

The Mental Game: The Game Inside the Game

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 five essential licenses that will help athletes feel more at ease with themselves as an athlete *and* as a person.

In last month's article, we discussed the secret to sustained peak performance, a principal called *More than an Athlete: Person first. Everytime*. We also clarified that *More than an Athlete* doesn't require working harder, pushing or even pulling, it does require that the athlete, coach and parent shift his or her perspective so s/he can see the performance through a wider lens which includes the whole person, not just the athlete.

More than an Athlete gives the athlete five essential licenses that will help them feel more at ease with themselves as an athlete *and* as a person. Once they embrace this perspective, the performance becomes more authentic, the game becomes easier, and result shifts exponentially for the better. Certainly from a parent or coaches perspective this is the goal! These license's are:

1. **License to just be yourself:** When we start with you, the person, rather than just the athlete, we take the time to understand what it is that makes you who you are. We look at your attributes, experiences, and values that are the building blocks to your inner game. We look at your "more": the inner fuel that drives you and doesn't let you quit. Once you identify these qualities, you are able to bring your authentic self, spirit and story onto the court, and these characteristics will differentiate you from other players. Furthermore, you will feel encouraged and free, valued for being your authentic self (your "more") rather than trying to be someone you're not. Imagine Federer trying to be Nadal? It wouldn't work!
2. **License to let go:** When you recognize you are more than an athlete, you realize the game isn't "who you are" but "what you do." Once you realize this essential fact, you are less apt to tie your self-worth and self-esteem to your results as an athlete. You won't readily allow others' attitudes about the results to impact you. The process of letting go allows the athlete to unwind and refocus on what they can control without getting distracted by outside noise.
3. **License to see the entire picture:** Most training is focused on technique, talent, and skills, with little consideration to the mental game. However, in order for technique, talent and skill to fall into place, the entire picture must be seen, including the mental component. When you have the license to look at the entire picture, rather than just the game, you can view underlying issues which may have previously held you back. Experiences such as a bad day in school, argument with significant other, trying to live up to expectations can get in the way of performance. It may be as complicated as an injury, personal trauma, or past failures. Through the big picture lens, the whole story can be is taken into account, not just the "missed shot" that is mistakenly seen as bad technique when an underlying stress is really tightening the body so the technique can't happen. In Andrew Friedman's book, *Breaking Back*, which chronicles former top 10 USA tennis player, James Blake, he quotes Blake as saying, "If there is something wrong in your life, it'll show up in your tennis game- not always in predictable ways, but in ways that are logical: self belief might be manifested in weak second serves, impatience can cause you to make low percentage gambles, and so on."

4. **License not to be perfect:** We all know that being perfect is impossible. Imagine if we stopped trying for perfection and just tried to do our best? When we know we are *More Than an Athlete*, we understand we are human and therefore imperfect. The expectations of trying to be a super hero is no longer realistic. Now we can focus on one thing at a time: our process, our choices, how we adapt, and what we can control vs. what we cannot. Trying to be perfect is impossible, with this impossibility comes frustration, and frustration can be extremely detrimental to your game.
5. **License to be more and do less:** Pushing and pulling isn't the only option. Letting go, taking a step back to recharge and reboot are all also options. Metaphorically it may feel similar to stepping out of your house in the morning and not being able to see 10 feet in front because of a dense layer of fog. Then you return to the house. Twenty minutes later you go back outside to see that the fog has cleared. Only from this perspective of clarity are you able to take the next step. The mind works similarly. So often, it's not about "doing more," learning another technique, or getting the next great piece of equipment. Rather, it's about giving yourself a little time and space so you can see clearly. Sometimes, you have to step back to move forward.

With these five licenses comes a clearer more relaxed perspective in which the player can adapt and adjust to what is happening during competition. From this place the athlete will be freer to let go of what they cannot control, focus on what they can control, and consistently play their best. Stay tuned for part three in May!

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!