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Sammel concern over LTA funding

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One of Britain's leading tennis coaches fears changes in funding will damage the sport in this country.

Lawn Tennis Association chief executive Michael Downey is coming up to a year in the role and the publication of his four-year plan for improving British tennis is expected in February.

The high-performance part of the blueprint has been guided by Australian coaching guru Bob Brett, who Downey appointed director of player development earlier this year.

The details are still being finalised but it is no secret that high-performance funding will be cut, a process that began before Downey came in, and channelled towards the grass-roots and developing coaches.

Junior funding is to undergo a complete overhaul and will be targeted at a small number of the most promising individuals while central funding for senior players will be reduced.

The tournament bonus scheme, which tops up players' prize money, will also be scaled back and there seems certain to be an upper age limit.

It is this that concerns Dave Sammel, who founded the Monte Carlo Tennis Academy in 2006 before partnering with the high-performance academy at Bath University.

Currently Britain has 13 men in the world's top 400 - the situation is the women's game is less rosy - a significant improvement on recent years.

Sammel told Press Association Sport: "I'm convinced people will stop playing.

"You need to build a very good base and if we keep wiping the slate clean and saying the current crop of players are not good enough, you don't have any players for any new talent to have to fight through.

"We've had the situation before where we had a number of players retire - the generation before the current one, a lot of these players retired pretty early because they couldn't make a living out of the game.

"It's taken us almost 10 years to get back to where we are now, where we've actually got a number of guys and a few girls that are capable of making the top 200.

"The reality of tennis is, at Futures level (the third tier of professional tennis) it's impossible to make a living so the bonus scheme is the lifeline for all of these players to keep playing."

Sammel recently had his contract with the LTA ended despite a strong track record of producing and helping players.

"It's disappointing but life goes on," he said. "I believe in what I do. This is the seventh regime that I've been through in my career and I've survived them all.

"There's no question they're going to have to talk to me again because, when you keep producing, you get to a point where they have to engage with you."

As well as working at Bath, Sammel is also coaching 20-year-old British number three Liam Broady.

Broady is funded by the LTA and provided with a coach, Mark Hilton, but pays Sammel to work with him as well.

Since the pair linked up in the summer, Broady has climbed nearly 160 places in the rankings to 189.

Sammel, who is also the author of Locker Room Power: Building an Athlete's Mind, said: "Liam had tremendous desire, he just needed some extra expertise around him.

"It's not magic and it's not coincidence. There are specific things I did with him for him to get himself there.

"The transition where we've always failed is from junior to senior pro and we always ignore that one area.

"Instead of embracing what I've done with Liam, they're trying to pretend it's not even happening. It's a very strange situation."

The LTA has long faced criticism that, by throwing its considerable resources at players in an effort to produce world-class talent, it has fostered a culture of entitlement.

Brett believes a tougher regime will produce players more likely to thrive in the harsh world of professional tennis.

Sammel accepts there has been complacency but believes funding based on performance - for players, coaches and centres - is the way to have a broader elite base.

He said: "For Liam to be 189 in the world and number three in the country, as nice as it is for him and for me as a coach, it would be far healthier if he was number seven or eight.

"Andy Murray's an inspiration but he's not somebody to chase because he's too far away. You need to have people at 50 in the world, 70, 90, 120 etc, so the next target is always there within reach.

"You don't have to do it by a lot of funding. Keep a decent bonus scheme and they will keep playing and they'll get there.

"Superstars come from anywhere, whether you have a system or no system. If the system in Switzerland was so good, where are the people coming behind Federer and Wawrinka? Why are we searching for superstars?

"What we do need is a strong base of persevering, hard working, diligent players who are getting the very best out of themselves. And if we can have a number of those between 50 and 250 or 300, we then have a strong tennis-playing nation."

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