

The Mental Game: 5 Ways to Help Your Child Play Their Best

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 teaches 5 Ways to Help Your Child Play Their Best.

"Play Proud" The words sound genius in their simplicity. Tiki Barber, former great NY Giants running back, shared some invaluable advice when asked on the Today Show in 2007 what his mother told him before he stepped onto the field each Sunday.

Although you may be asking what this has to do with you, the tennis parent, there is much to learn from Mrs. Barber's words of wisdom. Entering a match, your child may be feeling any number of emotions, pressures, and expectations. Mrs. Barber understood that in order for Tiki to play at his highest level, he needed to feel relaxed, focused on what he could control, and empowered. By saying "Play proud," she implied that she trusted him and his process, and as a result the winning and losing would fall into place.

As parents of competitive juniors, one of your roles is to help your child stay relaxed in the days leading up to a match. By giving your child this gift, they will be able to let go, play free, and allow the results to take care of themselves. On the contrary, comments such as "What ranking is he/she?" 'How many points will you get if you win?' 'You have an easy draw!' 'This is an important match! You need to do well!' 'This is an expensive tournament!' and 'I think you should be able to win!' are surefire ways to short-circuit the process. You want to avoid comments that take your child away from the present and things they cannot control, such as expectations and results. Rather focus them on what they can control ie preparation, doing their best, adapting/adjusting and 'playing proud.' The following are a few ways to help your child play their best prior to tournament matches:

Enjoy the Journey: Take the focus off the results and onto the process. The goal of any player at any level should be to play their best, give a full effort, execute a strategy, compete, and adapt/adjust to the situation at hand. No matter the result, there will be learning, adjustments and improvements to make for the next practice and match. Interestingly, in martial arts, they don't differentiate between matches and practice. It's all called practice. There is an implicit understanding of the process and matches are an environment where players can continually learn, grow, and improve, rather than serving as "judgment day."

Relax and Enjoy: Remember, the match is about your child, and is an opportunity to learn for future matches. If you are relaxed and simply enjoy watching your child compete, they too will "feel" this and have a better chance of being relaxed on court. You would be amazed at what they feel from you, whether 6 courts away or through a window to an indoor center. Your body language and actions/reactions to what is happening on court can have a big impact both in a positive way, or as a hindrance.

Information Overload: This is a common mistake parents (and even coaches) make prior to a match. Offering too much information/advice confuses a player. The focus should be on one or two things. If you have a coaching idea, discuss it the evening prior, or better yet a few days earlier. This way your child can integrate the ideas into their practice sessions. Ideally, communicate the ideas with the coach and let him/her bring it up within the context of the child's training. Filling the nervous or eager young player with information moments before stepping on the court is more likely to register in overload than success. Remember, a match is the time for your child to get centered and take in motivational and inspirational advice. Billie Jean King once sent a text to Maria Sharapova as an inspirational quote prior to her Wimbledon final. The text read "Champions adjust, pressure is a privilege!" Maria won the title.

Silence is Golden: Silence, and even grumpiness, is usually a sign of the player being nervous, trying to keep things within their control, and processing through the upcoming match. While they know they don't have ultimate control on the court, and they are soon to be putting themselves on the line, their emotions are a way of controlling their current situation. Don't take it personally - it's not a lack of commitment from them, or a lack of wanting to share with you. It's part of their process. Paradoxically, when they feel they have space, they may open up more.

Unconditional Support: Just before the match, you might let them know how proud you are of them. Maybe tell them something that is not tennis specific, but about how you admire their character to compete, or as Billie Jean King did, you may reference an inspirational idea or quote. These positive, non-tennis specific words will go a long way toward motivation in what may be a tough match, without adding needless pressure. The idea is ultimately to help them remember their training, and trust their game.

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!