



# Psychological implications of 'expecting the ball back'

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## ABSTRACT

*Mental toughness is widely accepted as the main aspect that makes the difference at the professional level. Hence it is becoming increasingly important that the coaches integrate psychological training in their day-to-day training program. This article discusses how a simple instruction of 'Expecting the ball back' that is commonly used, can have far reaching psychological benefits, if used with the right understanding.*

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## INTRODUCTION

When coaches instruct a player to 'expect the ball back', they do so with the intention of ensuring that the player is ready to play the next ball and is therefore not surprised or out of position when the opponent does retrieve the ball. Too often this is seen as the only apparent benefit, but if we analyse a little further, we find that there are several other far reaching psychological implications involved and it in fact results in making the player very tough mentally, if ingrained in a player so it becomes a habit. A lack of mental skill training in players can restrict a player's development and prevent them from fulfilling their potential, Eraña (2004) states that coaches tend to be preoccupied with technical development when technical and mental skill development can go hand in hand if coaches are a little more imaginative. A simple mental process of expecting an opponent to retrieve every shot will improve a tennis player's focus and eradicate frustrating mistakes or poor decision making.

### Setting up the scene

Let us focus on a typical situation in a match and analyse the psychological implications of 'expecting the ball back' from this (following) situation. For better understanding try to visualise the following scenario:

*"Player A has done all the hard work and has forced a short ball from the opponent that can be put away with a forehand (FH) into the open court. Just before executing the forehand, player A becomes aware that his/her opponent guessed where he/she is going to play the forehand and starts to move early in that direction.*

### Analysis and options in the situation

In this situation, two very different thought processes can determine the outcome of the execution of the FH by player A.

In the first thought process, if player A thinks about hitting a winner and does not want the player B to retrieve the ball back:

- 1.They might try to change the decision, in the last moment, and hit it behind the opponent, which would probably end up as a badly executed shot. As stated by Weinberg (1988) one of the fatal mistakes you can make is attempting to change your mind on the type or placement of your shot at the last moment.
- 2.Since the goal is to ensure that the opponent does not reach the ball, in an attempt to hit the ball away from the opponent, they could pull it out wide to achieve this goal.

However, if in the same situation, player A has no problem with player B retrieving the ball back and hence, expects the ball back:

1. The player will stick to their decision and continue to execute the FH into the open court
2. They will fully focus on the execution since he/she will not be perturbed by his/her opponent reaching the ball and therefore will not be distracted by the opponent's early movement towards the ball.

## DISCUSSION

**The psychological implications of expecting the ball back:**

- 1.Concentration - Staying in the present: The thought of expecting the ball to come back ensures that the player stays in the present while executing the shot. The focus remains on the execution of the stroke and does not shift to the outcome of the point, as will be the case if they do not want the ball to come back. In all likelihood given the position of the player in the point by committing to the first decision even though the opponent has guessed correctly, the player is still likely to be dictating the play.
- 2.Confidence - Avoiding negative thoughts: When the player is expecting the ball back, it is already a positive thought since they are expecting their shot to fall in (only then the ball will come back). Furthermore by expecting the ball to come back into play they are looking for further opportunity to win the point positively, rather than pinning his or hopes on their opponent not reaching the ball or missing the court. The notion of wishing or hoping for your opponent to make a mistake can induce negative, apprehensive feelings and added tension during competition which in turn can develop a fear of failure in a player. Weinberg describes a fear of failure as a tennis player playing not to lose instead of playing to win (Weinberg, 1988).
- 3.Process orientation: It is also clear that this ensures the player is process oriented and not outcome oriented during play.
- 4.Control of emotions - Reduces anxiety: Most of the time mistakes happen in put away situations, due to the anxiety that it causes, which results in the player looking up too early to see if the ball is falling in/out, or if it is a winner/opponent reaching the ball, thereby affecting the balance and the timing of the stroke. When a player expects the ball back, anxiety reduces and helps them relax through the entirety of the execution of the shot.

5. Right attribution and awareness: Since the player is focused on the execution, the awareness is very high, of why a particular shot was good or not. This allows the right attribution for the success or the failure and thereby helps them reinforce the right execution, or to understand what was wrong and correct it so when faced with a similar situation in the future the player is aware of what needs to be done to improve.



#### APPLICATION

The ability to stay focused on the execution by expecting the ball back and not be distracted by the fear of the opponent retrieving the ball can be trained on and off the court. This skill can be developed on court, by ensuring that the player is recovering to the next tactical court position immediately, after the execution of every shot, including an easy put away.

Off court, visualisation techniques can be used to help the player develop this desired thought process.

Being ingrained with the ability to visualise can have a positive aspect on additional psychological affects in tennis to those being primarily targeted.

Visualisation can be done internally and externally. Internal visualisation is recommended for use in recreating tactical or more open situations, while visualising externally is preferable for honing technical or more controlled and simple tasks (Weinberg and Gould, 1995). Imagery or visualisation is a key aspect of mental training that if utilised can result in significant reward for a player. Visualisation is the process whereby internal images that are produced consciously and believed to reduce anxiety, decrease errors, heighten anticipation, coordination, concentration and enhance self- confidence (Crespo et al, 2007). By recalling prior situations during competition where a player has regretted a particular decision, in this case not expecting a ball to come back, the player can then learn from that mistake and visualise executing that point in the desired fashion. Therefore when faced with a similar circumstance in the future the player, having rehearsed the point several times in their head previously, will eliminate the opportunity for indecision, 'positive imagery can prevent issues such as lack of commitment and confused shot selection' (Williams et al, 2000).

An off court practice for visualisation and imagery outlined by Crespo et al (2007) includes these points:

- 1-Learn to relax.
- 2-Divide the movement into sequences.
- 3-Visualise a static object.
- 4-Visualise a moving object.
- 5-Visualise a player moving.
- 6-Visualisation directed by other person.
- 7-Visualise with words of the player.
- 8-Visualise before the match.
- 9-Visualise during the match.

By introducing this progressive and systematic process for developing visualisation in a player, qualities such as expecting the ball back can be greatly improved. By visualising an

opponent retrieving a ball back and also visualising the next shot, a player, by being expectant and mentally prepared for that instance stands a greater chance of correct execution.

By integrating visualisation into a player's armoury research has clearly demonstrated its many benefits: levelling emotions, enhancing confidence and facilitating technique modification and tactical training (Noel, 1980).

#### CONCLUSION

Therefore, with a simple thought process several aspects of psychology in tennis are covered. This thought process could be easily trained and developed by a player and their coach during practice both on and off the court while also being included into a player's preparation for match play.

All of us understand the importance of integrating psychological training along with all the other aspects of training on court. It will be of great benefit to the players if we can achieve this goal with such simple and easy to understand instructions.

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