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Research article

The Relative Age Effect and Physical Fitness Characteristics in German Male Tennis Players

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ABSTRACT

The aims of the study were to test: 1) whether the relative age effect (RAE) was prevalent in young (U12-U18) German male tennis players; 2) the potential influence of age and/or skill level on RAE and 3) whether maturity, anthropometric and fitness measures vary according to birth date distribution in elite youth tennis players. For the present study the following male populations were analysed: Overall German population (n = 3.216.811), all players affiliated to the German Tennis Federation (DTB) (n = 120.851), players with DTB official ranking (n = 7165), regional (n = 381) and national (n = 57) squads (11-17 years old), as well as the top 50 German senior players were analyzed. RAEs were more prevalent at higher competitive levels with more players born in the first quarter of the year compared with the reference population for ranked (29.6%), regional (38.1%) and national (42.1%) players. No systematic differences were found in any of the maturity, anthropometric and fitness characteristics of the regional squad players born across different quarters. RAEs are present in the DTB competitive system and it was more

pronounced at higher competitive levels. Compared with early born, late born players who were selected into elite squads did not differ in maturation, anthropometric and fitness characteristics.

Key words: Birth distribution, racket sports, maturation, physical characteristics

Key Points

- RAEs exist in the selection of youth tennis players in Germany, a greater percentage of players analyzed was born in the 1st quarter compared to all licensed tennis players in the country, and more pronounced with an increased competition level in youth players.
- Players born later in the selection year and still selected in elite squads were likely to be similar across a range of physical fitness attributes compared with those born earlier in the year.
- The selection process should be reevaluated and changed to reduce the impact of RAEs on tennis players.

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