

The Mental Game: Fight, Flight, FREEZE!

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 can hold an athlete back from achieving their potential unlimited performance.

How many times have you seen your child crash in a match? All of a sudden, something happens and they look like a deer in the headlights! Maybe you're even thinking... "If only he played to his potential" ... "If only she could play matches like she plays in practice" ... "If only he wouldn't get tight during crucial points" ... "If only she would just let herself go and play" ... "He is so much better than this, but" and so on and so forth. We all know the mental side of tennis is huge, "it's the glue that holds everything together."

The game is made up of four parts: technical, strategic, physical and mental. One of these parts without the others is essentially worthless. You can think of it like a car. The technical part is the body – a stable foundation, streamlined to make the car travel smoothly. The strategic part is the steering wheel – able to travel in the desired direction, or change course whenever necessary. The physical part is the gas – physical preparation and stamina, the component ensuring that the car has the juice to complete the journey. The mental part is the engine – the most essential component, the force that starts the car and makes it run. When all of the above are working smoothly together, our tennis game runs like a brand new sports car, with high performance and no worries. Yet when one of the components goes, the whole machine cannot function properly.

Knowing all this, the key question becomes, what gets in the way of a player performing well in pressure situations? More often than not, it is a result of fears which block the path towards potential unlimited performance. Often-times the player is aware of these fears but does not accept them, creating an internal struggle. Other times the fears may be just below their conscious thought patterns, and in this case it becomes necessary to delve a bit deeper into what is actually behind the fears. In either case, the first step towards change is developing awareness of what is going on. Following are seven of the biggest fears that can hold an athlete back from achieving their potential unlimited performance.

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.

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 into 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.

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.

Fear of Being Judged: This often comes up when a player is thinking about what their parents, coach, or teammates are thinking as they are playing. The simple act of this curiosity takes the player away from their present situation on the court, towards something that they can't control off the court. It is here that unconditional acceptance from the support team 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.

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.

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.

Fear of Injury or re-Injury: This fear is referred to as the "silent epidemic" by sport psychologist Dr. David Grand. 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 to work through them is what truly enables us to grow and reach our individual 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!