

## Unraveling the Net Worth: Exploring Financial Disparities and Diversity Deficits in Tennis

Finn Johnson

### Abstract

The cost of tennis for young players—such as equipment, lessons, tournaments, etc.—imposes financial barriers and affects the composition of the sport. Tennis is an expensive sport with high entry costs—competitive players require coaching, equipment wears out quickly, traveling to tournaments is both time-consuming and expensive, and tennis academies do not have financial aid but are as expensive as boarding schools. These factors, along with the fact that few professional tennis players are people of color, disproportionately affect low-income communities, especially for non-white players. In this paper, I will clarify the magnitude of the effect, how that influences the tennis circuit, and what can be done to change tennis culture.

### Introduction

The roar around the Arthur Ashe Stadium in Flushing, New York, was deafening. One point separated Frances Tiafoe from advancing to the US Open semifinal. Thus far, the quarterfinal between Tiafoe and Andrey Rublev had been a one-man show, with Tiafoe handily dispatching Rublev in the first two sets. After waiting for the crowd to quiet down, Tiafoe bounced the ball several times before acing Rublev outside to win the match. Tiafoe roared with the crowd and launched the second ball into the air. Tiafoe's smile proclaimed a more significant message than a win. This win was the most important of Tiafoe's young career; the twenty-four-year-old had never advanced past the quarterfinal round in a Grand Slam. His run to the semifinals—during which he beat Rafael Nadal, a twenty-two-time Grand Slam winner—was unprecedented for many reasons. Tiafoe was the youngest American man to reach the US Open semifinals since 2006 and the first African American man since Arthur Ashe in 1968 (1). Tiafoe's story is even more groundbreaking than his feats.

The story of Tiafoe's meteoric rise is a fascinating tale. His parents fled Sierra Leone to escape the burgeoning civil war and later met in Washington, D.C. Tiafoe's father worked on the construction crew for the Junior Tennis Champions Center (JTCC) in College Park (2). After construction of the JTCC was finished, Tiafoe's father became the head custodian of the building, and he converted a storage room into a living space for the family (2). Tiafoe started playing tennis at age 3 and practiced on the JTCC courts late at night and early in the morning. During one of these late-night/early-morning hitting sessions, he was spotted by Misha Kouznetsov, a JTCC tennis coach searching for talent to develop. Kouznetsov recognized his potential and helped Tiafoe compete in local tournaments (2). Tiafoe dominated prestigious junior tournaments, culminating in a win at the Orange Bowl, a prestigious junior tennis competition held annually in Florida. Winning the Orange Bowl at seventeen launched him into the spotlight; soon after, he turned pro.

Tiafoe's case is unique. Despite growing up poor, fortuitous circumstances provided him with a court to train, the opportunity to attract a renowned coach, and, ultimately, the chance to

compete at the highest level. However, most players from low-income backgrounds cannot access top coaches and courts. Instead, their journeys reflect the unforgiving side of the game. Two of the greatest female tennis players, Serena and Venus Williams, better embody the harsh realities of tennis for the poor. The sisters grew up poor and without the resources Tiafoe was provided. Their story sheds light on the plight of the thousands of other young tennis players who are disadvantaged and have to start from nothing.

With a combined total of thirty Grand Slam titles, the Williams sisters are globally recognized for their talent and inspiring rise to the top of tennis. The Williams sisters grew up poor and did not have reliable access to tennis courts, let alone coaches. Instead, their father, Richard Williams, a security guard with no tennis coaching experience, taught them to play (3). The Williams sisters grew up in Compton, with few public courts and ever fewer competitive players. Unable to afford coaching or travel to prestigious tournaments, the sisters competed locally against older competitors (3). Their remarkable rise from humble beginnings to becoming two of the greatest female athletes ever is a testament to their resilience and undying support from their families. Other Black players have experienced similar financial hardships, such as the highly ranked tour players Sloane Stephens and Taylor Townsend. While these players beat the odds and became successful tennis stars, there are thousands of non-white players with the talent to succeed but who are prevented from achieving their potential due to financial barriers. The hardships faced by Serena, Venus, Sloane, Taylor, and others are commonplace and reflective of the elitist origins of tennis.

### **Thesis Paragraph**

The most prominent junior tennis players are committed to the sport individually. Yet, numerous players attached to tennis fail to achieve their dreams due to the financial burdens. While players' circumstances remain different, the typical costs of tennis are coaching, court, and tournament fees. These factors disproportionately affect low-income communities and suggest tennis's most significant barrier is price, not talent.

### **Paper Structure**

In this paper, I will provide context for the low minority tennis player base, including the elitist origins of tennis and early discrimination. Then, I will present evidence typifying the low minority percentages today and provide information on costs such as coaching, courts, and tournaments that explain why these small numbers persist.

### **History of Tennis and Discrimination**

The modern game of tennis was invented in 1874 by Major Walter C. Wingfield, who patented the rules for the game. Games were played on smooth outdoor courts. The popularity of croquet, a lawn game where players use mallets to hit balls through hoops or wickets, meant a high supply of courts adaptable to tennis. The All-England Croquet Club held the first Wimbledon tournament in 1877. From its inception in 1868, the Club attracted wealthy members

of British society. The membership requirement was stringent, demanding exorbitant fees and affluent social connections. Croquet was a game for the rich, and the All-England Croquet Club provided a venue for the elite to socialize and compete. When tennis was introduced to the Club, it followed this pattern of exclusivity. The original Wimbledon tournaments were only attended by aristocrats and the wealthy. Only whites were permitted to participate in and play in the tournament. Even today, the Club has maintained exclusivity with hefty membership fees and a strict dress code. From its inception at its first tournament, Wimbledon, tennis has been associated with money. Indeed, tennis's history of discrimination toward non-whites emphasizes its exclusive nature.

African Americans have long faced discrimination in tennis. Because of segregation, the majority of tennis clubs excluded African Americans from membership. There were few courts or coaches in Black neighborhoods, and the cost of the sport prevented the majority of Black children from playing. The first significant development in the integration of tennis was the founding of the American Tennis Association (ATA) in 1916, the oldest African American sports association (4). The ATA created tournaments and networking opportunities for Black players. Arthur Ashe, a famous Black player with three Grand Slams, used the ATA to develop his game. However, integrating African Americans into Grand Slam tournaments was a more challenging endeavor. In the 1950s, one of the few places talented Black players could train was Dr. Robert Walter Johnson's summer camp in Lynchburg, Virginia (4). Johnson sought to break the color barrier and identified Ashe as a player who could withstand racism and become a prominent figure in the fight against discrimination. Although Jim Crow gradually faded, Johnson found it extremely difficult to desegregate a sport associated with exclusive clubs.

Johnson was obligated to receive approval for his players to participate in tournaments and to cover his players' travel and hotel expenses, as tournaments did not provide accommodations for Black players (4). Johnson taught his players to remain calm and not protest calls, as it would make them seem hostile in spectators' eyes (4). Eventually, the tide changed, and when Arthur Ashe won the U.S. Open in 1968, he ushered in the "Open Era." The Open Era admitted professional and amateur players into the Grand Slams, the four major tennis tournaments. Tennis became more lucrative—top players received prize money and scholarships. Before the Open Era, amateurs who played had to secure funding, limiting the potential for non-whites to compete. The Open Era would usher in women and non-whites into tennis. Although revenue has only increased for the top professional players, financial issues remain for young players or minorities, which is why so few play tennis.

Today, tennis's inclusivity has not increased significantly. There are more than 5,410 tennis professionals in the United States. Of those, 66.5% are white, 12.4% are Asian, 12.2% are Hispanic or Latino, and only 8.9% are Black (5). Since integration, only 3 non-white, two Black, and one Asian player have won a Grand Slam in the men's field. The women's field appears more balanced because of Serena and Venus Williams's combined 30 Grand Slams, but besides them, only four other non-white women have won a Grand Slam. Financial challenges are the primary reason for the sparse non-white tennis population. Since its origins

with the British high class, tennis has remained a sport few can afford. For the competitive junior player, tennis fees for a year of training at the high school level are around \$3,000. Access to top trainers, like those found at tennis academies, typically costs between \$50,000 to \$100,000 a year (6). Thus, only a few of the estimated 2.83 million young American tennis players will experience professional success (6).

### Coaching Fees

Work ethic is essential to success in tennis, but instruction is required to refine your technique and game. The player is in full view of all the spectators at a tennis match, yet their coach inspires their game. The coach is critical to each player's technique and strategy. Often, the best coaches on tour are actively pursued by the top players. The same desire for a top coach lies in junior tennis as well. Access to these coaches comes with a high cost. Individual and group tennis lessons are notorious for their exorbitant costs and financial strain on families. Thus, the benefits of coaching are available to select groups, giving them an advantage over non-trained players.

Group lessons are a popular form of instruction. Like any medium, group lessons in tennis allow players to practice without less emphasis on the individual. Group lessons are commonplace for juniors, during which they can have fun and be free from the rigor of private lessons. Group lessons are excellent at developing a junior's base level, following a structured curriculum that covers a range of fundamental skills, techniques, and strategies (6). Beginners and casual players often gravitate toward group lessons, seeking recreation and opportunities for social interaction. Group lessons are also substantially cheaper, as the cost is divided between multiple people, but they lack the individual rigor of private lessons.

The beauty of private lessons is tailored training. In an individual setting, players receive the full attention of their instructor, immediate feedback, targeted corrections, and customized guidance to accomplish specific goals and improve weaknesses (6). As a coach can devote full attention to developing one player, private lessons involve higher intensity and focus than group sessions. Therefore, these lessons enable rapid improvement and breakthroughs in a player's game. However, the advantages of private lessons come at a significant cost. For a qualified coach, private lessons start at fifty dollars an hour, equating to the cost of approximately five group sessions (6). Given the cost, many families prefer group lessons to private ones. Unfortunately, group lessons are less efficient in developing proper technique and mechanics. Hence, families who can afford private instruction substantially accelerate their child's development in tennis.

Seriously competitive junior players gravitate toward elite tennis academies. While private lessons ensure individual tennis instruction, they do not include other training elements. Private lessons rarely include fitness training or video analysis to improve other aspects of training. This is in sharp contrast to the comprehensive approach taken at tennis academies. IMG Academy, the nation's leading sports academy, has a renowned tennis department. Throughout history, they have developed 32 players who have earned a top-10 ATP ranking (a merit-based system

that determines the world's best tennis players based on tournament performance). IMG's world-class coaching and facilities provide strength and conditioning, medicine, nutrition, and visual training (7). Perhaps the most critical aspect of assisting competitive junior players is their annual training schedule. Each player works with a coach to schedule tournaments specific to their level, such as Junior Grand Slams and ITF Junior events (7). IMG Academy provides the opportunity to play at the collegiate and professional level, which many competitive junior players desire. However, these increased opportunities are expensive. IMG charges an annual tuition of 80,000 dollars and offers very little financial aid. As a result, only more affluent players can afford the price of admission, and those who can gain a competitive edge.

### **Court Fees**

Tennis lessons are an excellent way for players to learn new techniques and improve their game, but to implement these changes in matches, players need to practice on their own time. To do so, they require access to courts for multiple weekly hitting sessions. Even players without a coach can refine their game through independent practice, and many successful players were self-taught as children. For example, Andre Agassi, an eight-time Grand Slam winner, grew up hitting tennis balls on his court in the backyard, developing his skills through individual practice. Unfortunately, not every young player has access to their own outdoor court. While outdoor courts are a free option to play, their availability differs by region. In low-income areas, outdoor courts are less available. Consequently, less wealthy juniors must accept minimal playing time or pay the price for tennis club memberships offering indoor courts.

Practicing on a tennis court is a necessity for competitive junior players. States provide funding for public parks, some of which feature tennis courts. These courts are open daily and accessible to the public. For example, New York City has around five hundred outdoor courts, and Central Park is particularly popular with tennis enthusiasts (8). However, low-income areas such as the South Bronx notably lack tennis courts. Historically, the South Bronx has faced economic challenges, and recreational infrastructure does not receive the same attention as more affluent areas. Other low-income areas, such as Jamaica, Queens, and Central Harlem, face similar challenges. The limited number of tennis courts has been so prevalent that the federal government provides funding to state and local governments to support the improvement of parks and recreational facilities (9). The money is often used to build or improve tennis courts. Yet, grants do not entirely solve the problem of limited access to tennis courts.

Indoor courts are an alternative to outdoor courts. Indoor courts are often well maintained and of a higher quality, but memberships are required to access these courts. Tennis clubs are deeply ingrained in tennis culture, frequently where affluent players practice and take lessons. The pricey reputation of tennis partly derives from exorbitant club fees. In the tennis hub of Portland, Oregon, there are many clubs with different services and features, all of which charge a high price. For example, Irvington Tennis Club has around 400 spots in a community of almost 30,000, forcing people to sit on its waitlist for years. The club requires a \$3,000 initiation fee and two \$2,000 monthly payments for dues. Further, they charge six dollars per hour to play on the

indoor courts. The Irvington Club's high fees and court time costs are standard for tennis clubs nationwide. Due to the facilities these private institutions manage, revenue has to be steady and come from multiple sources. The courts, coaches, and people tennis clubs expose you to are vital. However, the many costs of being a tennis club member deter many from joining.

### **Tournament Fees**

For a competitive junior, court time is geared toward honing their skills, hoping to earn college scholarships and play professionally one day. Coaches and scouts determine a player's future potential by observing their match play. Specifically, they analyze match play from tournaments widely available for all skill levels. However, tournaments are expensive and require entry and travel fees for competing players. Local tennis tournaments are generally cheap and accessible. The UTR (Universal Tennis Rating) circuit has gained prominence recently as a way for tennis clubs to host tournaments and for juniors to compete. Any tennis club can host an event and allow non-members to participate. Fees range from only tens of dollars for a tournament. Due to the popularity of UTR, coaches, and recruiters can infer a player's UTR rating. While UTR requires five matches to give a rating, it only counts matches in the last twelve months. Therefore, playing a steady stream of tournaments is necessary to maintain your rating, and competing in many tournaments can still be expensive.

While the UTR circuit has the benefit of accessibility, there are more prominent tournaments for competitive juniors. Players like Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, and Novak Djokovic began their careers by winning the Junior Grand Slams. Many other players compete in the Junior Grand Slam or ITF Junior Tour, two of the most competitive junior tournaments. These tournaments are international circuits that allow the best juniors to play worldwide and experience international competition to prepare them for their professional careers. In addition to requiring players to have a certain skill level, these tournaments impose other constraints. Due to the global footprint of these tournaments, travel fees are required. Similar to professional Grand Slam tournaments, these fees can be insurmountable for most aspiring tennis players. While air travel is expensive, there are also food and hotel costs. Less fortunate families cannot pay for these high travel costs and do not play in these tournaments.

### **Conclusion**

Tennis has a justified reputation as an exclusive sport with little support for minority players. In the beginning, racism and discrimination in tennis discouraged minority participation. Today, minority barriers have shifted to high coaching costs, tournament costs, and unequal access to facilities. Expenses for junior tennis players range in the thousands of dollars, making it a very exclusive playing field. Relatively few minority players have overcome these barriers to entry, resulting in disproportionately few professional minority players. As a result, tennis has developed the stigma that it mainly caters to the rich and white. To help recruit more young, talented minority players, the USTA and other tennis federations need to find ways to lower the barriers to entry, such as coaching and equipment so that money is not a deterrent. Further,



governments must spend more on low-income neighborhoods with little tennis access. Finally, high-quality tournaments must reach low-income areas, ensuring disadvantaged players can compete at the highest level. By achieving a more diverse player base, the sport will find new success, where price is not a constraint for players.



### Works Cite

1. Scott, Jelani. "Sports World Reacts to Francis Tiafoe's U.S. Open Win Over Nadal." *Sports Illustrated*, Sep. 2022.  
<https://www.si.com/tennis/2022/09/06/sports-world-reacts-frances-tiafoe-u-s-open-win-over-rafael-nadal>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
2. Bemby, Jerry. "Frances Tiafoe: The story behind tennis' unlikely hero." *Landscape*, June 2019.  
<https://andscape.com/features/im-looking-for-the-next-frances-tiafoe-the-story-behind-tennis-unlikely-hero/>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
3. Cotton, Tressie. "Venus and Serena Williams on Their Own Terms." *Bazaar*, Feb. 2022.  
<https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a38957619/0001-0179-origin-story-march-2022/>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
4. "Before the Open Era: African Americans in Tennis during the 50s and 60s." *UCLA, Oral History Project*.  
<https://arthurashe.ucla.edu/2021/03/11/before-the-open-era-african-americans-in-tennis-during-the-50s-and-60s/>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
5. "Tennis Professional Demographics And Statistics In The US." *Zippia*.  
<https://www.zippia.com/tennis-professional-jobs/demographics/>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
6. Barrabi, Thomas. "Coco Gauff, other youth tennis players face expensive path to the pros." *FOX Business*, Aug. 2019.  
<https://www.foxbusiness.com/features/us-open-coco-gauff-youth-tennis-training-cost>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
7. "IMG Academy Boys Tennis Program." *IMG Academy*.  
<https://www.imgacademy.com/boarding-school/tennis>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
8. Shaftel, David. "The Courts of New York City." *The New York Times*, Aug. 2018.  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/nyregion/tennis-courts-new-york-city.html>. Accessed 6 June 2024.
9. "Community Development Block Grant." *HUD Exchange*.  
<https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/cdbg/>. Accessed 6 June 2024.