Finding the sweet spot in German tennis

The Germans have seen better days in tennis. The times of Boris Becker and Steffi Graf were happy days, but that was nearly two decades ago. Since then, tennis has lost some of its reputation and business has skidded across the court. A year ago, the international sports trade fair ispo in Munich and the German Sporting Goods Retailers' Association (VDS) launched the Sweetspot Initiative with one aim: stopping the decline of tennis in Germany.

The end of the 1980s brought the biggest tennis boom Germany has ever known and the names Boris Becker and Steffi Graf are synonymous with those glorious tennis days. Newspapers wrote about tennis and endless matches were shown on TV. The Australian Open, Roland Garros, Wimbledon, the US Open, the Olympic Games, the Davis Cup and the ATC Masters were the events of the year – and German names were among the top players.

The country enjoyed success both on the court and in retail outlets as sales figures rocketed upwards and broke all records. Boys wanted to be Boris Becker (BB) and girls wanted to emulate Steffi. Tennis clubs enjoyed social prestige and membership numbers grew.

But, a boom like this never lasts long and when Boris' time was up tennis returned to normal. But the tennis scene had been spoilt for a while and this meant that expectations for the next generation were high, too high to realise. Although tennis in Germany had in fact just returned to normal, everybody began talking and writing of a crisis and sales figures started to fall. Over a period of ten years the industry has reported double digit declines in the sales of tennis rackets, falling by between 15% and 30% annually.

But tennis was denigrated unfairly. Although sales fell, in 2004 sports retailers still sold between 300,000 and 310,000 rackets in Germany – not counting those sold by discounters – which adds up to approximately €26 million. Club membership was still up at 1.7 million players with an additional two million casual players. That's not too bad. Compared with golf, the new darling sport in Germany, the situation is extremely good: nearly four million tennis players and some 50,000 tennis courts versus half a million regular golfers on 650 courses from north to south.



Concerted action on court

In conjunction with the media running down tennis on the courts and in retail, another crisis also appeared. The official catalogue for Summer ispo 2004 named only five exhibitors for tennis clothing – Asics, Australian by L'Alpina, Carat Sports Int., Lotto and Yonex. For tennis rackets the list was even more devastating, with only Bonny Sports, Finesports, Gueng & Long, Roxpro Int., Shinehome Industry and Wish Sporting Goods participating at the show. Has anyone noticed an important company is missing?

Just four years earlier tennis at Summer ispo had included most of the respected tennis brands such as Pro Ace, Dunlop, Fischer, Gamma, Head, Karakal, Prince, Völkl and Wilson among the racket exhibitors and Australian, Authentic Klein, Asics, Dunlop, Ellesse, Gamma, Head, Henri-James, K-Swiss, Lacoste, Maier Sports, MDC, Steinbronn, Sergio Tacchini and Wilson in the field of tennis clothing.

Whatever had happened, one point was certain: the biggest sports exhibition ispo no longer held any allure for racket sports. As a result, retailers had no means of getting an overview of tennis and even less of an insight into the developments in this field. Bad sales at retail seemed more prone to poor trade fair performance than to unsuccessful athletes on the centre courts in Paris or at Wimbledon.

The VDS called for concerted action to bring back both industry and retailers to ispo. In May 2005 the tennis initiative "Sweetspot" was brought to life. Ispo presented Sweetspot as a new way to address the industry, which followed the Ispovision concept with small, standardised booths of maximum 130 m^2 with a fixed path that the visitors had to follow to pass through – somewhat like the layout in IKEA shops. The VDS presented Sweetspot as an initiative to give the "Sport in White" the necessary impetus for a better future in Germany. According to Helmut Ott, CEO of VDS, Sweetspot is "the turning point on the courts, to give tennis a new splendour."

The tennis industry was enthusiastic but cautious. Enthusiastic because at last something had been done and cautious because the concept was anything but clear. Statements such as "lots of theory, but few ideas" were heard. Furthermore, whilst some companies were willing to join the initiative they would not exhibit in Munich. Nevertheless, Wilson, Fischer/ Gamma, Yonex and Lotto agreed to join Racket-ispo in Summer 2005, signalling that a start had been made.

Furthermore, the second half of the year saw a real domino effect and by early winter 2005 the Sweetspot initiative, represented a broad platform of companies from the German tennis industry. Members now include the DTB (German Tennis Association) with its 18 regional sub-associations, the two leading tennis magazines Deutsche Tenniszeitung and Tennis Magazin, the VDS and its Austrian equivalent VSSÖ; the ispo trade show; retail organisations Intersport and Sport2000, and the companies Babolat, Dunlop, Greenballs, Head, Head Sportswear, Kirschbaum, Pacific, Prince, Reebok, Tecnifibre/ MTS, Wilson and Yonex.



Steffi Graf recently came out of retirement to play doubles with Justine Henin-Hardenne, but the golden days of German tennis are long gone.

adidas

Try before you buy (in)

A week after the FIFA World Cup final, the Sweetspot initiative launched one of its marketing ideas for 2006 to promote the "Sport in White" in Germany. Under the tagline "Tennis for all, and that's free of charge" the "Jetzt Tennis" (Tennis Now) project was launched during which clubs throughout Germany were asked to participate in an open tennis weekend for two days, allowing anyone to play tennis at a club and enjoy the club atmosphere for free. It was hoped that this would allow people to experience the fun on and off the court, regardless of age, ability or whether it was with the family, couples or singles.

Because DTB's influence on individual clubs is limited, along with its media partners, Tennis Magazin and Deutsche Tenniszeitung, it raffled off attractive support packages to all of the participating tennis clubs.

"Jetzt Tennis" was endorsed by DTB and industry partners and it is hoped that it will become an annual event. Some industry partners criticised the chosen weekend, arguing that the longer the German team stayed in World Cup tournament, the harder it would be to switch peoples' minds from football to tennis. To make things even worse, the "Jetzt Tennis"-weekend also fell right in the middle of this

year's Tour de France and, as the German cyclist Jan Ullrich was set to be going for his second tour victory, the attention was not focused on tennis. However, this was to be one problem that apparently found a solution with his sad last minute withdrawal.

On the campaign trail

The second campaign is a new service for tennis players, answering the question "how good is your tennis?" 'TeXX' is a tennis handicap programme equivalent to golf. Within 15 minutes, either in a short training session on court or in an Internet-interview, every tennis player can establish his or her own tennis handicap. Ten rankings, from TeXX 10 for beginners up to TeXX 1 for the ambitious amateur, help to find another at a similar level when in new surroundings, on holiday or on a business trip. The TeXX idea is not new. "Find a Match" is a similar concept which has been run for many years in the USA. Even in Europe "Tennis Classified", "Tennis Matching" or other match-up programmes also exist. The part that is actually new is the possibility to continuously input new game results into the computer statistics. This way the TeXX can develop a momentum that classifies players according to their progress or loss of ability. Players can regularly check their or their partners' development over time.

Bitter sweet concept

The Sweetspot initiative is picking up speed – that's for sure. The membership basis is solid and represents the greater part of German tennis. Over and above that, ispo has managed to convince the tennis industry to exhibit at the summer show again – even though booths are a lot smaller than they used to be in the early 1990s.

Nevertheless, disappointment is growing. The initial initiatives have left a sour taste as nothing really new is actually happening. Any good tennis club that wants to widen its membership base has already featured play-for-free weekends or weeks. And TeXX is not really a new invention.

Parts of the industry see the major problem as being the boring way in which tennis projects itself today. On the one hand tennis has lost out in many ways to golf, while on the other hand it's not 'cool' enough to be attractive to young people. Tennis club regulations are too strict for many young people, but what do you expect from a sport that can't even count right? Tennis is not as sexy as golf, nor as cool as basketball. There's no identification through apparel, nor are there any strong professional characters out on the courts. So far Sweetspot has not fathomed how to address the 15-25-year-old age range– which is the group that spends most on sports apparel in Germany.

What can Sweetspot do to promote tennis apparel or tennis hardware? An industry that spends money on Sweetspot and its trade fair presence, will expect some return. So far this has been noticeably lacking. That is why some companies prefer to carry on with their own marketing initiatives instead of joining Sweetspot. Völkl says its "Disney Academy" and "Camp Tour" programmes are more effective, as its Mickey Academy reaches some 20,000 children a year.

So, if Sweetspot is supposed to survive in the long-term, marketing activities need to become a lot more interesting and effective. And they should make sure it helps the retailers and the companies' turnovers.



In July Sweetspot launched "Jetzt Tennis" (Tennis Now) asking clubs throughout Germany to participate in an open tennis weekend.

Sweetspot

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