

The Mental Game: Unknown Secrets of Great Athletes-Four Principles of More Than an Athlete

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 how having a set of foundational principals can help the athlete, parent or coach to better manage and learn from adversity, challenges and successes in competition.

In Part 1 of the *More than an Athlete* series, we highlighted how, when an athlete brings his or her “whole self” (mental and skillset) to the performance, s/he is better able to play their game and be the best s/he can be. In Part 2, we highlighted how, when a player understands that results don’t define them, they can play from a more relaxed, aware, and grounded place.

In Part 3, we will show how having a set of foundational principals can help the athlete, parent or coach to better manage and learn from adversity, challenges and successes in competition.

Having a set of foundational principles is one of the unknown secrets of great athletes and teams. These principles help the athletes to focus on the process and what they can control. This allows the athlete to be in the best position to achieve their goals and the parents/coaches to support those goals. Without having that “true north” set of principles athletes may be in danger of going off course.

Below are four fundamental principles of *More than an Athlete* that will help athletes set their course for success and parents/coaches to support the journey.

- 1. Person First. Every time:** James Blake said in his book, *Breaking Back*, “When we walk on the court, we walk on as a person. What’s inside effects what’s on the outside. It’s one and the same.” Think about watching the “Gladiators.” It’s not about the armor a gladiator wears, but the spirit and heart beneath the armor that determines the fight. Rafael Nadal summed this idea up well when he said: “Tennis is not who I am, It’s what I do.”
- 2. An athlete is Not Broken:** Performance blocks such as nerves, anxiety, slumps, and the yips are not the problem but symptoms of other challenges. Often the challenge is only this: we are focused on the end result, rather than the process. Once we can reframe our mindset, we can allow ourselves to hold both excitement and fear about the process. The athlete does not need to be fixed but rather helped back to the place they were at when they could perform fluidly.
- 3. The Fruits Are Always a Result of the Roots:** We tend to look at situations as isolated occurrences, but when a player chokes, it doesn’t happen out of the blue. There have been iterative incidents along the way that triggered the player’s nervous system. Our individual journeys lead us to unique performance, and every day we have an opportunity to learn from our experiences. Rather than compare our end result to others, we might understand that because everyone’s process is unique, the results will be unique as well. Appreciate the journey it took to arrive right where you are today.
- 4. Playing is a Privilege.** Inevitably fears, doubts, and nerves are going to be part of any competition. The idea is not to eliminate these emotions or hide from them, but to be able to experience them as part of the privilege of playing the game. Billie Jean King addressed this idea by titling her book “Pressure is a Privilege.” She understood that playing was a privilege and that if you are feeling pressure, that’s part of the privilege of being an athlete!

To summarize, these four principals are the building blocks to realizing you are “More Than an Athlete”. Being more than an athlete is the key to sustainable, long term success. Parents and coaches are in the driver’s seat to helping the athlete navigate the journey.

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!