

Tennis is a Mental Game - Part One

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"I was thinking of an important match last night. I visualised how that match was going to be and this helped me fall asleep. I had a court in my mind and I could see every point. I played the points in my mind exactly the way I wanted them to be the next day" (Chris Evert).

Players and experts are surprised with the fact that nearly 80% of playing time is spent on things other than just hitting the ball to win a point. A lot of time is taken up changing ends, in the intervals between games, between points and thinking. However, during training, players rarely use 70 or 80% of the time to mentally prepare themselves.

"The mental aspect of tennis is very important. I have worked a lot in this area and the results are starting to flourish" (Feliciano López, member of the Spanish Davis Cup Team).

Tennis is a complex sport, which does not only depend on talent and physical potential, as well as technical tactical skills, but also on psychological abilities such as emotional control and mental strength. The mental aspect of tennis is so important that Jimmy Connors once said that, at professional levels, tennis is 95% a mind game.

"I want to be number one at the end of the year. I know it's difficult, but I am preparing myself mentally and working hard" (Marat Safin).

When two players with similar potential and technical-tactical skills come up against each other, the result of the match is often determined by psychological factors such as self-confidence, determination, willpower and concentration.

"They all end up frustrated; they have difficulties on the court. It's a mental game. Two minds battling against each other" (Marat Safin).

Part of mental training consists of visualising, in an organised way, repeatedly and consciously, all motor skills, techniques and strategies, in order to improve two things: movements and situations. By movements we refer to the specific motor skills which are necessary for tennis (for example: the serve). By situations we are referring to the different tactics and strategies that occur during a match (for example: approaching the net).

"Carrying out psychological work is of fundamental importance, because if players do it during training, they will remember it

during the match" (Larri Pasos).

Here are some suggestions of mental routines which can be carried out before, during and after the matches:

1. Before the match (mental pre-game)

- Mental warm-up: Visualise strokes or images where you succeed.
- Come up with a strategic mental plan of the game ("mental game plan") analysing the opponent's strengths and weaknesses.

2. During the match (mental game)

- Observe and analyse the technical-tactical behaviour of your opponent (their strengths and weaknesses).
- Anticipate the strokes, movements and patterns of play of your opponent.
- Take the initiative and make fast and efficient decisions.
- Concentrate before each serve.

3. After the match (mental revision)

- Mentally evaluate the game in general: behaviour in certain situations, game strategies, emotional control, etc.
- Evaluate the opponent's strengths and weaknesses
- Evaluate one's own strengths and weaknesses and come up with a strategy to improve on any weaknesses.
- Reach important conclusions for mental aptitude training and for the next match, with the aim of optimising strategic thinking.

All these mental routines can be acquired and perfected through systematic mental training with the help of a sport's psychologist and in collaboration with a responsible trainer.

"If I don't train the way I should, then I won't play the way I know I can" (Ivan Lendl).

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE OF A TENNIS PLAYER: BASIC PSYCHOLOGICAL ABILITIES AND SKILLS

Although we know that physical, technical and tactical factors are essential for the appropriate development of a great tennis player, we must not forget that the psychological aspect must be trained and perfected in the same way.

"It is not just about playing tennis, the mental part plays a very important role. Tennis is not just about hitting the ball over the net, serving or volleying; it is much more than that; you need to use your head" (Marat Safin).

A successful tennis player is born from the combination of these factors (physical, technical-tactical and mental) in conjunction with natural talent. In the same way as with the development of the other factors previously mentioned, the capacity of understanding and learning mental skills varies from one player to another.

Here are some fundamental skills which characterise a winning tennis player.

Anticipation: is the ability to plan objectives, foresee actions (technical and tactical), results and consequences. Tennis is not only a game of reaction but mainly of anticipation and intelligence. Players must learn to anticipate their opponent's movements, strokes and game play (by reading their body language). Depending on this, the player can also better anticipate and initiate their own actions.

Attention: generally understood as a selective, active, intensive and directed state of one's own perceptions. The main objective is to attend to relevant stimuli and block out any negative thoughts. In tennis, relevant stimuli, amongst others, are: game strategy, opponent's positioning and movements, keeping visual control of the ball and situations in which decisions need to be taken (for example: tie-breaks). A tennis specific attention characteristic is that of being able to maintain one's concentration on the relevant stimuli during the appropriate amount of time.

Positive attitude/Winning attitude: is directly related to self-confidence. It is based on expectations, beliefs, thoughts and positive images, which are manifested through positive behaviour such as: gestures, posture, verbalisation, expression, positive body language, etc. A winner always walks onto the tennis court with a winning attitude and always believes in his own victory.

Self-confidence: is a player's conviction that he can do things well in whatever situation and at anytime. It is defined by: confidence in one's own talent and potential, strokes, physical condition, mental strength, determination, persistence, etc.

Self-motivation: is the ability of motivating oneself and positively reinforcing oneself during training and matches, and being able to overcome difficult situations. There are different methods of self-motivation (Samulski, 2002): 1) cognitive techniques: self-motivation through mental processes

such as perception, visualisation and memorising, 2) motor skill techniques: self-activation through movement, exercise and behaviours, 3) emotional techniques: self-stimulation through positive emotions like happiness and pleasure, the "flow" and the sensation of winning.

Self-verbalisation: is the ability to control behaviour during the match through verbal instructions (Come on!!), remain focused by means of talking to oneself (I must attack my opponent's weaknesses!!). It has two functions: helping to motivate the player during the match (for example: in a difficult situation) or to calm down and remain composed throughout the match.

Communication: is essential when exchanging information with coaches and communicating effectively with your doubles partner. Interpersonal relationships are established due to the sharing of attitudes, thoughts, objectives, strategies and behaviours. During a doubles match, communication can be verbal (e.g., verbal

instructions and conversation) and non verbal (e.g. gestures, body language and behaviour).

Concentration: is the ability to focus on a specific object (tennis ball, racquet, etc.) or action (serve, attacking strategy). In tennis, the player needs to learn to concentrate on the actual moment, on the action that needs to be carried out, blocking out any other external stimuli which may intervene in the execution of the action required (for example: the public's influence or the climate). This ability entails three basic skills: the ability of selecting the right stimulus in order to remain focused on it (the relevant stimulus), the ability of changing one's attention according to the situation (adaptation) and the ability of keeping one's attention and concentration (maintenance / endurance).

Emotional control: is the psychological ability of playing whilst keeping mental and emotional thoughts under control. The player must learn self-control techniques in order to

regulate his levels of anxiety and stress during the match and maintain an appropriate emotional balance at all times, especially when having to take important decisions. The tennis player must be able to deal efficiently with internal (demanding too much of oneself) and external (the pressure of winning on for coaches, sponsors, press, family, etc.) pressures.

Creativity: is the ability of a player to produce or come up with original, innovative and surprising technical-tactical techniques. Some of these characteristics can be trained, but exceptional players such as Kuerten, Federer and Nadal are extremely talented, with creativity and smart play being some of their distinctive traits.

REFERENCES

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(To be continued in 2007)

New ITF Publication - Tennis Psychology: 200 + practical drills and the latest research

The ITF Tennis Development/Coaching Department announces the publication of its book ITF Tennis Psychology. Written by Miguel Crespo, Machar Reid and Ann Quinn, the publication covers the most important issues relating to the mental side of the game. Through a combination of sport science research and practical application in the field, the authors provide an insight into the psychological implications of tennis for players, coaches, parents and officials at all levels of the game.

ITF Tennis Psychology provides a detailed analysis of the mental challenges of the game. Complete with theoretical information and practical examples, this ITF publication reflects the ITFs ongoing role in making available the most up-to-date tennis-specific training information to players and coaches worldwide. Included are more than 200 on- and off- court practical drills and the latest research in the field.

"I think I may use some of the psych drills in this book!"

Marat Safin, former world number 1, Australian and US Open champion and 2 time Davis Cup winner.

"The authors tackle the complex issue of psychology in tennis with a new level of insight...a must read for the athlete and coach."

Craig Tiley, Director of Player Development, Tennis Australia.

"The book does an excellent job of covering all the major areas of tennis psychology, integrating the latest research findings. Key points and coaching tips are highlighted throughout the text including drills and activities to incorporate in practices."

Dan Gould, Sport Psychologist.

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