

The Mental Game: Key Mindsets of a Championship Team - Players, Parents and Coaches

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 explores key mindsets of players, parents and coaches as juniors develop.

Think back to the last grand slam final you saw...the winner and runner-up always raise the microphone and shout out to their team thanking them for their unwavering support. In order for any athlete to reach the highest level of performance there are a set of underlying principals which must serve as a guide for the team (athletes, parents, and coaches) during the journey. Metaphorically, these principals act as the rudder which helps the player, parents and coaches stay on course.

While we all know that while hard work is imperative for success. Many of us are familiar with the adage that in order to master a task, you must put 10,000 hours into the task. While this idea has been debated by many, one thing has not. The training needs to be directed and purposeful. In fact, we can think of things this way...building the technical, strategic and physical skill sets is much like building a sturdy foundation for a house, one floor at a time, each resting on the previous skill.

To understand the mental component, lets use a sailboat as an analogy. It is obvious for everyone to see the sail of the boat when it's gracefully moving on the water; similarly we see the graceful physicality of a player. However, far less obvious but of equal or more importance is the rudder. The rudder determines what direction the boat travels. If it is not pointing in the right direction the boat will veer off course. However, because the rudder is below the surface, it often goes unnoticed. However, this all important rudder is the metaphorical equivalent of the mind-set, beliefs and assumptions of the player, coaches and parents. Without the rudder pointing in the right direction, a boat cannot reach its destination. Similarly, the same goes for a player and their team.

So what's a key mindset for the player, parent and coach to embrace in order to create a champion? The remainder of this article will identify 3 key mind-sets which are imperative in developing a player that embraces competition, thrives under adversity, and ultimately puts themselves in position to rise to the higher rankings and reach their personal peak potential in their sport.

Players- Focus on competing vs. winning: Junior players are too caught up in winning! Yes, I understand this is the goal, but it should be known that winning is a consequence of taking disciplined purposeful action over time. The key question which must be asked is ***what does it take to win?*** This question presupposes there is a process to winning and encourages the player to identify these actions and attributes such as preparation, discipline, effort, focus on things within the players control etc. Winning is not something which a player can directly control, but they can control their process towards this outcome goal.

Juniors need to change their singular focus to the process and get comfortable with the word, *competiology*, that is, the art of competing. We all know that the player that *competes* better is usually the player that wins. Attributes of what it means to compete include: maintaining high energy, a positive attitude, bouncing back from adversity, adjusting and adapting to match situations, staying in the present moment, taking nothing for granted, beginning each point in a centered calm place, accepting yourself and your process, and giving an all-out effort. All of these attributes are within the control of any player at any level and are necessary steps to succeed in life and win on the court.

Parents- Focus on the process vs. the outcome: Parents are often caught up in the outcome, worrying about what a loss means to their child's ability to play at a high level years down the road. This thinking places the focus away from the step-by-step progression and inevitably takes the child's mindset away from the present and focuses them on the future. Additionally, and more destructive, the focus becomes the parental expectations. One of my clients once said to me, "When I'm on the court, I think about what my Dad is thinking." Clearly this is not where the athlete's mind should be during the match.

Parents need to be patient with the process, and understand there are no such things as bad losses unless no one learns from it. All competitive experiences are learning opportunities and practice for the next match. The goal of any junior player is to continue making progress, and losses hold answers for improvement that lead to future victories. A keen eye must be focused on how a player is using their strategy, how they are making adjustments to obstacles, how they are letting go of the past, how they are refocusing, and how they are competing to the best of their ability. When these things are happening, improvement, rankings and rewards will follow as a result.

Coaches- Focus on the Person, not the Athlete: Many coaches and academies often have pre-conceived notions of what a player should look and play like as they progress to certain stages. This takes the emphasis off the person and their unique qualities (i.e. Naldal-fire, Federer-calm, Ferrer-patience, Santoro-creativity). The key is identifying these intangibles and building on them as a strength. Recognizing that each players journey is going to be unique to the player. In my private practice, athletes all the time express to me that they wish people would "get them," to understand "what they are going through" and to appreciate and respect their journey as a person and not just a player. Embracing this mindset is a far quicker launching pad to success than trying to mold a player towards some sort of preconceived model.

As a coach, a key facet toward reaching peak performance is realizing how to tap into their players unique personal skills, attributes, and motivations. Truly understanding the person and what their story and story behind the story is, will lead to increased trust and loyalty. This will ultimately serve as a launching pad to unleashing the player within. Preliminary questions to ask your player may include: What's your big Why for playing? What motivates you? What do you like and dislike about the game? What are your goals? What did it take to get to this point (obstacles and success)? How do you deal with adversity? What's something about yourself that doesn't make you better or worse than others...but makes you individually who you are? Understanding these answers will better enable you to understand where your player currently is, and how to motivate them going forward. Additionally, the player will feel you "understand" them as a person and give a full effort from the inside out.

In summary, in all performance-related endeavors, we need to understand that the performer starts off as a person. When a player walks through the court gates, they bring the same strengths, weaknesses, confidence and insecurities that they feel off the court. The job of the player is to focus on what they can control, that is competing not winning. Paradoxically, this focus will provide the best chance to win. The job of a parent is to support their process, and understand to reach the goal the player will have a unique journey. Obstacles, setbacks and failure must be viewed as part of the process, and something to learn from. The job of a coach is to recognize their player as a "person first", and strive to bring out their unique qualities, which make them and their game unique and different. Not comparing them to what they think a champion is. Champions come in all shapes and sizes, just look at McEnroe, Lendl, Sampras, Agassi, Becker, Nadal and Federer. Who's to say your child can't be next?

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!