

Winning...it's all in your mind

From time to time, I am asked how I was able to learn to play the game of tennis in such a relatively short period of time. Truth be known, a combination of factors came to play in accelerating my development. First, I must confess that I was and am diligent about efficient practice. Second, I stopped listening to the conventional wisdom of the tennis pundits...frankly, most of it just didn't work for me. So, I started to apply my scholarly skills of observation, analysis and verification to develop my own guidelines. However, one component in my development that I truly believe is essential involves the mental skills and discipline to learn and compete effectively. If you read [Mental Equipment](#) in Tennis Server each month, you are presented with a thorough (and I believe well founded) exploration of this part of the game. What follows is my own advice on mental development. It is offered as a primer...not a complete curriculum.

To begin, it amazes me how many players will hit thousands of balls every day, yet avoid any deliberate efforts at improving their mental skills. For me, this is similar to the body builder who only develops his/her upper body. She/he is doomed to lose in competition! Everything we do stems from the mind...which is really not a separate organ in our bodies. Rather, the mind reaches every cell in our bodies. Every thought we have in some minor or major way impacts every millimeter of our bodies. They are inseparable and deeply interconnected. To prove my point, try this experiment.

Wad up 10 pieces of scrap paper and place a wastebasket about 10 to 15 feet from where you are standing. Take some practice tosses and attempt to throw the balls of paper into the basket. Now close your eyes and imagine for a few moments that you make every shot perfectly. Really imagine yourself throwing the balls...see them travel through the air...and see them land perfectly in the basket. Now, open your eyes and actually throw the 10 balls of paper. As you throw these, use your imagination to again see every throw being "on target." After you have thrown all 10 balls of paper, count how many actually made it into the basket. Now, go back to your original throwing spot and again, close your eyes, this time imagine that each shot misses the basket. Repeat the above procedure and throw each of the 10 balls of paper. During this second series of tosses, use your imagination to see misses as you actually throw the balls of paper. Don't deliberately try and miss the basket. Just think of missing while you throw the balls toward the basket. Again, count the number of balls that actually land in the basket. I am fairly certain that the first series will have fewer misses than the second does. In the second series of attempts, you were trying to make the shots but were thinking negatively...very similar to the negative thoughts that creep into our minds while trying to hit a shot...especially when trying to serve...no? Almost invariably, negative thoughts yield negative consequences.

Whether or not this "experiment" was a clear illustration for you, I assure you that your mental beliefs, frame of mind and imagination exert major influences upon your development, competitive performance, and most importantly, enjoyment of the game. Given this, here are some things you can do to improve these factors:

1. Daydream...deliberately...about perfect strokes, strategies and performances! Remember how much you daydreamed as a child. You would actually see yourself being all sorts of people...athletes...movie heroes...doctors...space travelers, etc. In your mind's eye, you actually could see, hear and feel these experiences. When you watched a sporting event like basketball, you often went out and played the sport with your friends...imagining that you were your favorite player. You probably played your best... executing beyond your normal ability. Why?...because you imagined yourself playing perfectly...and your body couldn't tell the difference. Well, the same can be true as an adult playing tennis.

Throughout the day, I take little breaks from reality and daydream. I see myself playing perfect tennis...winning every point...sometimes I see this in slow motion. If I am in my office alone or at home, I might enhance the experience by closing my eyes during the daydream. These reveries take no more than five minutes and sometimes last for far less time. But, they are an indispensable part of my training regimen. The more you imagine yourself playing perfect tennis...actually seeing it...hearing it...feeling it, the more likely it is that you will play perfect tennis. I actually learned to hit the overhead smash using this technique. I watched the pros hit overheads on television. Then, I spent many daydreams seeing myself hitting the shot in an identical manner. Know what? The overhead went from my least favorite and most difficult shot to one of my most favorite. At one time I actually feared having to hit the overhead. Now, I salivate at the opportunity! Sure, practicing the shot on court was necessary, but the improvement came at warp speed once I put my mind to it!

Sometimes when my schedule permits, I will actually "meditate" for 15 to 30 minutes. I play an entire match in my mind...of course, I win! If I have a tough tournament match coming up (aren't they all?) and if I know my opponent, I do this kind of "match meditation" on the day of the actual contest. It actually helps me to relax when I play and to believe that I can and will win. For some people, meditation is too severe and conjures up images of monks wearing orange robes. Well, each of us have daydreamed. If meditating is too weird or infeasible, try mini daydreams...they'll achieve the same result in time. Better yet, do both. Believe me, if you can imagine doing it...you can do it!

2. Avoid negative self-talk and start to compliment yourself! Imagine you are playing doubles with a person whom you have just started dating. You really like him/her, and there is the excitement of a new relationship. What kind of partner would you be? Hopefully, you would be patient, supportive, forgiving. Winning wouldn't be the most important thing. You would do your best to encourage this partner and would never chastise him/her. You would offer your best advice and try to keep your team's confidence high. If you lost, you wouldn't blame her/him. You would probably express how well she/he performed. You would probably express your confidence that next time, your team would win. You certainly wouldn't get angry at

her/him...call her/him names...throw your racquet in disgust...nor give up and tank the match. You would fight to the end...no? Well, don't you think you deserve the same when your partner is yourself?

I watch high school and college players compete all the time. So many of them are self-abusive when they play. They yell at themselves, call themselves all sorts of names, panic at every little mistake and sometimes they just give up. No wonder they end up losing or even worse, find themselves not enjoying the game. If they were paired up with themselves in doubles, they would probably walk off the court...stating something like: "I refuse to play with that maniac!" (By the way, these histrionics are not limited to junior and college players)

Negative thoughts or verbal expressions (self-talk) rarely if ever, improve a player's performance. It's natural to get a bit fearful or to lose confidence in a shot, etc. However, negativity will never get you back on track! (Okay, you'll put McEnroe forth as an example of a player who could use anger to his advantage. Maybe so...but do you think he really enjoyed those matches? Besides, these tantrums won him matches by unsettling the opponent...not by out playing the opponent. He never went crazy when he was winning! To me, this form of "gamesmanship" is nothing more than cheating. What is really sad is the fact that he was rewarded with millions of dollars for this behavior. Incredible!)

When you do sense that your thoughts are turning negative or you find yourself saying negative things aloud, pause and say firmly to your self: "STOP!!!" Then, try to relax your body and reverse the negativity with a positive statement.

Throughout a match, I must say the following statements a hundred times (silently or even aloud): stay tough, you can do it, patience...hang in there, the stroke is there...just give it a chance, I'm getting tougher every point, next time...I'll make it, I'm getting stronger, I'm feeling tougher. Self talk is so important! If you say it often enough...you'll believe it. If you believe it is true...it usually becomes true. Even when I am off court, I practice positive self talk. I must say the following phrase a hundred times a day...every day: "My tennis strokes, skills and strategies are improving every day!" I say it silently to myself...almost as an unconscious chant. It may seem strange, but it really does work. Regardless of whether or not you'll practice specific affirmations on a daily basis, I promise you that your game, and more importantly, your enjoyment of the game will greatly improve once you stop the negativity. I know for many this is not any easy task. However, like all good things in tennis...practice makes perfect.

3. Teach your mind to relax your body! Living in the Northeast of the United States, I am used to driving my car in snow. Years ago, my driver's education instructor conveyed to me and my fellow students an invaluable insight on driving in snow...don't drive tense! As soon as you tense up when driving a car, your body is no longer able to fluidly control the vehicle. Many people are afraid to drive in the snow (I am not attempting to minimize the potential hazards and dangers). But driving in snow requires your best driving reactions and skills. Both of these are substantially reduced when you drive tensed!

Learn to relax while driving in the snow. How?...by using your mind to deliberately relax the muscles of your body. The same holds true in tennis. When our body is calm and relaxed, we are likely to play our best. When we are afraid, we tend to hit less fluidly and frequently -- we commit errors. These errors cause more anxiety and we find ourselves becoming even more tense...a horrible cycle! How do you break this cycle?...through two specific techniques: controlled breathing and mind induced muscle relaxation. Throughout a match, I monitor my breathing. I want slow, regular, relaxed breathing. Whenever I find myself taking short, shallow breaths, I stop and force my breathing to slow down. I inhale deeply through my nose and exhale slowly through my mouth. I force my breathing rate to slow down. The by product of this controlled breathing is relaxation. You greatly reduce tension, anxiety and stress when you breath slowly and deeply. It really works!

Between games and points, I use my mind to relax those muscles that are particularly tense (for me, the shoulders and neck get tight first). You can relax any muscle group with your mind's "commands." This is especially true if you send these "signals" while breathing deeply. Try this experiment:

Sit in a chair comfortably. Take in a deep breath through your nose. Fill your lungs with air to their capacity. Hold this breath for three seconds. Then, exhale slowly through your mouth. As you exhale, say the word: R...E...L...A...X, and send relaxing "signals" from your mind to every part of your body. Repeat this entire procedure three times. Now, monitor how relaxed you body and mind are. I am certain that you feel more comfortable and stress free than at the beginning.

You can do this little relaxation ritual between points...right before beginning the serve ritual...in between games, etc. Watch Mary Pierce. Here is a player who experiences stress and anxiety on the court! To her credit, she has learned to use breathing rituals to calm her mind and body...resulting in improved performance. If you did nothing more than learn how to relax your body 10% during a match, your performance would soar!

4. Play to play...not to win! Finally, some attention must be given to why you play tennis. Let's face it... we all have too much ego invested in our games. The vast majority of us are not going to make it into the top 100 players. Even if your goals include professional competition and/or scholastic competition, you've got to keep the game in perspective. First, 50% of all people playing a tennis match lose. Second, no one wins every match. Third, no one is perfect...why should we expect to play perfect tennis? Fourth, if you play to win, you are in for a rollercoaster ride of emotional victories and defeats. The best reason to play tennis?...simply to play it.

Once tennis becomes a job, a statement of personal worth or a means of recognition...it becomes a burden. Once tennis is a burden, it begins to lose its appeal. Goals that include winning or achieving a ranking, etc. aren't bad. But, they shouldn't be the reason(s) you play the game. The joy of playing this wonderful sport...the places it takes you...the people you meet...the insights about yourself you learn...the benefits to your health and body...the satisfaction derived from training

and working hard...the improvement in your play...these are some of the best reasons to play tennis.

I have been fortunate. I have and am ranked by USTA New England...I have coached winning teams...I have competed in USTA National Tournaments...I've trained at some of the world's best facilities. I've won my fair share of matches and "suffered" 0 - 0 losses. I've met wonderful opponents and unfortunately, some very shallow, conceited players. I've won matches and never really understood why, and I have lost matches and learned volumes. I teach people to play this sport, and learn from every person I teach. I have lost matches that I was expected to win and won matches that I was expected to lose. I have been complimented on my play, and I have been ridiculed for losing. I have read libraries worth of tennis literature, and write this column. In short, I have experienced much in my encounter with tennis. But the one thing that keeps me going...particularly during the difficult times in this game...is that I simply love to play...nothing more and nothing less. Each of us has experienced this unique pleasure. This is the thing we need to keep in mind as we play, train and compete. Next time you find yourself losing or playing poorly, remind yourself of the joy you can receive if you simply hit the ball. The joy we all experienced the first time our ball went over the net and landed in. That's what it's really all about!

So, in concluding this month's column, I ask you to daydream, speak kindly to yourself, learn to relax and simply hit the ball. If comply with my requests, I am certain that you'll soon become a tennis overdog!