

The Mental Game: 10 Myths that Need to be Busted!

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 top 10 myths parents, coaches and players should no longer believe.

Can you remember a time you played effortless tennis? The ball looked big as a grapefruit? Your mind was free of distracting thoughts, your body relaxed, and you seemingly floated from shot to shot?

Roger Federer in his book, "Quest for Perfection" described it this way "At the time... I was in the famous zone. Suddenly everything was running on automatic. I had the feeling that I couldn't do anything wrong."

The following are the top myths which as parents, coaches and players we have held fast to. The time is now to myth bust so we can help and coach our kids to concentrate on what's important and let go of what's not.

1. **Winning is ALL about Talent, Skills, and Technique:** It's clear these things are important to good performance, metaphorically they can be thought of as the armor a warrior wears. Without them the warrior would be at an extreme deficit when competing. However, these things are only half of the equation, half the warrior, not the whole warrior. What is crucial is what's behind the armor, the athlete's spirit, soul, story and inspirations. When an athlete can bring *who* they are to what they do in competition, magic happens. That combination can unlock the unlimited. It's the combination of the inside with the outside, not one or the other.
2. **Great players do it ALL themselves:** In individual sports it's so common to think that an athlete's success is 100 percent about them. Certainly, again the athlete is a key component. However, look at many recent grand slam winners from Novak Djokovic, Stan Warinka, and Serena Williams. They all have a box full of supporters and coaches. Each one is supporting the player in a different way. So if you want to stand taller, you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Pay tribute to those who have come before you, even meet with them to understand their journey. Then jump on their shoulders and reach higher!
3. **Work harder, succeed more.** Certainly this sounds like a logical equation. Growing up, it was a mantra. Now, I'm not disputing that hard work, resiliency, and determination are keys to the success equation. However, there is also a point where you work so hard (grind) that you metaphorically "strip the gears." Part of work is rest and rebooting the body and mind. This should not be an afterthought. The greatest players build "down-time" into the equation. This allows them to rejuvenate and deposit physical rest and mental recovery into their next performance. Djokovic spoke about how he took time off after his French open loss to rejuvenate and get his head right for Wimbledon. We all know he beat Roger at Wimbledon!
4. **Great Players have NO weakness.** When looking at the top professional players or even top seeds in a tournament, it's easy to put them on a pedestal and overlook their weaknesses. All players have weaknesses, the great ones are just better at hiding them and playing to their strengths. They know how to amplify their strengths. For example, Pete Sampras wasn't the best baseliner, but he covered that up with a huge serve. Even when he was pinned to the baseline, he often overplayed his backhand and baited his opponent to hit into the open court. The open court was his lethal running forehand. The key is to understand what game plan provides you the best chance to win, then strategizing, moving, and hitting those shots.
5. **Great players show NO emotion.** Yet another myth that couldn't be further from the truth! The great players do show emotion, however they are also exceptional at letting it go so it doesn't impact the next point. The key point here is being able to let go of the previous point and the emotions that go with it and begin the next point in a relaxed, aware and balanced place. This will

allow you to make the appropriate adjustments and/or adapt to what is happening in the present. This past Wimbledon, Djokovic was livid he gave up a 6-3 lead in the second set tiebreaker to Federer. After dressing himself down for everyone to see on TV, he recomposed himself and won the next two sets in a straightforward fashion. So remember, it's not the emotion that's bad, but what happens after it, does the player let it go? Remember when Murray cried after losing at Wimbledon, he then followed it up with a US Open and Olympic victory! That's what I call a good cry!

6. **Winning is supposed to be easy.** Nothing is further from the truth! How many times do you see a junior player walking on the court and expecting an easy match or not respecting their opponent? This puts them at a huge deficit before the competition even begins. They are not in the present but already far into the outcome and future. When the match gets tight or challenges present themselves, they are so surprised that they are not able to manage the adversity and have no resiliency to battle. However, if a competitor walks on the court respecting their opponent, and expects a hard match, when they get to the high pressure points they will not be surprised and just play like any other point. The moral: this game is hard, expect pressure, expect to be challenged, expect to have to make adjustments and expect that nothing is easy!
7. **Seeded players are always better than unseeded players.** If this was true there would be no reason to play a tournament. A player's seed simply shows their body of work in the past, it has nothing to do with what will happen in the present. Matches are won and lost on the court, not on the paper that seeds are printed on.
8. **Great players only focus on their goals.** This reminds me of my brother Mark's saying "focus on the path not the peak." Certainly it's important to know where you want to go, this piece provides purpose, inspiration and passion. However, once the goal is set, the focus needs to shift from the peak to the path. What are the specific steps that must occur in order to reach the peak? I often think of it like dominoes, in order to knock over the last domino, the one before that must fall. Essentially it starts with the first domino, once that falls, momentum is built, and it can be easier. Goals are never achieved simultaneously, rather they are a sequence of actions that happen one at a time until the last domino or outcome happens.
9. **If you lose, you weren't prepared enough.** Have you ever played in a tight match where you lost a heartbreaker? Certainly, if you didn't train then you could have prepared harder. However, assuming you trained hard, slept right, did your mental training and hydrated, the result cannot be blamed on lack of effort. Remember, winning and losing is not something a player can control. They can only control their effort, adjustments, and choices. There is an opponent that has at least 50% in the outcome. The key is to enter a match knowing you controlled what you could and then let go and play.
10. **Being nervous is bad and shows weakness.** Another myth that must be busted. Being nervous shows that you are alive, that you care, and that you are entering a competition, not knowing what will happen in the future. Being nervous is never a problem, it's how you respond to it. Many junior players enter competitions nervous and then get scared that they are nervous, this then leads to a downward spiral. Nervousness is ok, acknowledge it, accept it and shift your focus to what you need to do next in the match.

Whether you're a player, coach or parent the above myths need to be busted! They are erroneous thoughts that can weigh you down and hurt your performance. I highly encourage you to reframe and BUST these myths to set the stage so you can play your best, unlock your unlimited, and be more than an athlete!

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!