

## **The Mental Game: Broken Rackets - Bad Body Language**

Welcome to The Mental Game, a feature with Rob Polishook, MA, CPC. Rob, a mental training coach who founded and directs Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group, helps athletes compete with confidence, calm, and concentration, often the difference between winning and losing.

Rob is no stranger to tennis. He works directly with tennis players, coaches, parents and teams at all levels. He is a regular speaker for the USPTA and has spoken internationally in Israel and India.

In this installment, Rob Polishook explores the *underlying cause* of the broken rackets and negative body language.

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One of the big buzz words regarding the mental game is *body language*. Body language usually refers to how the player is physically projecting him or herself on the court. For instance, if a player exhibits slumped shoulders and is moping around, it is usually perceived that the player is feeling defeated and lacks competitive will. However, if the player is standing tall and appears alert and prepared, it is usually perceived that the player is mentally strong. While not an absolute, often times you can look at a player's physical cues and infer their willingness to compete.

Rafael Nadal's pre-match ritual during the coin toss is the ultimate example of positive body language. Nadal bounces around feverishly before sprinting back to the baseline, making it clear to all that he is eager to begin the match. Coaches, parents and even sport psychologists love to use it as an illustration of how today's players should act and send a message to their opponents. Although motivating to watch, I would like to suggest that it's not the outward action we should react towards, but rather the underlying attitude and emotions that are fueling Nadal's physical action. Conversely, it's not uncommon to see a junior player toss their racket and mope around the court with that hang dog look that so often precedes a downward spiral in play. While this is both unappealing and unsportsmanlike, try to imagine the anxiousness and fear that player must be experiencing to fuel these negative actions. Now make it a bit more personal: imagine it's your 12 year old child (or a player you coach) that is alone on the court, under the microscope, self-destructing. Possibly instead of anger at them towards the unsportsmanlike and embarrassing behavior you feel, your focus might shift to empathy towards your child as they individually and awkwardly try to navigate through the uncomfortable and highly charged situation.

Understanding and addressing the *underlying cause* of the broken rackets and negative body language is the key to changing the actions. Certainly, if your kid were a robot you could turn a switch and viola, their body language becomes acceptable and the racket stays in their hand. But, in reality, if this were to happen, would the fear and anxiousness be gone? Probably not. You have just affixed a bandage to the symptom not the cause. Dr. Alan Goldberg, noted sport psychologist, explains "this is precisely where most repetitive sports performance problems begin, that is when the underlying cause is ignored, and the anxieties, fears and stresses that the athlete is holding get ignored and pushed away and seemingly forgotten. But like a yellow elephant in the room, they inhibit peak performance, swell up, and overflow under another high pressure situation".

So what is the underlying cause? This is where things get complicated, and beyond the scope of this article. A few thoughts worth addressing may include: Is your child feeling intense pressure to win? Where is this coming from? Are the expectations of friends getting to them? Is the child afraid of failing? Is it that the child feels like they are being judged every time they walk on the court? By whom? Is it that they are trying to validate their worth and standing in matches? Is it that they forgot about the process and are only thinking of results? Are they holding the stress of an injury? Is it that they dread the post-match critique while bottled up in the car? Is it that the child is trying to be perfect, because that's what they think is expected? These are just some of the underlying fears and beliefs that may be behind a child throwing a racket and the use of negative body language.

Again, while the tossed racket and poor body language are what we observe, they are not the *cause* of the problem, rather the symptom to a deeper underlying cause that must be addressed. In reality, the throwing of the racket is an emotional release for the child, the only way they know to vent, really no

different than a good cry (only a bit tougher on the racket, fence and parents!). A young junior tennis client told me he used to punch himself in the stomach when he got into tense situations. He explained to me that he was just trying to punch his nerves away. He explained to me that it actually helped because he didn't feel his nerves, but also admitted it hurt his ribs! We discussed ways in which to accept the nerves and then release the nervous anxiety by patting his thigh.

On another occasion, I was surprised to see a top-notch high school player I worked with disgustingly throw her racket into the back fence during a match. Following the match, we discussed it. I asked her what she was feeling to display such a vent of emotions. Further, I explained that I knew her to be a competitive, diligent, and prideful tennis player. How, I asked, did she think observers of the match viewed her at the time of her racket-throwing? Did that view coincide with the qualities we both knew her to possess? I never had to tell her not to throw the racket again.

To gain perspective a parent and coach must recognize the context of the situation and the pressure that the player is experiencing. They can then view the situation from the player's eyes. By viewing the situation from this lens, the parent or coach will not jump to judgment and try to "fix" the action. Rather, they will be open to understanding the whole picture, seeking to understand the underlying cause. This will help the player calm down. Then they often will feel safe enough to be open to talking about what attitudes, emotions and beliefs fueled the poor on court behavior, and the actions will resolve themselves from the roots.

Again, let's be clear, I am not condoning ill behavior and racket throwing. However, it is crucial that we attempt to understand what is fueling these actions and address them from the root level. If the roots of the problem are not resolved, two things will happen: the emotional cause of the tension will be released a different way or the athlete will feel forced to hold the issues inside. Neither of these results will be conducive to the goal of achieving peak performance.

For more information about how to help you or your child achieve peak performance visit [www.insidethezone.com](http://www.insidethezone.com).

Don't forget to mention that you read about Rob Polishook on USTA Eastern's website!