

The Mental Game: The Pink Elephant on the Court

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 discusses the pink elephant on the court - The 5 Things Your Child Won't Tell You About Tennis.

As parents, how many times have you asked your child, "How was your day?" The response is usually a one word answer... "good!" Of course, this only leaves you wanting to hear more. Whenever I hear that response, I ask a follow up question. I say "huh, good can mean a lot of things to different people, so tell me what you mean by that? Or what specifically made your day good?"

Similarly, there are many things your kids don't tell you regarding their tennis game and your involvement. As always, it's usually the words that are between the lines that are of the most important. Or the unspoken words that your child might be hesitant to tell you because they are not sure of your response.

As a mental training coach, I work individually and in groups with kids ages 12-25. I have heard it all! What kids like, what they don't like, and what they would like to say but just don't. In fact there are common themes to things that kids don't share with their parents. I could probably write a book, maybe I will? But for now, here are the top 5 things your child won't tell you regarding their tennis game and your involvement.

1. **"When I lose...it feels like I'm disappointing you!"** This is one of the most common statements kids make. What's most important is not to conditionally judge them based on their winning or losing, but rather to support them no matter the outcome. It would be great to just let your child know how much you enjoy watching them play, with no strings attached. They feel bad enough when they lose, However, if they feel like they are disappointing a parent when they lose...It only makes the loss harder and bouncing back harder too. Curiously, sometimes this is the cause of cheating. Kids don't want to disappoint parents, coaches or be seen as a "loser" to themselves or their friends. Therefore they make dishonest calls.
2. **When I scream or throw my racket...it's a way of showing you I care!"** Certainly an interesting reaction. Many times when this happens, the player is simply overwhelmed and doesn't know who to handle the situation. Other times they act out to show you they care! You might ask...what do you mean? Well, if they don't act out it will look like they don't care. They worry that it might be perceived as accepting defeat. Certainly they don't want to be perceived as rolling over.
3. **"When you talk about money...it puts extra pressure on me!"** Kids are very perceptive about how much lessons cost, and the sacrifices that parents may be making for their lessons. In reality it's important to know that tennis is not a good investment. However, it is a great sport and an opportunity for your child to learn life's lessons, push themselves to their personal best, and get exercise. Don't put extra pressure on your kids by sharing the money part. This only makes them nervous and tight on the court. It's important that they are able to play loose and relaxed, not worrying about the cost of a lesson!
4. **"When you *always* talk about tennis...? It seems you care more than me!"** In order for a player to play well and feel empowered, they have to have their own Big Y. The Big Y is an intrinsic reason that motivates or inspires them to play. It's important you help cultivate that reason and support your kids during their process. If a parent's support is overwhelming, often times the child will feel suffocated. They will feel pressure and feel like they are not playing for themselves but for their parents approval. It's important to establish many lines of communication with your kids, not just solely about tennis.

5. **“If I don’t want to play today...it doesn’t mean I don’t care”** Today more than ever, kids have very little down time, they are going at breakneck speed from one activity to another. Sometimes kids need a break, a day or even few days to rest and recharge their batteries. Going to that party or being with friends is just what they need, the break will serve to make them hungrier and come back revitalized and with more energy. It will also give their bodies some much needed rest and recovery time. It’s important they have a balance between tennis, school, friends and whatever makes them happy. If they have a balance their time on the court will be more productive. Certainly that’s the idea...

As parents, I suspect some of these top 5 are hard for you to believe? However, in the confines of my office, when kids feel safe and unconditionally accepted, these statements come up time and time again. The pink elephant is now out of the room!

Part #2

Last month I published, The Pink Elephant on the Court Part 1. Since then, I have received an overflow of comments from kids who said “OMG, how did you know what I was thinking? This is exactly what I want to tell my Mom & Dad.” And then from parents, I have heard comments such as, “Really, I often wonder about what my son/daughter is thinking...wow, this is helpful.” Because of the numerous responses, I have written The Pink Elephant On The Court Part 2!

In this article, I have highlighted 5 more comments that kids share with me in my private sessions as a mental training coach. Hopefully, they are helpful to better understand what your kids might be thinking and best supporting their dreams both on and off the court.

1. ***You think your supporting me, but I need you to support me another way!*** Often times a parent will express to me or their child that they are doing everything they can to support their child. Usually what they talk about is the money being spent, miles in the car, and signing up for tournaments and lessons. However, from the child’s perspective, they don’t see this, they might say “ok, I know that (and dismiss it)...but when I look up from the court and you nod your head in disgust or throw your hands up after I miss an easy shot... that doesn’t feel like support! You never seem to be satisfied how I play...” Clearly there are different definitions of support being used. The parents speak of support in regards to time and money while the kids speak of support in regards emotional support.
2. ***Just because I don’t get upset or fist pump doesn’t mean I don’t care.!*** Sometimes a parent will come to me because they perceive their child lacks a competitive fire and they want me to help bring that out. I always mention to the parent how all kids show their competitive nature in a different ways. This is evident at the professional level; look at Nadal vs Federer vs. Hewitt, or Sharapova vs. Stepheie Graff. All these players express themselves differently on the court. There is not a right or wrong way as long as it is respectful to themselves, their opponent and the game. The key is to encourage your child to be themselves while moving past adversity.
3. ***I know the ball was out, but I don’t want confrontation!*** Many times kids will not call out balls out, they will play on! The parents are wondering if the child can’t see the lines or if they need glasses? In reality, the problem is none of these. The underlying issue is the kid either does not want confrontation, and/or they do not want to be called a cheater. The ball not being called out is really an issue of confidence and avoiding confrontation.
4. ***When I’m quite before a match, it’s because I’m nervous!*** The night before a match or even on the car ride driving to a match, has your child ever been quiet? It seems like they have clammed up or gone into a shell. Don’t take this to mean anything other than they just need time to be with themselves and process through the nervousness. The best remedy is to just be there for them and not force conversation. This will only facilitate short and edgy answers. The key is to help them just be themselves.

5. **It's not helpful when you tell me I should win, I feel more pressure.** Often times parents will think by telling their child they are the favorites or telling them they have a better record/ranking than their opponent, it will give them confidence. Actually, it doesn't work that way! More often than not, it just puts pressure on the kid to perform. Their focus goes directly to the outcome, a place that they cannot control and away from the process of what they need to do to compete, something they can control. Additionally, The child thinks...omg, if I don't win I will disappoint my parents. Certainly they don't want to let anyone down, therefore the pressure just gets doubled and unfortunately on the court the child gets tighter. Never a good recipe for success. Simply tell them to Play Proud, Just Be Themselves or Compete. Some parents keep it simple and just say...I Love You!

I know you all try to do the best we can do to help our child do their best in given situations. This parenting stuff is hard! Hopefully some of the Pink Elephants On The Court from Parts 1 & 2 will provide you insight to what your son/daughter might be thinking and also help put you at ease. Often times they don't need your help in solving or fixing the situation, but just need to know you are with them.

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!