

The **USTA** Newsletter for Tennis Coaches

High-Performance Coaching

An Integrated Approach to Mental Skills Training

by Paul Lubbers, Ph.D.

The field of sport psychology has contributed to the improvement of tennis coaching and playing at all levels of the game. At the higher levels of tennis competition, when physical skills and tactics of players are more comparable, psychological skills take on even greater importance. However, despite widespread agreement regarding the importance of psychological factors such as intensity, confidence and concentration to successful tennis play, coaches often fail to make mental skills training part of the daily practice schedule. There are many reasons for this, including lack of knowledge, misconceptions about mental skills, perceived lack of time and personal coaching habits. However, mental skills should not be treated casually. Rather, just as technique, tactics and physical skills are addressed on a daily basis, mental skills training needs to be integrated into the training schedule and practiced on a regular basis.

What Are Mental Skills?

Mental skills are internal capabilities that help athletes control their minds efficiently and consistently as they execute sport-related goals. Mental skills training provides the methods and techniques to not only develop skills such as concentration and positive body language, but also to foster personal characteristics such as self-esteem and positive competitive skills and behaviors.

Mental skills techniques help athletes adjust their actions, thoughts, feelings and physical sensations in order to improve their games. Mental skills techniques do this by helping the player to:

- Develop self-confidence
- Set goals and create a positive long-term vision
- Use imagery and visualization to work on competitive skills
- Focus concentration and attention
- Deal with adversity
- Improve error management
- Develop a positive approach to competition
- Create on-court routines

Off-Court Issues

The use of sport psychology may extend far beyond mental skills training. For example, problems related to growth and development issues, academic stress, strained relationships, time management, family conflicts and financial concerns affect everyone at one time or another. These issues may easily compromise a young player's tennis performance. When such problems

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arise, it is important to establish open lines of communication, discuss the problems with your players and parents and seek professional assistance when needed. It is important to remember that as coaches we are called upon not only to guide our athletes as competitors, but also to help them develop positive personal life skills.

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Mental Skills Training

Factors That Influence Mental Skills Training

Mental skills training for tennis does not occur in isolation, but rather takes place in a dynamic environment that is influenced by the core beliefs and values of coaches, players and parents. A brief discussion of four influential factors follows.

Philosophy of Coaching

A strong philosophy of coaching lies at the core of every great coach. It consists of principles and beliefs that guide actions and decision making in dealing with players. A philosophy is not acquired from any one source, but rather from a compilation of experiences. These beliefs about life, coaching and sports guide and impact us as we coach, teach and motivate our athletes both on and off the court. It is difficult to discuss mental skills training effectively without a clear understanding of one's philosophy of coaching and how it impacts implementation.

Coaches must apply their philosophy of coaching within the context of three broad perspectives: *coaching to help athletes develop physically, psychologically and socially; coaching to have fun; and coaching to win*. These three converging perspectives are complex and unique to each person. In addressing these three areas, expert coaches integrate their knowledge with experience to bring out the best in their athletes.

Love of the Game

At the cornerstone of tennis development lies a common thread, which perhaps stands out as the most important ingredient to success. This is the development and maintenance of a love and joy for the game (Bloom, 1985, and Saviano, 2001). Research shows that athletes who develop a deep love for a sport and are not pushed into serious and heavy competitive environments too early have the proper basis to excel later in their careers (Gibbons, 1998). A player's love of tennis must be consistently nurtured within the framework of mental training.

Role of the Family

The family is a very important part of the support team for a developing player. In today's game, the role of family members varies tremendously from that of active on-court coach to that of supportive sideline spectator. The evidence is quite clear that for a young player to have a healthy approach to competition and training, a parent or significant individual must help create an environment that is both supportive and conducive to excellence.

Planning Skills

"Success is peace of mind, which is the direct result of the self-satisfaction in knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming." —John Wooden

Success is the direct result of doing one's best. However, in addition to this obvious fact, having a vision and a plan can bring life to an athlete's hard work and commitment.

A plan can be seen as a basic psychological process in which a person visualizes the future and develops a framework to guide action in order to achieve this future. The assumption then is that planning affects in some systematic way the manner in which coaches interact with their players. Martens (1997) brings this point home by stating: "Failing to plan is planning for failure. Regardless of the competitive level at which you coach, you need an instructional plan. Without a plan you will not know where you are going and thus end up where you do not want to be."

A developmental plan is one way to bring structure and life to a player's quest for success (Saviano, 2000). This plan is a blueprint for the long-term development of a player that provides focus and clarity to the coach and the athlete on what needs to be addressed and how it is to be accomplished. A developmental plan should include the following:

- A long-term, comprehensive vision of the type of player the athlete wants to become (style of play, weapons, conduct, physical conditioning, etc.)
- The strategies and patterns that need to be mastered and the weapons that need to be developed
- The training needed to make sound basic tactical adjustments and good shot selection
- The techniques to be developed
- The emotional/psychological approach the player will take to competition
- Scheduling and periodization
- Physical development
- Goal setting

Evaluation of Mental Skills

One benefit of a mental skills training program is that it enhances performance on the court. Winning is one of the objectives in tennis, and winning requires consistent performance at a high level. One way to better ensure consistent performance is to individualize the mental skills training program to the athlete. Individualizing a mental skills training program can be accomplished by evaluating an athlete's mental skills set within the framework developed by Gould (2001). According to Gould, some of the areas that coaches need to analyze and evaluate include:

- Goal setting
- Personal motivation
- Practice intensity
- Imagery skills
- Error management
- Positive self-talk
- Positive body language
- Confidence and composure
- Concentration
- Routines
- Stress management and arousal control
- Sportsmanship
- Pre-match preparation
- Competitive skills

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Mental Skills Training

This analysis and evaluation of a player's mental skills set can prove to be difficult due to the many variables that affect on-court performance. For example, Loehr (2001) states that it is important to note that emotional problems during match play can just as readily be caused by physical deficiencies as by emotional ones. Lack of physical recovery due to inadequate sleep, rest, nutrition or hydration can completely derail a player's ability to summon the right emotions at the right time. This is particularly evident in player breakdowns. Just as poor fitness can lead to mental and emotional problems, excessive anger, frustration or nerves can undermine both mental focus and biomechanical efficiency. Due to these many factors, coaches should take great care when identifying and evaluating a player's mental capacities and be aware of the integrated nature of performance.

Implementation of a Mental Training Program

The 18-and-under high-performance competitor should have tactical understanding of his or her key patterns of play and game style. In addition, at this age, players should be technically sound and possess a wide array of strokes and shots. However, what is often lacking in their program at this stage of development is a well-developed daily practice and competitive mental skills training program.

Coaches need to be aware of the importance of creating an environment where there is purpose to daily practice. Players need to understand the link between quality training and peak performance—that is, not just to train, but to train with intentionality and purpose. A culture of excellence must be communicated to the athlete where quality training is rewarded.

Conclusion

In coaching young players, coaches need to apply science-based content knowledge as well as practical experiential knowledge to address the many factors that are at work. This is in essence

both the art and science of coaching.

The process of implementing a Mental Skills Training Program requires a personal understanding of both who you are as a coach and who your players are as young people. This provides a starting point for both coach and athlete in the quest to learn, develop and strive for excellence. Acquiring positive mental skills is important for all players, regardless of level or age of development. However, for younger players, it is of utmost importance in order to establish a base of fundamentals related to daily practice and competitive skills that will serve as a springboard for continued growth as healthy competitors.

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