

AGE ELIGIBILITY RULE IN TENNIS AND OTHER INDIVIDUAL SPORTS

Comparative study by Valery Lutkov and Martina Alterova
For Tennis Europe Women's Committee

The Purpose of the Research Project

The Age Eligibility Rule (AER) in women's tennis has been in force since January 1, 1995. This Rule was adopted based on the recommendations of an independent commission comprising sports medicine and sport sciences professionals. Nowadays the AER is a part of the integral Player Development Programme administered by Sanex WTA Tour. In the last year AER has been subject to criticism and has been discussed a lot. AER was discussed at various meeting of Tennis Europe and the ITF Women's Committees.

The purpose of this research is to find out the restrictions imposed by other International Sports Federations on younger competitors in individual sport, and to make a comparative analysis of the current attitudes in international sports towards participation of young athletes.

Methods of the research

In the first stage of the project a letter was sent to several International Federations asking for co-operation in this research. Three questions were put:

1. Are there age limits for competitors in your sport?
2. Are there restrictions on the number of competitions per year an athlete can participate in?
3. Is your federation happy with the status quo?

The Federations were selected to be governing individual sports, in which the results could be achieved at a relatively young age. The replies were received from high level executives (General Secretaries). They provided some first-hand reliable information, which was analyzed and summarized in the second stage of the project. The second stage of the research also included interviews with experts in the elite sports (sports medicine doctors, educators and coaches) held in St. Petersburg, Russia.

The research was carried out in December 2001 – January 2002 by

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Summary of the situation in different sports

Three distinct groups of sport were identified:

- ***“No Problem” Group***

Men’s tennis

In men’s tennis the ATP Rules state that

1. Male players under the age of fourteen (14) shall not be eligible for entry into any ATP or Challenger Series Tournament.
2. Male players age fourteen (14) shall be eligible for entry into a maximum of eight (8) ATP or Challenger Series Tournaments.
3. Male players age fifteen (15) shall be eligible for entry into a maximum of twelve (12) ATP or Challenger Series Tournaments.

Badminton.

Reply by Wendy Bennett, PA to Chief Executive, International Badminton Federation

There are neither age limits for international competitions, nor a limit of competitions per year for young athletes. The IBF is happy with the status quo.

Squash

Reply by Ted Wallbutton, Chief Executive, World Squash Federation (WSF).

There is no minimum age for participants at any International Squash Competition. There is no intention of imposing one. National Coaches are responsible for selecting players.

Young women mature in playing terms much faster than young men. Girls from Egypt and Malaysia (*sic!*) compete at the highest junior level at a very young age (from 11 to 14 years). There is no evidence of over competition. As the financial rewards are very different from tennis, there is less pressure on the young girls.

- ***“Too Tough for Kids” Group***

Athletics

Reply by Pierre Weiss, General Director, International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF).

There are competitions on a world level for Junior Athletes (18 & 19 years of age) and Youth Athletes (16 & 17 years of age) with respective World Championships held every two years.

For adults, there are age limits only for the Marathon and 50k Walk where athletes must be at least 20 years old to participate in competitions.

Skiing

Reply by Sarah Lewis, General Secretary, Fédération Internationale de Ski (FIS).

Competition year is July 1st – June 30th

FIS International Competitions:

- Cross-Country / Relay: at least 21 years (20 years for 2001/02). Juniors should normally start in their own classes. They may start in the respective ladies' or men's classes.
- Ski-Jumping: at least 19 years (18 years for 2001/02). Juniors wishing to start in the Senior Category must have the skills to compete in that class.
- Nordic Combined: at least 21 years (20 years for 2001/02). If there are no separate Junior competitions, juniors may participate in the men's classes.

There are no age limits / minimum age requirements for Olympic Winter Games and FIS World Championships.

- ***“It Is An Issue!” Group***

Skating

Reply by Becky Cairns, International Skating Union.

There are minimum age limits for the various disciplines and levels of competition. There is no limit on the number of competitions a skater may participate in.

There are no plans to suggest any changes to the Rules.

For all skating disciplines, the age is determined on the July 1st preceding the event.

- Speed Skating and Short Track Speed Skating.

For Senior Championships, Olympic Winter Games and International Senior Competitions only skaters may compete who have reached at least age of 15. For World Junior Championships, the Junior skater must have reached the age of 14 (the maximum age being 19).

- Figure Skating/Ice Dancing.

In ISU Senior Championships and the Olympic Winter Games only skaters may compete who have reached at least age of 15. In International Senior Competitions the minimum age is 14. For International Junior Competitions and ISU Junior

Championships a Junior should be between 13 and 19 years of age for ladies and men in singles competition, and for ladies in pair skating and Ice Dancing competition; and between 13 and 21 years of age for men in pair skating and Ice Dancing competition.

- Synchronized skating. For the ISU Championships and International Competitions the skaters' minimum age is 14. For Juniors, the age should be between 12 and 19.

Gymnastics

Reply by Norbert Bueche, Secretary General, Fédération Internationale de Gymnastique (FIG).

- Women's Artistic Gymnastics: 16 years (15 years in the pre-Olympic year).
- Rhythmic Gymnastics: 15 years (16 years from January 1st, 2005).
- Trampoline: 18 years for Olympic Games, 17 year for all other International events.
- Sports Acrobatics: 14 years (15 years from January 1st, 2003).
- Sports Aerobics: 18 years.

Each year some Federations propose to raise age limits (the northern countries), and some Federations propose to reduce them (southern countries).

FIG seems to be trying to safeguard the image of gymnastics as "sports for adults", rather than "circus for kids". In addition, the attractiveness of young women is apparently higher than that of 12-year olds.

No replies were received from the International Federations of swimming, table tennis and chess.

Summary of the responses and analysis

Some sports do not impose any age limits on the athletes. In track and field or skiing, athletes cannot achieve extraordinary results at a very young age. Squash or badminton do not have the huge pool of competitive women players, and opt to keep everyone in the game.

The cases of Gymnastic and Figure Skating present some interest. There are age limits set to safeguard the "performance value" of those sports. Those age limits are even stricter than in tennis (15-16 years).

We haven't found any other sport that imposes quantitative restrictions on the number of events a competitor may compete in (except for downhill skiing).

The reason, in our opinion, lies in the following factors:

- In most of the sports the competitive season is limited to a few months (as opposed to virtually all year round calendar in tennis)
- The number of official starts in gymnastics or figure skating is limited to approximately 10 per season (as opposed to 20-30 tournaments per year in

tennis). Downhill skiers have up to 75 starts per season, but it means just 75 days in four months).

- Financial dividends available for young girls in tennis.
- Physical possibilities for them to offer competition to older players.
- There is pressure on the players coming from the system of ranking calculation that requires playing in a large number of events.

Tennis seems to be ahead of other sport in terms of providing a comprehensive education programme for young female athletes.

Conclusions

Age restrictions vary from sports to sports because of the unique nature of competition in each of them.

Professional tennis has an exceptionally tough competition schedule. AER should be kept in the interest of safeguarding the human nature of the game and pursuing educational goals in sports. We do not want overtraining and inhibition of human development on a world-wide scale, even though it may slow down the formal progress of some exceptional individuals. Let's just stress that there are other playing opportunities available for juniors, besides the professional tour.

A collateral benefit of the AER is that coaches/parents have to think about planning the competition schedules rather than letting the young girls play every week. That alone can help to save the young athletes from overtraining and burn-out.

We should be further looking into recommendations from sport medicine doctors, coaches and educators.

Appendices

