

## **The Mental Game: Competeology - The Key to On Court Success**

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 Competeology - the study of competing.

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Many of us probably know the suffix –logy means “the study of.” For example, astrology is the study of stars, neurology is the study of the nervous system, and ideology is the study of ideas. So what does this have to do with sports? I would like to introduce a new “–logy” into the world, one that sets the top players apart from the rest. Competeology - the study of competing. Understanding how to compete is the key to sustainable and long-term success in any sport.

So why is competeology so important during competition? Think of it this way: we require a basic knowledge of all the sciences to understand the world we live in, therefore, wouldn't it make sense that we require a basic understanding of how to compete, what it means to compete, and what are the key tenants to competing. This understanding will position a player to maximize their potential.

By successfully utilizing these eight essential tenants of competing, a player can earn their PhD in competeology. More importantly, this applied degree will position them to unleash their potential.

### **1. Sportsmanship**

A competitor respects themselves, their opponent, and the game. Their focus is on ethically following the rules while trying their best. A competitor plays with intense self-belief, but checks their ego at the door. This allows them to play free, adapt and adjust to situations, and opens the door to limitless performance. They don't hold onto expectations of what others think, rather, they acknowledge their opponent for putting himself or herself on the line. This mindset allows them to focus on his or her own game and the best tactics to utilize within the contest. A true competitor understands that their opponent is not an enemy but views them as a challenge, an opportunity, a partner that is necessary to take your game to the next level.

### **2. Maintain a process-based attitude vs. a fixed attitude**

A competitor understands that their development is a process, and while a loss may hurt, there are lessons that must be learned. They see challenges and losses as an opportunity to grow, not a problem. An athlete with a fixed mentality sees their talent as unchangeable and gets exceedingly frustrated with setbacks, as they think it's an indictment of their self worth. A setback sends them into a tailspin of which they usually cannot climb out. A competitor, however, possesses a processed based attitude and continually puts themselves in situations where the outcome is unknown.

### **3. Focus on what you can control and let go of the rest**

A competitor stays focused on what they can control, things such as effort, energy, time management, and bouncing back from adversity, to name a few. They understand they cannot control how well their opponent plays, court conditions, or winning and losing. When a competitor focuses on his or her game, utilizes their strategy, and competes to the fullest, they always walk away knowing they did their best on that day.

### **4. Never, Ever, Ever Give up**

Competing means never giving up and managing all situations no matter how dire they may seem. A true competitor understands that not every day is going to bring top-level performance. Such a player thrives under adversity, especially the adversity of having to figure out what to do when their game is not on. A true competitor doesn't mind winning a tight, or even ugly, contest. They have perspective and prioritize

building experience and learning from the outing over the result. Before winning the 2010 Wimbledon Championships, Rafael Nadal said: "I just try my best in every moment, every practice, every point."

### **5. Adapt and Adjust to situations**

A competitor is constantly adjusting and adapting within a contest. This is what separates the great players from the good ones. Momentum shifts are a given in a contest. What's most important is to be aware of what is happening and adjust and adapt. Too often in the heat of competition, athletes get caught up solely on the result, or what was. This singular focus takes them away from a key question: What do I need to do to play better now, or get back in the match?

### **6. Get comfortable being uncomfortable**

A competitor understands that during competition they may have to take a calculated risk, try something new, or hit a shot not quite the way they would ideally like to. They understand that they may have to navigate through momentum shifts which are not always comfortable for them. However, they also understand that by embracing the idea of getting comfortable being uncomfortable their game will become more diverse and escalate to another level.

### **7. Be Aware and Make High Percentage Choices**

A competitor is making high percentage choices during all stages of their competition. For example, does a tennis player try to hit a screaming winner down the line that may appear on ESPN, or counter with a defensive shot that will get them back to a neutral position? Or does a player go for an outright winner, something they can't control, or go for target zones? Sometimes the best choice is to stay patient, stay in the point until an opportunity presents itself.

### **8. Learn from Mistakes**

Babe Ruth was noted for saying "every time I strike out I am one step closer to hitting a home run." What the Babe understood is that mistakes, setbacks, and failure happen, they are part of the process. In fact they should be expected, encouraged and most importantly used as feedback. If we don't make mistakes we are not pushing ourselves, mistakes are only bad if the player does not learn from them. Mistake provide a player the opportunity to learn, and adjust, essentially correcting from the previous setback. Mistakes are a necessary albeit painful part of the process to improving. Nothing great was ever achieved with out adversity!

By following the above tenets of competeology, you will put yourself in the best position to achieve optimum results. These concepts are all within a player or teams control and will therefore increase your confidence in competition. They will help you to stay present instead of worrying about results, focusing on the past, or looking ahead to the future. Lastly, they will help you become increasingly aware of what is happening, which will allow you to relax and make better decisions. Ultimately, following the tenets of competeology will free your path to learn and grow every time you compete.

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!