

Sports Psychology for Junior Tennis Players

Ideas and Tips for Developing the Competitive Mental Edges

Allen Berger, Ph.D. - Certified Sports Psychologist, Clinical Psychologist
and Elite Tennis Professional USPTA

In order to maximize your potential as an athlete you need to first develop **self-awareness**.

Self-awareness is based being honest with yourself about what you are saying or doing to yourself, and how this affects your performance.

Sometimes we put so much pressure on ourselves that it is impossible to perform well.

There are two sources of pressure that interfere with our performance.

The first is **external pressure**. This is pressure you feel from your parent or coach. Some parents or coaches unintentionally put pressure on us because our results make them feel good about themselves. They get too psychologically invested in our performance. Don't get me wrong we want our parents and coaches to be committed to our development as a player, but what I am talking about here is different than that, this is the case where too much self-esteem is on the line for them when we play. Rarely does a parent or coach do this intentionally.

The next type of pressure is **internal pressure**, this is the pressure you put on yourself. It comes from many different sources like perfectionism, unrealistic expectations, fear, poor self-esteem, etc. This type of pressure is as destructive as external pressures and also

needs to be addressed and reduced if you are going to play the best tennis you can play.

Tennis players who excel in their sport *accept total responsibility* for their game. Many athletes confuse beating themselves up with taking responsibility. The difference is that taking responsibility is empowering while beating ourselves up is debilitating.

What does the phrase, “*accept responsibility for your game*” mean to you? Please take a minute and think about your answer.

If you don't develop faith and confidence in your ability and in your problem solving skills, you will hope for miracles on the court to help your performance.

Four Basic Concepts in Sports Psychology Relevant to Tennis Performance

- I. Awareness of Self, Others and Circumstances
 - The player who has an awareness of self, what weaknesses they see in their opponent, and the circumstances they are in and can utilize this information has an advantage over other players who don't integrate this information during a match.
- II. Our best performance occurs when we create a harmony and coordination amongst all the different self-parts of our personality.
 - We have many different self-parts.
 - Some self-parts are *positive*, they *enhance* our performance. They encourage us to give our best effort, to learn and improve, to compete well and to be a good sport.
 - Some self-parts are *negative*, they *diminish* our performance. They criticize us if we make a mistake, they tell us we have to be perfect to be OK, they get

upset when we lose a point or lose a game or a set or a match. They act like they are trying to help us but they make us feel bad or anxious because so much of our pride or sense of self is at stake.

- Learning how to deal with our negative self is extremely important to optimize our performance in a match.

III. There is a strong relationship between playing well and our psychological intensity and physical energy level.

- Low levels of psychological intensity and low levels of physical energy are associated with poor performance.
- High levels of psychological intensity or physical energy also create poor performance or choking.
- Imagine a scale of one to ten with one being lazy and ten being filled with high anxiety and nervousness.
 - i. What level do you typically play at?
 - ii. What level is best for you?
 - iii. Find the range of intensity and arousal that marks the lower and upper boundaries of your optimal zone of performance.

IV. Task specific performance cues or thought content have been found to increase athletic performance. Examples of performance cues in tennis are:

- a. Keep your chin up – serve.
 - b. Stay down– ground strokes.
 - c. Drive through the ball – ground stroke.
- Positive self-talk has been found to increase athletic performance. This includes:

2. Self-encouragement.

- a. Great point.
- b. Good shot.
- c. Solid serve – way to go.

3. *Effort control.*

- a. Relax. Take it one point at a time.
- b. Slow down, you're playing too fast.
- c. Stay focused.
- d. Keep the pressure on.

4. *Performance Segment Goal Achievement.*

- a. Don't change a winning strategy – tactic.
 - i. Great first set, don't change a thing.
- b. It's 4 all.
 - i. Time to break serve.

- *Mood Words* – are words that have movement content or words or thoughts that evoke an emotional state in the athlete. Mood words that have direct movement or performance counterparts have been found to increase performance. Words that are used should be compatible with the basic performance capacity required.

- c. Explode, balance, attack, rip it, light feet, dance, happy feet, jump on it, be ready, pick it up, come on, focus, etc.

Between Point Psychology

Off Task Time during a match is important to manage because it helps the athlete focus on task relevant thoughts.

- It is estimated that between two-thirds and three-fourths of the time during a competitive tennis match is spent off task.
- Between point psychology concerns the management of the time between points and during change-overs.
 - You are allowed 25 Seconds between points.
 - You have 90 Seconds for change overs.
 - You have 2 minutes between the 2nd and 3rd set.

Between Point Psychology - The Three R's

- The Three R's presented by Dr. Karl Slaikeu and Robert Trogolo provides a great framework to manage you off task time on court. The Three R's are:
 1. R – Release: Letting go of the point that just happened. A helpful release gets rid of energy, but lets you hold your head high, maintain your integrity, and look strong to your opponent.
 - a. Use immediate rehearsal or imitation of the shot you wished to hit. This will let you constructively release the energy from a technical error.
 - b. If you play a bad or strategically poor shot immediately correct yourself by saying: “Let’s play higher percentage or go for the opening or whatever is relevant to that particular situation.”
 - c. Humor is an excellent way to release your energy, keep your head in a good place and create relaxation.

d. Your release will vary depending upon the stage of a match. Earlier in a match you may not have as much energy to release as you will have later in the match.

i. Samples:

1. Performance Cues: “Stay down watch the ball.”
2. Effort control and Self-encouragement: “Come on – Yes!!! That’s it.”
3. Self-encouragement (private thoughts): “You’re playing great. Keep it up.”
4. Compliment Opponents
Good Shot: “Too good. Great shot.” Applaud with the racquet.

2. R – Review: The review gives you a chance to affirm your tactics or strategy or to switch tactics. Your review lets you evaluate where you are at and make any adjustments necessary to improve your situation.

a. Start your review by switching your racquet to your non-playing hand.

b. Ask yourself coach like question:

i. What just happened?

ii. Am I playing my opponent’s weaknesses?

1. Play her backhand more.

- iii. Am I following my game plan?
 - 1. Get in on a short ball.
 - iv. What do I need to do next?
 - 1. Be aggressive.
 - 2. Take control of the point first.
 - c. Use performance cues to improve your game.
3. R – Reset: In this third phase you are going to enter into your ritual or routine to either serve or return serve. The ritual or routine helps you refocus your attention to the here and now. It creates a boundary between what just happened and the next point, allowing you to bring your full attention and intensity to the next point.

References

Berger, A., Brady, K., Brady, K., Dunkle, W., and Rizza, D. (2003). *Sport Psychology for the Competitive Junior Tennis Player* (Audio Book). Torrance, CA: AND Publishers.

Loehr, J. (1990). *The Mental Game: Winning at Pressure Tennis*. Plume Books.

Slaikeu, K. and Trogolo, R. (1998). *Focused for Tennis*. Human Kinetics.

Rushall, B.S. (1984). The content of competition thinkings. In *Cognitive Sport Psychology*. W.F. Straub and J.M. Williams (Eds). Lansing, NY: Sport Science Associates.

Dr. Berger's practice is located in Doylestown, PA:

3420 Aquetong Road
Doylestown, PA 18902
1(818)584-4795
ABPHD@MSN.COM