

Why sports psychology often fails

Edgar Giffenig



Any competitive tennis player or coach knows that the mental game plays a huge role in tennis and is certainly familiar with the basic principles of sport psychology. There is a great deal of information on how to improve on-court performance by applying such concepts as: visualization, relaxation, breath-control, rituals, goal setting, routines, etc.

However, little is ever mentioned about one essential underlying factor, without which none of these skills can truly work, and that is: “Understanding your game.”

Unless you are absolutely sure about how to build points and what you can and cannot do on the court it is impossible to reach a mental state that will allow you to play up to your potential, regardless of what sport psychology tools you try to apply.

Each player has different technical abilities, and the only way one can play consistently and effectively is by playing within your own “game,” that is consistently playing the shot that will give you the best chance of winning the point.

If you are constantly second-guessing your shots or playing above your technical capabilities, no amount of sport’s psychology will help. The barrage of unforced errors will make it impossible to achieving any type of calm, confidence or aplomb.

So how can you achieve this maturity?

The answer is: with the right mentality during practice, a few specific drills and plenty of match play. Let's take a look at the process.

A player's game is a fluid entity during the development process so a general goal for every practice should be to continually work to find that fine line between power and control. How hard can I hit the ball without making mistakes? Every player should spend practice walking this "tight rope." – continually experimenting and adjusting. I am missing too much - increase the spin. I am still missing – slow the swing down. I am not missing at all – accelerate - see if you can stay consistent. This in itself will be very helpful to understand their capabilities, but two types of drills will further assist in the process: Series Drills and Competitive Tactical Drills.

The series drills are exercises in which players have to complete a series of shot combinations or rallies without mistakes. Any mistakes in any of the series, and the players have to start all over again. This automatically increases the pressure as the players progress from completing one series to the next. Here are a few examples of a rally series: Players have to hit 3 series of 15 shots in a row, (Options: only backhands, only forehands, one hits slice the other topspin, all shots pass the service line, etc.).

One can also make each series incremental, that is, the task gets harder within the series. For example in our 15 ball rallies, the first five shots have to be hit slowly, the second five at a medium pace and the third five fast.

Another example of useful series are 3 shot combinations such as: an approach down the line, a crosscourt passing shot and a down the line volley or an inside out forehand approach, a down the line passing shot and a crosscourt volley. In these examples players could be tasked to complete 3 sets of 5 series of those three shots.

As players get used to these exercises, they should push the envelope and try to complete the series at the highest possible speed. This will slowly help them to acquire a sense of the maximum speed at which they can control the different shots and send them on their way towards developing a strong base for match play.

However, understanding their technical ability is only half the battle. Equally important is to internalize the types of shots they should hit from every situation on the court.

The best way to do this is by using Competitive Tactical Drills in which players practice common and specific patterns. For example, if a player should play hit high, crosscourt when on the run, he or she should practice that situation over and over. The idea is to break down points and practice the desired response to all common situations over and

over until they become automatic. This will eventually lead to players who know exactly how they should play the points, and put end to second guessing – I should have gone crosscourt, I should have attacked, I should have approached the net, etc.

Between the concept of balancing power and control in every practice, the Series Drills, the Competitive Tactical Drills and plenty of match play, players will develop a much better understanding of their games upon which all the sport psychology tools can be applied much easier and effectively.

After all, how can a player identify if his/her mistakes are mental when they have no idea of what to expect from their game. Are they missing because they are tight or anxious or are they simply hitting the wrong shot or the right shot at a speed they cannot control?

Self-knowledge and understanding is an essential first step on which to build a better competitor. Only after players understand exactly what they should be doing on the court and if their mistakes are truly mental will a psychological approach succeed.

Knowing and understanding your game is the first step towards truly playing with confidence.