

The Mental Game: The Secret to Peak Performance

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 why it is so important to see her/him as more than an athlete: person first and athlete second.

What's the secret to sustained peak performance? Lets face it... this is the million dollar question! Federer, Sharapova, Isner, and all competitors are trying to solve the mystery.

In some ways it's a paradox, it doesn't require working harder, pushing, or even pulling. It does require that the athlete "let go" and "*be themselves*" so they are able to play from a grounded place inside *their* zone. From this state, they will have the capacity and resilience to deal with challenges and adversity and be able to navigate pressure situations from a clear perspective.

Imagine a time when you watched a player get nervous and seemingly freeze in competition. You know that "dear in the headlights" /look?" It can be confusing to understand how this comes about. Especially when the athlete (maybe it's your child?) has performed the shot hundreds of times in practice. Many of us have experienced this situation when we compete. We know and even *feel* there is an opposing force, getting in the way of us reaching the next level.

Usually what's holding the athlete back is NOT what's on the outside. It's not the part that everyone can see: the athlete's talents, skills and technique. These can always be improved. But hitting 1000 extra forehands won't make a difference if the anxiety the athlete is holding inside makes him/her tight.

The key is to look at the whole person not just the athlete. What's going on below the surface? The block might be related to confidence, bad test results, an argument with a friend, fear of an injury reoccurring, or a combination of things. Whether it's a single issue or an accumulation of issues, carrying an anxiety overwhelm into competition will affect performance every time! Athletes are not robots, what's on the inside affects how we play on the outside.

As coaches, parents and even players, looking at the entire picture, understanding what the person is experiencing below the surface and what may be triggering seemingly avoidable mistakes is the best way to help the athlete. This means looking through the lens of the *athlete as a person first and athlete second*.

From the *person first, athlete second* perspective, it's clear that playing tight, performance blocks, and choking is symptomatic of whatever the athlete is consciously or unconsciously holding. It's interesting to note, this overwhelm-- otherwise known as a "freeze" response-- is actually an instinctual defensive reaction that is normal and employed by animals in the wild and humans for self-preservation. However, in the sports arena it isn't helpful.

When an athlete competes, their unique story, distinctive spirit, and authentic self are what makes them who they are and where their resilience, determination and unique style come from. We are all unique. The key is tapping into this uniqueness not assimilating to a one-size-fits-all mentality. Greatness at any level starts with the person, and then transcends through the performance.

So what happens if an athlete does not understand the synergy between him/herself as an athlete and the person within the athlete? Usually it's a fast track to burnout. Certainly they will never reach peak performance pushing and pulling so hard they neglect their innate talents. Similarly, if the coach does not understand the synergy, they will be unable to connect with the player. The player will not trust the coach because they know the coach doesn't care about them as a person, but only the sport. If the parents don't understand the synergy, they will unknowingly put heavy pressure on their child. The child will feel

burdened and understand the only way to connect or get their parents approval is to play and succeed more. Clearly this is an impossible uncontrollable situation for a child and leads to bad performance.

It is so important and essential to your child's long term success both on and off the court to see her/him as more than an athlete person first and athlete second. This idea is so intuitive, simple, and a clear way to guide and strive for the best results.

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!