The reimbursement program that Hebei recently initiated is particularly rough for him because of his family's background. If he does not do well at a particular tournament, he will have to cover the expenses out

of his own pocket. This has put an undue amount of pressure on him to perform and has also made him less motivated to compete. Because of the little time that he has left on his contract and because of the few opportunities he has to play tournaments, his potential advancement in the CSS is limited. Ricky has expressed his disdain for the system and feels he is a prisoner without rights. He has expressed his desire to start university next year if his entrance examinations go well (personal communication, May 11, 2012). However, due to the lack of skilled players on the team, Director Shaun will not allow him to enter university until he finishes his contract and competes in the National Games. Given his current status as an athlete in China and Hebei, he has the official papers necessary to enter a second tier university in China, but is hoping to test well so that he can enroll in Beijing Normal University. Over the course of the next year he still has chances for social advancement. If he can place into the quarterfinals of the National Games, or earn a professional world ranking, he can be placed into a first tier university and will be given a better retirement package.

Most of the current Hebei players fall into the third category in the Hebei program. They are 16-17 years old and in the past year most signed six year contracts with the province. That will keep them on the Hebei team through the 2017 National Games. Generally speaking, six years is a long time for these players to improve and advance within the system. They have monthly salaries of 1000 RMB (\$160), are given free accommodation in a dormitory, and are provided with three meals a day in the teams' cafeteria. Equipment, clothing, and shoes are provided as well as all training cost. Tournament fees will follow the recently implemented reimbursement program, in which they not only have an opportunity to be completely reimbursed but can also earn bonuses

depending on their results. A player's socio-economic background will dictate the effect the reimbursement program has on their attitude toward competition. A player's motivation level for playing will more than likely depend on their ability. If they believe they have a chance to improve then they work harder for their goals. However, many of the current players don't believe they can compete at a high level in China and accordingly feel stuck in the system with little hope for social advancement. Like Ricky, many will be looking forward to retirement and potential university placement.

The last category of players, Hebei's youngest generation, is still hoping to earn a full-time contract. They are generally still motivated to play and have something to prove. While a contract may not mean much, these players still have the time and opportunity to advance in the system. They are hoping for the chance to represent the province, earn full-time status on the team, and reap the benefits that come with it. These players are 15 years old and have joined the team on their own accord. They are provided with a reduction in their cost of living and food. With this small exception, they must pay for all other costs associated with playing tennis. Another way to look at the situation is they still have the freedom to decide when and where they play and are not bound by a contractual obligation to the province of Hebei.

What is apparent in this system is the diminishing level of benefits and the increased amount of pressure and hardship for players on the Hebei team as they get further down the list. No two players are alike and accordingly no two players have the same motivation for playing tennis or joining the Hebei team. In this type of environment, it is difficult to create a team atmosphere in which they are focused on a

common goal. The stratification in the system creates class division, jealousy, selfishness, and individualism rather than a team culture.

### **Hardships of the Chinese Sports System and Hebei Tennis**

Becoming a part of the CSS is a choice. Nobody is born into the system; a family or the player makes the decision to become a part of this program. For many, it is considered an honor and privilege to have the opportunity to compete for a province and the country. The CSS training regimens have been well documented in China and every child and every parent has an understanding of what they are signing up for before they enter the system. That being said, the CSS does not give much room for flexibility in its program. The CSS leaves many athletes at the end of their careers with little opportunity to function in society and with limited marketable skills with which to enter the workforce.

There are two main criticisms of the CSS. The first is that once an athlete signs a contract to play for a provincial program, they are left without basic alienable rights that give them the freedom to come and go as they choose. Their lives are directed by the coaches, directors, and management centers they train with. Decisions are not made by the players but rather by others in regards to where they live, train, how long they train, competition schedule, and pay; any number of these different factors go into a typical training calendar. There is no other option but to follow the plan set by their management center and there is no recourse to challenge those decisions. In essence, players are bound to contracts and must follow set guidelines regardless of whether it's in the best interest of the athlete.

The second criticism has to do with the lack of educational opportunity within the CSS. Many Chinese believe that full attention in a singular discipline is needed in order to become successful and because the CSS is in the business of creating Olympic athletes there is no room for an academic curriculum. The pervading opinion is that once athletes retire they have few skills necessary to succeed in something outside of the sports environment. Even if they have an opportunity to go to school, more than likely their test scores will be too low to enter a good university and they will struggle with the academic standards.

The Hebei players struggle with this day in and day out and you can see their motivation for playing fluctuates with their mood; some days good, some days ok, and many bad days. This stems from what the player believes they can still obtain by playing within system. Many on the Hebei team regard their time here as a job with which to make some money and are simply biding their time until they finish their contractual obligation with the province.

Many of the Hebei players feel stuck in the system and no longer enjoy what they do. Most have been playing tennis since the time they were eight years old. They have endured long training days, long training years, and many have come to the realization that they will not be able to progress any further in the CSS. Specifically, in Hebei, this poses a problem. The infrastructure here is not set up to simply allow its players to leave when they no longer want to train. Unlike other programs in the country, Hebei does not have a steady source of upcoming talented players ready to fill in for the unmotivated ones. The management center and directors need the players to stay involved to compete in the national games. The results of our players also affect the coaches and directors'

ability to move up the CSS's chain of command. The players are forced to finish their contracts, are expected to improve, ascertain good results, and stay motivated along the way. The Hebei players begin to see their careers as an obligation and burden rather than a privilege and feel like a slave to the system without the prospect of a better future.

### **Reforms to the Hebei Tennis Program**

The most beneficial reform of the Hebei team I have seen was enrolling all of the players into part-time school. During the designated school year, the players go to class six days a week. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday they have class for one hour in the morning. Tuesday and Thursday they are in class from 8:00 A.M. until 11:00 A.M. The players study Chinese, mathematics, and English.

This works into my coaching philosophy two ways. First from an athletic standpoint, it gives the players a chance to rest their bodies. Before the players were practicing morning and afternoon and had eleven training sessions every week. It is physically draining to endure this type of repetitive practice every day, and most of them have been doing this type of training for years. Additionally, it was important to enroll the players in school because it would give them an opportunity to challenge their minds. To be a good tennis player, you need to be smart and know how to think on the court. My hope was that school would give them an opportunity to build more brainpower and to successfully transfer knowledge and problem solving abilities into their practice situations. However, one possible unintended consequence of this reform might be strengthening the stereotypical style of learning by using traditional Confucian education teaching methods. If the students are not taught how to problem solve in their daily

classes, then it may make the cultural divide between my methods of teaching and their traditional methods of learning even more apparent.

The second and more important reason for going to school is for their future benefit after they have finished their athletic careers. Going to school will help the players toward earning a high school diploma and if they choose to enter university, help them score higher on college entrance examinations. It could give them the opportunity to enter a normal university rather than one designated simply for athletic studies. It is important that the players have a solid foundation of knowledge to work from if they decide to enter university. I don't want them to struggle once they begin college course work.

For example, in my first four months with the team, I had the chance to work with one player (that wished to remain anonymous), whose father died in a car accident two years prior to my arrival. The Hebei team made arrangements for the player to attend part-time school. With their help, he was able to enroll in a chemical engineering university in Beijing. He told me in an email shortly after entering university in September of 2011, that despite his two years of studies prior to enrolling, he feels behind all the other students and must work extra hard on his studies to keep up in his college courses (personal communication, September 23, 2011).

Despite the benefits school may have for a player's future some of my students still resist the change. During their 2011 winter holiday from school, I asked the players to complete a short survey on their academic experience to assess whether or not changes needed to be made in the practice schedule. Little Jason asked if he could have time to sleep instead. Simon told me he would rather be practicing, and Andy told me that going

to school makes their head hurt and they cannot have a clear mind the rest of the day. (personal communication, December 29, 2011). Most acknowledge the fact that going to school is beneficial, but they don't like it. However, this is one change that while I am the coach will not be adjusted. In my opinion, education is paramount to their futures and while they may not like it now, maybe they will thank me ten years from now.

With the exception of this change, there is not much more that I can do to provide the players with additional benefits while working in the CSS. I don't work in a perfect system; so much is out of my control. I can suggest ideas that may lead to a better training environment in Hebei, but the final say comes down to the directors and their superiors at the Provincial Bureau.

Every day I have conflicting opinions as to how to make Hebei not only a competitive team but also a place where their time can have a more meaningful purpose beyond the game of tennis. There is a fine line between the discipline needed to create this atmosphere and the expression of freedom that can allow the players to take control of their training and lives. I am also conflicted because I believe a player, regardless of how long they have been in the system or how long they still have to go before finishing their contracts, still has an opportunity to succeed. If they are able to find the willpower, put in enough time and effort, anything is possible. This might just be coach speak but the players and their families knowingly made a choice to enter this line of work. Whether or not they regret their decision or feel stuck, most knew what type of system they were entering. If a player looks upon any decision they make with regret rather than optimism toward the future, then no matter what path they choose life will be a constant struggle.



While there is no easy solution to the problem, I remain an optimist that good ideas and small changes will bring hope to Hebei and can make a player's time in the CSS productive and meaningful. So much depends on how motivated they are to obtain their goals and whether they have a good support system of teammates, coaches, and directors to help this become a reality. If I do my part to create good training methods and competitive avenues, and the directors do their part to provide the support and infrastructure necessary to succeed, then the rest is up to the players. I believe that Hebei has the best interest of the players in mind, or they would not have gone to such lengths to improve its program.

Ultimately, the responsibility lies with the players as to whether they can progress as athletes in the system. If they have good results and can earn accolades for Hebei province, they can have more than just a secure future. The players and their families must be accountable for how to work with the system rather than against it. For all the criticism that is bestowed upon the CSS, there is also a human factor at work and many athletes can and have had success.

Yet, as more information comes to light about the potential hardships and benefits of the CSS, Chinese citizens will be able to make better informed decisions about whether or not to enroll their child into the system. Parents and athletes may not be willing to take such a big leap of faith when it comes to relying on the CSS to provide them with benefits that will ally them with the Chinese upper social class. Additionally, as market reforms continue to sweep across China and push toward elite sport, there is a large debate as to whether or not the CSS will be able to uphold its current infrastructure. It is possible that the Chinese government will face pressure from society to invest more

money into sport for the masses and that market forces might altogether eliminate the need for a government-sponsored sport system.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: FUTURE OF THE CHINESE SPORT SYSTEM AND OF HEBEI TENNIS

Market reforms have given China a new future, new direction, and new purpose for its citizens and these changes are beginning to find their way to the CSS. The ongoing debate is how market changes will affect the CSS. As China pushes toward a more individualistic and capitalistic society, its sporting culture may also be headed that way. Over the past fifty years, sport policy has been integrated with political functions. However, due to modernization, China is finding new ways of individualizing sport into the daily lives of its citizens while also trying to maintain an elite sports system that encourages nationalism. This transformation has opened up new possibilities for how sport is incorporated for different segments of the Chinese population. In China's quest to modernize its institutions, policy and attitude toward sports have been met with problems as commercialization has led to many different interpretations regarding how the CSS will evolve or if market forces will eventually eliminate the government run program.

### **Commercialization and Capitalism Pushing Elite Sport Toward Decentralization**

“In 1963, Chen Yin, Vice-Prime Minister of State argued: Sport is not just about playing ball. It reflects our country's image, force, spirit and the superiority of our socialist construction. The achievements in sports are the glory of our country and people” (Huan, 2007, p. 443). It was at this time that China changed its policy from

promoting exercise for the masses in favor of elitism as they began to search and train world-class athletes that would bring international praise and political recognition. This marked the beginning of stratification, elitism, and top down hierarchy that has pervaded China's centralized sport system.

As China began to produce elite athletes, it increased its participation in international competitions and the government channeled "all the resources on a few elite athletes in order to produce high performances on the international sports stage" (Wei et al., 2010, p. 2386). When China embarked on its policy for training elite athletes, it "withdrew from making efforts to promote sport at the grassroots," thus ignoring large segments of its population (Huan, 2007, p. 444). China's new endeavor was to promote only the most skilled athletes using a model of upward mobility while neglecting sports development for the majority of the population. "It was a turning point of Chinese sport ideology and the system had changed from 'two legs' to 'one leg'—the elite one" (Wei et al., 2010, p. 2387). This elite system still plays a large role in China's current sports climate.

The late 1970's and 80's was a time of immense change for Chinese society as the government instigated radical economic reforms in its ultimate goal to modernize China. Elite athletes and their success in international competitions bolstered the nation's enthusiasm and motivation to push toward modernity. China's new image was on display for the international community, and elite athletes continued to promote Chinese national pride and confidence. However, the biggest change for China was the economic progress and increase in wealth for many of its citizens. Economic and political reforms have had

a major impact on sports and have changed the way the general population participated in leisure activities.

In 1995 the five-day week was adopted throughout the country; income levels have risen, with greater disposable margins; the economic boom is bringing an air of confidence; industrial growth is strong; inward investment is high; consumer goods are expanding; and an embryonic leisure industry is emerging. As leisure time increases with the long weekend, and as prosperity grows, more attention is being given by sports leaders to the provision of “Sport for All.” (Riordan & Jones, 1999, p. 5)

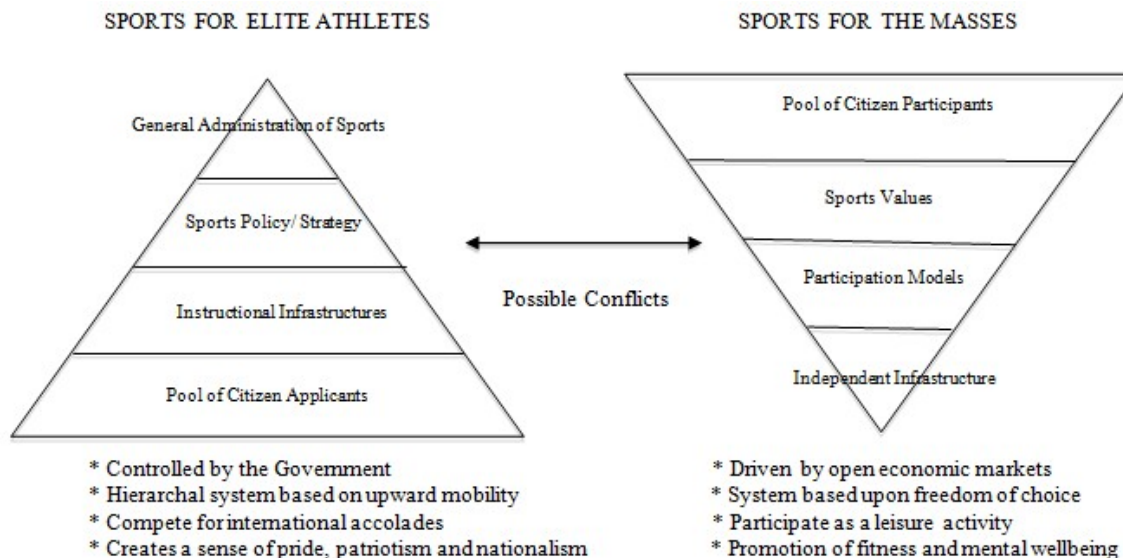
The deep-rooted affection for sport created by a nationalist support for its elite athletes has driven more Chinese citizens to participate and has opened a massive market for the commercialization of physical activity.

The Chinese government has supported the role of decentralization and embraced the idea of allowing a market driven economy to push the ideals of its citizens in the development of sport for the masses. This is a new era in China, one of personal choice and freedom to participate without government involvement. “To a certain extent, the forces from the bottom up were far more powerful than top-down sports policy in promoting mass sports participation,” (Huan, 2007, p. 452). Innovation, economic forces, freedom of choice, and deep-rooted nationalism is driving the industrialization of the sporting community for the Chinese population. Chinese citizens now hold power when it comes to constructing how sports will play a role in their everyday lives and are creating social pressure for the government to do more to promote sport in the public sector.

Mass sport is driving the “development of fitness projects, the building of sports facilities, the training of fitness instructors and the holding of sports events” (Huan, 2007, p. 452). “The most significant changes have taken place in people’s attitudes to health, leisure, and consumption in relation to sport” (Huan, 2007, p. 453). Sports, for this segment of the population, is predicated on the improvement of the daily life of its citizens not only in the realm of physical fitness but also by providing possible individual economic opportunities through the commercialization of the sporting industry.

### **Market Effects and Problems for the Chinese Sport System and Sport for the Masses**

The sporting climate in China over the past 100 years can be defined as a yo-yo effect—one in which there has been a dramatic shift in policy of sport for the masses, to elitism, back to sport for the masses. Many thought that a market driven economy would supersede the government role of training elite athletes and decentralize the sporting systems entirely. However, with China’s unprecedented success in the 2008 Beijing Olympic games, it seems as if the government role in producing world-class athletes is here to stay. At present, there is a two-pronged system of sports in Chinese society. As seen in Figure 5 below, this system maintains a fine balance between the government’s hierarchal system of producing elite athletes that garner international accolades and the other market driven, bottom up system that promotes physical fitness for its citizens.



**Figure 5 China's Two-Pronged System of Sport**

Modernization “has launched an economic revolution in people’s lives, it has triggered a socio-political debate on how to redefine the relationship between sport, the state and the individual” (Huan, 2007, p. 449). Today’s two-pronged system of sport supports both the social and political aspects of continued development. However, economics and the commercialization of the sporting system is what will continue to define sport; its ability to reach all segments of the population will define how sport will modernize. There are potential problems in relying so heavily on the economics of sport in any society especially in China where institutions are continually changing and do not have a clear definition.

As the political climate continues to progress toward decentralization and freedom of personal choice, so too will elite athletes want to maintain their personal autonomy. Athletes will continue to push for individualizing their athletic achievements and will want to reap the rewards for their personal talents. This means privatization of

endorsement contracts, less reliance on state-owned entities for training, and more control over their status as individuals in their sporting environment. This may come into conflict with what the government perceives that a national hero is entitled to, especially if the state has funded an athlete and has a vested interest in supporting their athletic pursuits. Commercialization and market forces could potentially drive a wedge between the government's idea of socialism and the athlete's idea of autonomy in the perceived rights and role of sport.

As for the world of sport for the masses, economic forces may actually be driving more people away from being able to afford the ability to participate in physical activity. China's new economy has already created a division of opportunity between rural and urban centers. Most of the increased economic advancement is in urban areas. This has created a disparity in where development of new facilities and grassroots organizations are finding homes. Additionally, people who reside in rural areas tend to have less money and leisure time and are unable to afford sporting opportunities compared with those in urban areas. As China's economy continues to improve, opportunity for sport might also become more expensive and more divisive.

### **Market Effect on Elite Tennis and Tennis for the Masses in Hebei**

Economics have changed the athletic culture in China. Hebei tennis is an example of the way the market has affected its structure. Tennis in Hebei has two avenues for its citizens: the elite state-sponsored system and the independent realm for the public. As market forces pervade both the elite and the public realms of sport, the possibility for a merger between the two becomes more of a reality. It is a complex relationship based upon cause and effect of market capitalization.



The Hebei tennis team is at a disadvantage when it comes to the amount of funding it receives from the government. As presented by in the annual budget meeting in January 2012, the previous year saw Hebei provide its top four players (one woman and three men) with approximately 250,000 RMB (about \$40,000) for tournament fees. Not a small amount of money, but it pales in comparison to what the top tennis programs in China can provide. In 2011, Hebei only had four full time members on the team; this year it has added four more contractual players to its roster, which means more bodies to support.

To make matters more difficult for the Hebei team, the Chinese government has recently come under fire from its citizens to allocate more funds into the realm of public sports rather than its elite state-sponsored system. The government is feeling the social pressure to provide for the sporting welfare of its mass population after it was disclosed that China spent nearly seven million dollars for each of its 51 gold medals in the Beijing Olympic Games (Beech &Wei, 2008, para. 10).

This means that since Hebei is not one of China's elite tennis programs and is not known for producing the best players, it is likely that its government funding will be reduced after the next National Games in 2013 unless the team can have substantially better results in this competition. With reduced funding from the government, Hebei will continue to be at a disadvantage when trying to recruit top tennis players to join their team and will also have trouble supporting the players that are currently on the team.

This effect is already noticeable in the Hebei tennis program. For example, the tournament reimbursement program put into place to motivate and hold the players accountable for their practice effort and tournament results also helps ease the financial

stress on the Small Ball Management Center. With this system in place, the management center is not entirely responsible financially for all of its contractual players and therefore will give the program some leeway to allocate funds for useful projects in the future.

In my opinion and in the opinion of the directors, this makes perfectly sound business sense. The management center is protecting its assets, while giving the players a reasonable system to work under that can provide the players with financial benefits if they have positive results. The players are held accountable and the management center is not wasting money that could be used productively.

However, the players see this in a different light. They believe this system is unbalanced and creates an undue amount of pressure to succeed in competitions. Simon has expressed to me that they are worried about playing competitions because if they don't reach a certain target they will shoulder the financial burden associated with playing tournaments (personal communication, April 27, 2011). I can empathize but do not necessarily agree with their assessment because this is the line of work they have chosen. The players are given a monthly salary and other cost effective benefits that make the reimbursement program reasonable. Many professional tennis players struggle with the cost associated with playing and traveling to tournaments. To put it simply, the Hebei players are professional athletes in China trying to make a living and, like it or not, this is the path they have chosen.

Regardless of my opinion or that of my directors, the reimbursement program does create a new burden of financial pressure for the players. The financial weight can be seen as the onset of market forces finding its way into the Hebei tennis program causing dissension among the players. Andy believes this is not the CSS that he signed

up for and feels that once they become contractual members of the provincial team the financial obligation should be that of the Hebei tennis management center (personal communication, May 5, 2012). Greg believes that the province ought to pay for athletic efforts, regardless of their tournament results (personal communication, March 10, 2012). Ricky has communicated to me that he feels trapped, a prisoner of the system, with no recourse or way out of their contracts and have to bear not only the responsibility of training everyday but also a financial liability (personal communication, April 20, 2012).

Who is right and who is wrong in this matter is a matter of opinion. A case can be made for either side; players, coaches, and directors all feel the pressure to succeed and climb the sporting hierarchy in China. One certainty is that it stirs a revolutionary emotional fever and sets the stage for reform. Players are crying out to have independence from the system, to maintain their autonomy, and to choose how and when they compete.

These are the type of reforms that were afforded to China's four best female tennis players, Li Na, Zheng Jie, Peng Shui, and Yan Zi, who were released from state control. These players are now able to control which tournaments they play and whom they train with, are able to form corporate sponsorships, and keep a majority share of financial winnings from competitions. These same type of reforms take aim at decentralizing the CSS and might shape the future of elite sport in China.

If this is the case, the future of elite sport and the CSS may in fact be taken over by the same capitalistic forces that have changed the lives of Chinese citizens. Tennis has already experienced reforms because it is a relatively new sport, growing in popularity due to the success of the top women players. Chinese tennis also lacks a

domestic coaching expertise so an increasing amount of foreign coaches and independent businessmen are looking to capitalize on the marketability of the sport by starting tennis academies and private clubs across China

In Hebei, the independent nature of tennis is still relatively low compared to other major metropolitan cities such as Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. This is in part because tennis is an expensive sport to play; it has long been associated with an affluent class and this is also the case in China. Hebei and in particular Shijiazhuang City is relatively low on the list of affluent cities.

Nevertheless, a decentralized tennis market has still affected Hebei. Baoding and Langfang cities have two well-known independently-run tennis programs that have produced good players and have well-established grassroots programs. Both programs are run by former Hebei provincial head coaches who are familiar with the system and are able to effectively market their programs to attract potential clients. The Langfang club has had a foreign coach working at their facility for the past three years.

These two programs in Hebei and the many more independent clubs that are popping up in cities all over China are adapting their business model to fit the needs of the mass population. Their biggest success has been to market tennis at the grassroots level and tout tennis as a leisure sport that keeps children healthy and active. With the right formula of coaching, talent, and motivation, a player might be able to transform a leisure activity into a professional career. Nothing is promised and expectations are different when there is a paying customer on the other side of the net. The market is still very competitive and Chinese parents, like most parents around the world, have high aspirations for their children. However, the independent system is based on a system of

give and take between student and teacher. This is much different than the government system established upon the premise of hierarchy and control.

In the past year, I too have been approached by more than one businessman willing to double, even triple, my salary if I would break from the system and form a new tennis club. As enticing as it sounds, and even if I did want to build something from scratch, my own contract won't allow me to work anywhere else in mainland China until October of 2013. For the time being, if I want to work in China, I too am bound to the provincial system.

That being said, the cause and effect relationship of the capitalistic forces on the tennis system in Hebei are clear. It is apparent to me that in this new and modern China one will not be able to succeed without the other. I believe that for the Hebei tennis program to remain relevant in the future, it will have to initiate change that integrates a strong business model based upon the economic reforms that have made China so successful over the past forty years.

### **Market Reforms to the Hebei Tennis Program**

The Hebei tennis program has many difficult decisions on the horizon if it is to continue to succeed in the CSS. The provincial bureau, management center, and its directors must think outside of the box and expand by merging the examples of successful state-sponsored tennis programs and independently run programs.

In future meetings with my directors, I hope to bring two suggestions to the table and one big idea that I think will help the program gain notoriety in the Chinese tennis community and help the Hebei program stand apart from other state-sponsored teams in

the country. New ideas are imperative to capitalize on the economic market in China and help capture the changing ideologies that will shape China's future sports culture.

The first and most important step is to help Hebei tennis find independent sponsors willing to support the team. This idea is not new. Businesses have begun to sponsor teams and players as a way of marketing their own products and advertising to new clientele. For example, the Tianjin tennis program has a clothing sponsorship with a major apparel manufacturer called Li-ning. Hebei tennis ought to try and find clothing, shoe, and equipment sponsors. This would help eliminate the cost of outfitting its players and providing necessary training equipment such as balls, rackets, grips, and string. It would provide the players with a new and fresh image when they stepped onto the court and provide the sponsor an arena to promote new products. Most importantly, it would free up cash reserves for Hebei to build its infrastructure.

The Hebei team would also find it in its best interest to find local businesses or manufactures that might have a vested interest in providing financial sponsorship to the team or a singular player on the team. This also is not a new concept; companies have made inroads to the CSS and have been effectively marketing their products through elite athletes. The Hebei team could wear a company logo on its clothing, do small scale promotions, or provide benefits to the company if a player makes waves on the professional tour. Details would have to be worked out between the management center and company, and must be beneficial for both. However, with extra cash from a private sponsor, Hebei could again build its infrastructure and relieve some of the burden of having to support players with only government funds.

The second idea for reform is to create a grassroots program in Hebei that is affiliated with the provincial team. The potential market of young tennis players in China is growing and it is a sport that has seen a significant boost in popularity. Hebei needs to capitalize on the popularity of the game while understanding that not all young athletes have aspirations to become future stars in the system. Tennis is an affluent sport and parents are willing to pay for lessons to introduce their child to a lifelong game that promotes health and exercise. This program can work in one of two ways. First, the current Hebei players themselves can become involved as coaches in this program as a way of making additional money to support themselves. Second, the program could build a grassroots program in part that the small fish (leisure players) can feed the big fish (Hebei program). The money raised can go to support the Hebei program and fund potential projects that would build Hebei's tennis infrastructure. At the very least, it would be beneficial for the Hebei team to organize two or three free introductory tennis clinics every year as a way of reaching out to the community and provide a service project that would cast a more favorable light on the government program.

The big idea I have to change the outlook of the Hebei tennis program comes from the reform that I suggested in the previous chapter. The bottom line is Hebei must find a way to reinvent itself in a changing economic environment and find a way to stand apart from the other teams in the CSS. I believe that a new way of thinking is pervading Chinese culture, one that seeks creativity and innovation and does not lend itself to a singular purpose. One of the parents whose son I coach privately recently asked me about the prospects his son could obtain if he enrolled with the Hebei team. After explaining to him the different possibilities, he informed me that he was unwilling to give

up his son's educational pursuit for an athletic career in which the social benefits are uncertain (personal communication, May 15, 2012). This thought process is beginning to permeate throughout "New China" and in the future, parents, especially educated urbanites, will be turning away offers from state sports organizations unless reforms are made to provide more opportunities that stem beyond athletics. Hebei should create a new system based upon both athletic and academic education.

The concept is simple. It would create a team with four stages of educational and athletic upward mobility by fusing leisure time grassroots programs with the current elite athletic system. The program would be based upon market capitalization using a theoretical approach focused on freedom of choice, educational flexibility, and two convergent/divergent pathways.

The Level I team would be a grassroots program for players 6-9, which would include an introduction to the game of tennis and a pay-for-play project that would teach the students in an after school type situation, two to three days every week. This allows for the team to promote health and fitness while concurrently identifying and developing potentially talented juniors.

Level II would be a team comprised of boys and girls age 10-13. These would be the players who are more serious about their game, that have graduated from the Level I program, and would continue the pay-for-play program based upon market principles. The understanding here is that the players would still be in school full-time and upon graduation from this level would have the flexibility to choose whether they want to pursue a more intensive tennis education or a more traditional education. Training in this program would also take place after school and would be a four-day a week program. If



players came from outside of Shijiazhuang City, proper school and accommodations would need to be provided, but under the auspices that the parents would be responsible for the associated cost. By the age of 14, the players would have an opportunity to enter Chinese high school if they decided to no longer pursue tennis or could continue with the Hebei's athletic/educational program.

The Level III would be where the provincial team of Hebei would become more involved in its elite system of sport. The team would be comprised of players age 14-17 that have the talent and aspirations to pursue an athletic education. Hebei would begin to partially or fully sponsor the best players while giving other players that wish to remain in the program an opportunity to continue paying for training. Under no circumstances would a player stop formal education. I propose that players continue with a modified education curriculum comprised of half-day schooling. By the time players reach the age of 17, this would be a critical juncture in deciding what life path would best suit them. At this point, the Hebei team would offer full contracts to a select number of players to join its professional program; but only the players motivated and willing to make a full commitment would be offered a spot on the professional team. The other players having received a more than sufficient academic education would then be helped with placement into three different educational arenas. The first would be a Chinese sports university, the second Chinese normal university, and the third would be American universities. Partnerships could be formed with universities as the Hebei team would help find the best fit for each of its students based upon their educational and athletic aspirations.

The final stop on the Hebei provincial program would be its Level IV professional program where full sponsorship and six-year contracts would be provided for players to

pursue the highest level of tennis domestically and internationally. These players once in the Level IV program would receive all the perks that are now afforded to players in the system: salary, sponsorship, retirement bonuses, university, and job placement.

Most important in this model of upward mobility is that students have been given the choice to systematically progress through the Hebei program and are given the opportunity to decide what path to take. This system would create highly motivated players wanting to compete at the top level and well-rounded students equipped to pursue a first class education. There would not be players in the system that didn't want to be there due to the fact that at each stage in the progression Hebei has offered them an opportunity to choose their own life path.

A program such as this would give Hebei a way to stand as a new model program in the CSS by taking advantage of the changing economic and social environment occurring in Chinese society. This would be a huge undertaking and would take a major commitment from many people both inside and outside of the system. The potential benefit for both players and program could be unprecedented only if a state-sponsored program that adapted to suit the changing ideological values of Chinese society based upon independence, autonomy, opportunity, and freedom of choice would follow through with resources.

## CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION

Individuals who have studied the CSS or have had personal experience within the system would more than likely call most of my ideas and suggestions for reform unrealistic. However, the purpose of this study is to show that reform within the CSS can and is in fact slowly taking place. The Hebei tennis program is an example that new ideas can replace the old system of thought, be a platform for innovation, and be a model of success for future government sports programs. In some areas, Hebei has taken small steps toward reform by, for example, hiring a foreign coach, embarking upon an international training exchange, and providing players with an opportunity for academic education.

However, the Hebei tennis program has just begun implementing the broad scale reforms needed to become a more relevant and long lasting entity in the future of Chinese sports. Still the majority of their directives are in line with maintaining the social order and structural integrity of the CSS. To truly have an opportunity to remain relevant in China's changing economic and societal culture, the Hebei tennis program must make a break from the linear thought processes that drive the CSS, recognize the international implications and potential of athletics, and develop its program through a critical assessment.

### **Findings and Interpretations: Linear Thought**

The CSS is predicated on upward mobility—a path to the top of the pyramid for its athletes, coaches, and directors that is dependent upon results and success.

Accordingly, most of the initiatives and reforms put into place by the Hebei tennis team are imbued with linear thought and singular motives.

Pinpointing Hebei's underlining problem is difficult; there are so many areas in which the program can improve. However, what stands out is a lack of organization and clear sense of purpose for the program. As a coach, I can suggest ideas that influence the program's method of training, competition, and infrastructure; but it is up to the directors to find a way to initiate those changes within the framework of the CSS. After working in the CSS for more than a year, I am under the impression that most of the decisions are made for the purpose of climbing the social ladder. Whether decisions are made by player, coach, or director, it usually takes into account a person's ability for self-promotion. Often rash choices are made to obtain positive results in the quickest amount of time. Decisions are not made with the mindset of building a program for longevity but rather for moving up the social ladder and away from the program. The greater good of the team and program is not recognized and the focus becomes singular. In no small part, this is why I am coaching in Hebei, charged with the task of turning around the players' performance in a short period of time, so that those associated with the program might benefit socially from positive results in the 2013 China National Games.

In this study, I have touched on Hebei's infrastructure, athletic identification/selection, methods of training/competition, benefits/hardships, and future integration with a market economy. These facts show that the program is taking steps

toward reform but has not put together a thorough plan that goes beyond the national games in October of 2013. The Hebei program is looking for short-term fixes to long-term problems and does not have a backup plan in place if the team does not have success in 2013. Hebei tennis thinking is too linear in nature with only one point on its timeline. I fear that if I cannot succeed as a coach to turn Hebei's program around by showing results that appear on paper, that my legacy as a foreigner within the system will be viewed as a failure.

### **Recommendations: Creativity, Collectivity and Social Change**

China's current social progress was shaped by the cultural and economic reforms put into place in the late 1970s. These ideas and changes were by no means safe nor guaranteed that China would become a prosperous nation. These were ideas that pushed the envelop of creativity; they were dangerous, and failure risked the political wellbeing of the country and the social wellbeing of its citizens. Yet faced with no other alternative, innovation from new leaders pushed China to create a new chapter in its long and illustrious history.

As economic reforms and social pressure push the CSS toward decentralization, Hebei tennis is one of many programs with a chance to adapt, reinvent, and distinguish itself to China's changing sporting culture. How Hebei tennis decides to capitalize upon this opportunity is unknown, but to have future success in a modern Chinese society a new line of thought based upon innovation and creativity, and a program that can appeal to broad audiences, will remain a relevant entity while others will struggle to compete.

Hebei tennis is at a critical juncture in its present state. By reevaluating its present infrastructure, the program can design a new system that successfully integrates

the advantageous aspects of China's changing market and social environment. Hebei tennis has taken steps to reform its current infrastructure and I have suggested other ideas for change, but to survive in a new market driven economy will take much more thought and organization to design a viable system for success. It will take a creative thought process, innovation, and people willing to make a commitment to longevity.

The suggestions that I have made for the Hebei tennis program in this study can also apply to many other government and independent sports programs throughout China. The CSS has a chance to reach beyond the realm of elitism and its singular purpose of developing athletes to compete on the world stage. Given the amount of resources the government currently provides to manage the CSS, it is only a matter of time before members of mass society demand that these funds be used for the collective benefit of all rather than a selective few.

Furthermore, if market forces truly aim to take hold of the prospective capitalization of the Chinese sports culture, then government programs may find it difficult to compete with private organizations that offer athletes a chance for autonomy and freedom of choice when managing their athletic careers. Either way, be it through a government run system or a private entity, there is potential to change the way sports organizations are operated and participated in by members of Chinese society. Sports programs that recognize this opportunity and make the necessary adaptations to adjust to the changing mindset of the Chinese public will succeed in creating viable organizations with a chance to succeed in the future.

Hebei tennis, the CSS, and other independent firms need to recognize the changing ideological viewpoints of the Chinese society if they are to make progress in

creating sports systems that can appeal to a mass market. When reconstructing the image of sports organizations, the most important factors to be recognized ought to be an athlete's individual rights, freedom of choice, and personal autonomy when managing their career. Every athlete should have the opportunity to pursue not only an athletic education but also be afforded a quality academic education if they choose. The shared culture of learning and teaching through athletics and academics go hand in hand. In recognizing this possible avenue for reconstructing sport by fusing it with academics, athletes in China will have an opportunity to pursue convergent pathways that give them promise for a socializing and bright future.

Currently, in China, there is an opportunity to remodel the arena of sport and construct an atmosphere of positive social change. Through collective efforts between governmental authorities, directors, coaches, players, and other individuals, new sporting organizations can be designed that find plausible solutions to a system with many flaws. Minds working together for the collective good have a chance to transform a system and demand that the inequalities of the current structure be reformed. By using creativity and a collectivity, a plan can be developed that fuses elite and mass sport to create a system that represents its athletes in a fair and equitable manner, gives them freedom of choice in their athletic and academic education, and promotes values that support positive social development in the Chinese sports culture.

New plans that restructure sports in China should further “the notion that sport can, and indeed should, be a vehicle for progressive social change” (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, p. 156). Sports have an educational value that can unify its participants by teaching fairness, cooperation, respect, and solidarity, and can serve as “an alternative paradigm to

replace the win-at-all-costs mentality . . . a human development model to replace the dominant achievement approach to sport” (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010, p. 157). A collective and equitable arrangement by directors, coaches, and players can bring into focus the motivating reasons for why so many people are attracted to sports; it is not for the sheer necessity to win, but for the love of the game.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

I realize that my recommendations for further change in the Hebei system are at best difficult to accomplish but it is necessary to continue pushing for innovation that will lead to change in the coming years. I have four specific suggestions for new research that correspond to the recommendations that I just proposed.

The first recommendation would be to devise and implement a new system with the hope of eliminating the inequalities that are currently found in the Hebei tennis program. There are many private tennis academies around the world that have successful business models in place that could be researched, emulated, and modified to develop players and give them opportunities to succeed after their tennis careers are over. A new case study using the participants (provincial bureau, directors, coaches, players, sponsors, community members) of the Hebei tennis program would collectively analyze how the current system succeeds and fails and then suggest a new model that takes into consideration the desires of all who play tennis in Hebei. It would look at the major areas of the current system, including infrastructure, selection/identification, training/competition, hardships/benefits and availability to all through market integration. These areas would be examined in the hope of creating a system that, if implemented, would benefit all participants and could adapt to China’s changing sporting environment.



The second suggestion for future research is a comparison study between the current infrastructure that the Hebei tennis program has in place with a more successful government or privately sponsored tennis program in China. The study could analyze the differences and similarities to help recognize the deficiencies in the Hebei program and where it could improve compared to Chinese models that are currently in place.

The third suggestion for future research would be a secondary look into the Hebei program in the future. The study would chronicle what changes have been made, whether the program has improved, whether the initiated reforms in this study are still being used, and to what extent the market economy has or has not changed the way Hebei operates as a government sponsored program.

The last suggestion for research would be to look at the academic standards and level of educational achievement of athletes that participate in the CSS. A comparison study could be used to see if different sports programs within the CSS have different academic success rates. A further comparison could be made to analyze the educational levels of those that participate in traditional education systems compared to those that participate in the CSS and how this affects a student's future opportunities in the Chinese workforce looking at types of jobs, expected salary, etc.

### **Summary of Significance**

This study was designed to review the inner workings of the CSS and specifically the Hebei tennis program. While it is easy to focus on the many flaws of the CSS, one should not so quickly dismiss the benefits and the opportunity that it provides to many Chinese youth and their families. It is not a perfect or harmonious balance, but the current system's aim is to create a bold patriotic and nationalistic platform that inspires

hope and perseverance in its citizens to continue to build a stronger China. As time progresses, change will continue to pervade all areas of Chinese society and will force adaptation to the way the government sports program is run. I hope that my time here in Hebei and China will offer a small picture of what can be accomplished through sports in this nation. Given the right attitude and the right people working together, change in the Chinese sporting community can provide everyone a chance to participate in athletics and recognize sport for what it really is: a chance for individuals to share an experience and form lifelong bonds through the love of a game.

Although my work is centered on a competition-based system of sport, the real focus is humanitarian—there is more at stake than just winning. More important is creating trust, effective communication, and long-term relationships that break down the cultural barriers that are often put up between Eastern and Western approaches to diplomacy. I hope that after my time is finished here in Hebei, I will be recognized more for teaching than coaching and the real victories in this project will be an understanding of community and humanity rather than division and isolation. I will consider my time in Hebei a success if I can implement a sporting curriculum receptive to taking on the social responsibility necessary to better understand the society in which we live.

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