

The Mental Game: Championship Parenting

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 teaches the 10 steps to helping your child achieve peak performance.

How many times have you seen a parent watching their child play at a tournament but paradoxically the parent is the one that looks like they are playing? You've seen it; the parent is talking to themselves, hair disheveled, and sweat dripping down their brow. The over-involved parent looks as if they are making hand signals to their child but in reality these are simply spontaneous contortions as a result of the match! However, with each contortion or expression the child on the court gets tighter and tighter. From the child's perspective, they often feel like they are playing against two opponents, the misguided expectations of the parent and the actual opponent.

Certainly, most parents that push don't mean anything by it, they simply want what they see as best for the child and are willing to do anything to make this happen. In fact, they may not even understand that their behavior is actually putting more pressure on their child and making it almost impossible for them to perform their best because of things like fear of failure, fear of not being perfect, or fear of not living up to expectations. The precedents in professional tennis are on the TV scene all the time. Alan Goldberg, nationally known sport psychologist, describes it this way: "parents that are over involved in their child's sport run the risk of severely hindering their performance, but also, much worse, ruining their relationship with their child.

So, what's a parent to do? What's the best way to encourage your child and create a situation where they feel good about themselves and their sport? A situation where they are not afraid to risk and they are internally motivated not simply trying to live up to other's expectations. The first step is to know that the role of the parent is the most important role in a child's life. Whether dealing with everyday matters or issues related to their involvement in sports. The parental relationship is akin to the roots of a tree. It is the foundation from which everything flows.

If the parents play their position well then the child will learn the sport faster, perform better, develop self-confidence and have fun. Wayne Bryant, the infamous father of the #1 ranked doubles team, Mike and Bob Bryant, lectures all over the world and talks about parents bringing fun to the game. If the role is not played well, then the sport becomes old, the self-esteem drops, and relationships become strained.

Your child needs you on his/her team. The child's coach needs you on the team. It is extremely difficult to win without a solid child, parent, and coach relationship; one that is trusting and communicative. The following are key strategies for parents to use when helping your child to achieve peak performance.

- 1. Unconditional Support.** No matter if your child wins or loses.
- 2. Person first and athlete second.** Remember, behind that super athlete is your child, a teenager that is a person first.
- 3. Coaches shove 'em and parents love 'em!** This goes back to the idea that the parents greatest role is to support their kids as they navigate through the competitive world of sports.
- 4. The gift of failure.** Allow your child to fail and let them know its ok. Without failure a child will never learn how to bounce back from adversity or they may never see what needs to be corrected for the next time.

5. Process, not the outcome. All too often kids get caught up in wanting to win or needing to win. Don't get caught up in defining success or failure through wins and losses. Help your child understand and think in terms of what are the things that need to be done in order to properly prepare ourselves to compete and play proud.

6. Growth mentality. It's important to understand that your child's development is not fixed in a particular point in time. Just because they cannot hit a slice backhand deep today does not mean this is a life long sentence, rather it is something to work at and will continue to be a work in progress.

7. Keep it simple. When people describe "the zone" they talk about just letting it happen, relaxing and playing within themselves.

8. Have fun. Wayne Bryant says this is the #1 principal in developing your game at all levels!

9. No comparisons. The key here is to encourage your child to compete against themselves. Using others as a comparison will make your child get tight and feel like they are inadequate.

10. Time to mourn. It is important to understand that it's ok for your child to be sad, especially after a difficult match. Know that the child has earned the right to be upset for a time after a losing a match. Of course if it goes for days and weeks something may be wrong. However, simply be there for your child.

For more information about how to help you or your child achieve peak performance visit www.insidethezone.com.

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