

## **The Mental Game: Concentrate!**

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 talks all about concentration and how to focus on what you can control.

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It's happened to us all. One moment you are concentrating on playing the point—everything feels smooth, relaxed, and in control. Seemingly the next moment you find yourself in another place, feeling tense, and each step you take feels like a challenge. Add to that a stunned concern with how the match became so close, and a fear of where it is going, and your mind is now clouded over with doubt.

Or perhaps you have experienced this a different way: One moment you are leading 6-4, 5-2, and the thought comes up that you are only four points from the trophy. You begin to press, your heart rate goes up, you begin rushing, and the next thing you know you are battling in the third set, struggling just to stay even. You are left to wonder how your concentration strayed from "one point at a time" to seemingly everywhere except the present!

Concentration is one of the most important and misunderstood mental skills in an athlete's tool box. Stan Smith once said, "Good concentration separates champions from almost champions." The dictionary defines concentration in a couple ways: first, giving something your undivided attention; and second, narrowing a focus. These are well written definitions, but a bit limited for an athlete. The competitive athlete needs to create an action plan, and even more important, to apply it to the sport and the situation.

A colleague of mine, Dr. Alan Goldberg, a nationally known sports psychology consultant, says, "Concentration is the ability to focus on what's important, and let go of everything else." This definition implies that an athlete may be concentrating, but if it's on the wrong thing, it won't be helpful. Stroll by any court or field in the country, and you might hear a coach or parents prompting their players to concentrate! Firstly, the athlete probably is concentrating, but maybe not on the right thing. Secondly, this oft-repeated advice is not specific enough. For example, a player may be reflecting on the previous game, or anticipating what may happen in the future, while the coach is prodding them to concentrate on what's happening in the present.

Taking Dr. Goldberg's definition of concentration a step further, let's define concentration as "The choice to focus on what you can control, and let go of what you can't control." Have you ever found yourself focusing on something you had no control over? What did it do to your anxiety level? How did it affect your level of play? Focusing on something we cannot control almost always takes us off-course and creates a sense of helplessness and unease, ultimately leading to a downward spiral. Conversely, focusing on something you can control, such as your energy level, your attitude, and how you react to a game or match situation, will yield more confidence and sense of control over your destiny.

There is a helpful strategy which competitors can use to help them concentrate on what they can control before a match. Try this exercise: On the left side of a sheet of paper, list behaviors and strategies that you can control during a game or match, and label it "controllables." Your list might include attitude, preparation, staying positive, following a strategy, and bouncing back from adversity, to name a few

things. On the right side of the paper, list what you are unable to control—such as the weather, match or facility conditions, winning or losing (you cannot directly control this or you would simply always win!), and your opponent's attitude or ability. Simply by labeling what you can and cannot control, you will have a heightened awareness of where you want your focus to be. For example, a player cannot control the wind, but they can control how they react to it, and recognize that the opponent must contend with the same challenge. Similarly, they cannot control that their opponent has a huge forehand, but they can control their strategy in the way they set up points to avoid it during crucial situations.

With an understanding of controllables and uncontrollables, it's important to note that an athlete will inevitably lose focus. Rather than getting angry at him- or herself, the key response is simple awareness and acceptance. This non-judgmental process will help the athlete reframe their focus. Without this awareness, the athlete will continue to focus on the wrong thing. During competition, the act of refocusing can be as important as maintaining your focus in the first place.

Another element of proper concentration is to understand that a strong focus on something 100% of the time is not always necessary. In fact it can be exhausting, and can even lead to burnout. Knowing when to let go, and release focus and the accompanying pressure, is a skill. This may be any time prior to, during, or after competition. For example, Roger Federer often observes what is playing on the Jumbotron between games during the match.

In summary, when viewing concentration through the lens of what you can control and what you cannot, it becomes much more manageable for the player. Further, a player can benefit from learning to refocus effectively rather than attempting to maintain a laser-like concentration at all times. Lastly, knowing that there are times when you can and should let the guard down is empowering. In fact, this letting go will perpetuate even stronger concentration by providing a more relaxed focus, and will lead to more consistent performance in every match.

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!