

The Mental Game: More Than an Athlete: 7 Biggest Fears That Take You Out of The Zone

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 seven of the biggest fears that take us out of the zone and how just by identifying your fear, you can begin to move through it.

How many times have you heard kids cajole each other and say these two words, “bring it!”? The problem is that no one really knows what that “it” is! Whether you’re a parent, coach or player it’s actually worth knowing, so let me explain. Ultimately your “it” will be the key to sustained peak performance.

Bring it! Means to bring your whole self, it’s really another way of saying “more than an athlete.” When we watch tennis or any sporting event, it’s clear what’s on the athlete’s outside: their talent, technique, and skills. But bringing your *whole* self means to bring what’s on the inside, too: spirit, inspirations, and story. By bringing your whole self, you are bringing your “it,” you are bringing your “more.” Think about Rafa. He brings his deep determination and grit. Serena brings her feisty spirit and never-say-die attitude. At the French Open, Jack Sock talked about bringing the inspiration of his brother’s bravery in the face of illness. All these players are bringing their “it.” This “it” is what people can’t see, but this “it” is what drives and motivates the performer. This “it” is the athletes X factor.

In an ideal world everyone would be loose and relaxed enough to bring their whole self to the court and play inside the zone. But what gets in the way of bringing “it” to the court? Our fears. Every day experiences can throw us off balance when we least expect it. They can be emotional, physical, or both. We often say “everything is fine,” but carry the stress around from one activity to the next. Simulating dominos, the stress picks up steam.

Then, when the nervous system is overwhelmed, we feel blocked. We can no longer bring “it” to the court because we are dealing with excess nervousness, anxiety, chokes, and tightness. One of my clients described it as *“the body shuts down. It’s overwhelmed and says no more. The body knows and recognizes this internal state of extreme chaos (push pull), before your head and heart do.”*

So, how do you get back “home?” To bringing your whole self to the court? Your biggest tool is to be able to recognize, identify, and understand your fears. Below, I’ve listed seven of the biggest fears that take us out of the zone. When you are feeling blocked, you can come to this list, and just by identifying your fear, you can begin to move through it.

1. **Fear of Not Being Good Enough:** This fear rears its head all the time, both on and off the court; in fact just thinking about it may trigger an “ah-ha” moment. We all want to believe in ourselves and feel that we have the ability and intelligence to be successful, and anything short of that can be disheartening. In match play, players sometimes get discouraged and begin to fear that they are not good enough to compete with an opponent; they then lose their will and compete less than 100%. Sometimes in life and tennis setbacks may seem like validation of not being good enough – that we lacked what it takes to achieve. However, while we may have setbacks, what really determines our strength is how we respond to them.
2. **Fear of Failure:** This fear usually rears its head during a close match, especially when a player is perceived as being better than their opponent. The seemingly lesser player plays without expectations, but the favored player seems to be playing with a weight around their neck. The favored player is afraid to fail because they tie their identity and self-worth to their performance. Additionally, they may be afraid of what others will think and the subsequent reaction if they perform below expectations. Often-times when a player is afraid to experiment, afraid to try new techniques, or afraid to take a risk, their fear of failure is the cause.

3. **Fear of the Unknown:** This fear often rears its head in preparation for a big match. The player can't possibly know for sure whether they will win or lose. This "fear of the unknown" creates a high level of anxiety about what's going to happen, and then "if that happens" what "will happen" after that. Along with this is the fear of not being in control. This can be seen when a player is on the defensive. This player may over-hit, perhaps attempting a low percentage winner, because they are so uncomfortable with their opponent dictating the point. However, being aware of their defensive positioning and accepting the situation will allow them to play in the present and play solid defense, eventually working their way back to neutral or the offensive.
4. **Fear of Being Judged:** This often comes up when a player is thinking about what their parents, coach, friends, or teammates are thinking as they are playing. The simple act of this thought takes the player away from their present situation on the court, towards something they can't control off the court. It is here that unconditional acceptance from the support system is so important. When such support is provided, the player can feel calm, relaxed and safe. Thus, the player can play free without any worry of the results.
5. **Fear of Not Meeting Expectations:** This is similar to the fear of being judged, in that the player cannot control what someone else expects. Often parents, coaches and friends' expectations are a moving target in which only wins and losses are taken into account, and the process (their journey) is completely dismissed. For a player to play their best they must be in the present and focus directly on the experience. Focusing on expectations creates a mental distraction, not to mention enhanced feelings of pressure on the court.
6. **Fear of Success:** This fear manifests itself when a player has a lead and then begins to think things like "I shouldn't be beating this person, they are ranked higher than me." Or this player may not view him or herself at a certain level and therefore does not feel deserving of a victory. Other times, the uncertainty and subsequent anxiousness of putting themselves on the line for a possible victory is too much to handle. The certainty of losing, while disappointing, is well known and a familiar road already traveled.
7. **Fear of Injury or re-Injury:** This fear is referred to as the "silent epidemic". It is often driven by our macho sports culture's unwillingness to deal with the emotional stress and trauma-like experiences that may result from injuries. Specifically neglected is the athlete's uncertainty about recovery, alienation from the team, fear of not being able to return at full strength, and even anxiety about what might happen should the situation recur. It's important to note, while the athlete may be cleared physically by doctors, emotionally they still may not have processed through the fear. Anyone that has experienced an injury understands how psychologically the injury doesn't just disappear when the doctor says you're cleared.

In today's sporting society, exhibiting any sign of weakness or fear is difficult for a player. Society views vulnerability as weakness, whereas in reality, awareness of vulnerability equates to true strength. It is from this platform of awareness that change and improvement are best triggered. Fears like the seven mentioned above crop up all the time, especially in pressure situations. They are a defense mechanism to prevent us from trying something which may make us uncomfortable. Yet recognizing such fears and having the courage and support system (parents, coaches, friends) to work through them is what truly enables us to grow and reach our individual sustained peak potential.

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!