

A BRIGHT FUTURE

A bright future beckons for Roland Garros boys' and girls' titlists Geoffrey Blancaneaux and Rebeka Masarova; research shows that a French junior title is the strongest indicator of top 100 success.

By DR MACHAR REID.

One of the questions that those involved in player development often debate is how important the junior game is to future professional success. There's one camp that suggests junior results have little bearing on what might happen in the future, while there is another that suggests players have to come from somewhere, and the junior game is the obvious breeding ground.

So, what's the answer? Do the world's best juniors actually become accomplished professionals?

To get at the question we first needed to clarify a few particulars – some terms of reference, if you like:

- We considered the world's 'best' juniors to mean those that win a junior Grand Slam (Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon or US Open).
- We took "accomplished" to mean breaking through the magical top 100 mark in the pro game. Here, we could argue that the bar has been set too low, but cracking the top 100 signifies the first major milestone for most aspiring professionals. Also, ask any junior out there whether they'd like to know their chances of breaking into the top 100 and I don't think you'd need to wait long for an answer!

- Last point: the timeline is important as we needed to give players enough time to breakthrough, so we've just focused on junior Grand Slam winners between 1980 and 2005.

This is what we found: when you compare the four slams across those 26 years, you can see that the French Open is the strongest predictor of top 100 success, while the Australian Open sits comfortably in fourth position. Incredibly, there was only one junior French winner over that time frame – in both the boys' and girls' games – who didn't crack a double digit ranking. His name – Carlos Cuadrado, who was widely regarded as one of the best young talents of his generation but whose transition to the pro game was disrupted by injury.

So why are the juniors that win the French better placed than counterparts that triumph elsewhere?

1. First, historically the tournament attracts the strongest draw of all the junior Slams, with the implication that you need to be a better player to win through a deeper field.
2. Second, there's a general view that clay is the best developmental surface, suggesting

SET TO THRIVE: Geoffrey Blancaneaux (below left) and Rebeka Masarova (above) overcame strong competition to claim Roland Garros junior titles.



that if you're winning on the dirt at a young age, your game is in good shape.

3. Third, over the last 25 years, the professional tour has transitioned away from faster court surfaces, so that's been

a bonus for any young player comfortable on the red dirt.

I suspect that all this is on the verge of changing (if it hasn't already), but that's for a deeper

dive and for another time. For the moment, the moral of this story (for budding pros) is that if you could choose one junior Slam to win, it'd be the French. And if you had to choose one court surface to learn the game on as a kid, it'd (still) be clay. **ATM**



TRENDS OF THE GAME JUNIOR SLAM WINNERS

How do junior Grand Slam winners fare in the professional ranks?

Percentage of junior Grand Slam winners (1980–2005) who transitioned to the ATP/WTA top 100



THE ROAD TO THE TOP

Percentage of junior French Open winners who have reached the ATP/WTA Top 100 (1980–2005)

