

Mindfulness: Applications in tennis

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ABSTRACT

This article gives the reader an introduction to mindfulness, a way of 'being' that has been shown to have significant performance effects when translated to a sporting context. Well known for its application in tennis by world number one, Novak Djokovic, this article explores how coaches and players can begin to integrate mindfulness into their everyday lives and subsequently when performing on court.

Key words: Mindfulness, psychology, meditation, flow, performance

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INTRODUCTION

The practise of mindfulness has been used in the East for centuries as a form of meditation and was brought into Western culture in the past number of decades as part of treatments for clinical difficulties such as chronic pain, anxiety and depression. Mindfulness refers to an open-minded and nonjudgmental awareness of oneself and their environment (Aherne, Moran & Lonsdale, 2009). An individual practising mindfulness approaches everyday thoughts, feelings and behaviours with acceptance that they are naturally occurring events. The practice of mindfulness helps to let go of such events in order to focus on what is within their imminent field of action - the here and now.

In tennis terms, that can mean accepting the frustration we feel when we make an error or double fault at a key point for example. By accepting the feeling as normal and moving on in a non-judgemental way, the mistake (and subsequent reaction) have been left in the past and the player has a better ability to focus on the next shot or point. Another example may be accepting positive/negative thoughts about the end of the match (such as victory/defeat) but not getting caught up in such thoughts. Instead, one can notice these thoughts as a natural aspect of a competitive tournament season, take a breath and refocus on what can be done to improve (which is the only thing within one's control at that moment).

In recent years, mindfulness has also been used in a sports performance context as a method for helping athletes reach a state of flow and becoming more in tune with their physical performances. Eleven time NBA Championship winning coach, Phil 'Zen Master' Jackson, has spoken at length about the performance benefits of employing mindfulness practice. Current English Premiership and European Champions Cup winners, Saracens Rugby Club, have also taken on mindfulness as a worthwhile practice for their players. At an individual level, super-elite athletes such as Lionel Messi (soccer), LeBron James (basketball) and Derek Jeter (baseball) are said to have extensive meditative practice as part of their daily routines. Specifically related to tennis, world number one Novak Djokovic discussed openly in his book 'Serve to Win' that implementing mindfulness "is as important to me as my physical training" (Djokovic, 2013, p86).

While mindfulness is essentially a way of living, it can be developed and trained to be applicable in a sporting context. Specifically, mindfulness may be useful for dealing with intrusive thoughts, concentrating on the task at hand and being more aware of the different actions you are performing in the moment. To be mindful takes practice. Meditations that involve

sitting or lying down and becoming aware of one's body are recommended for developing one's levels of present-moment awareness. Further useful exercises may incorporate mindful breathing, mindful walking or mindful yoga.

The feature film 'Peaceful Warrior' provide



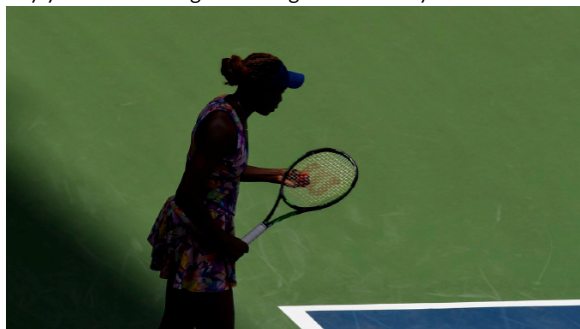
s coaches and athletes with a useful representation of how mindfulness can be applied to sport performance. Here is a particularly relevant scene that conveys the essence of mindfulness and present-moment awareness.

HOW CAN I START INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS INTO MY DAY?

Here are a few key components of practicing mindfulness that key practitioners have identified, set in the context of tennis:

- At change of ends: Pay close attention to your breathing, especially when you're feeling intense emotions, nerves or frustration. Use the breath as an anchor to come out of your mind and into the body. Re-centre yourself on the present. Decide to accept the feelings you have, let them go, don't judge or rebuke yourself. Once you do this you will be able to smile and enjoy the situation you find yourself in - embrace the challenge.
- When about to serve: Notice - really notice - what you're sensing in a given moment, the texture of the court below you, the sound of the ball, and the smells that ordinarily slip by without reaching your conscious awareness.
- At match point up: Recognise that your thoughts and emotions are fleeting and do not define you. Accept they will happen and let them go. Having this insight can free you from negative thought patterns.

- When running a drill with your players: Tune into your body's physical sensations, from the cool breeze on your skin to the way your feet feel against the ground when you feed in a ball.



SITUATIONS WHERE MINDFULNESS CAN HAVE A POSITIVE IMPACT

For a coach - when dealing with a confrontational parent

When faced with a tense and difficult conversation with a parent, imagine a divider between the situation and yourself; give yourself space. This space provided will give you room to focus on your body and relax the areas that are tense or tight. Do this while staying present in the situation i.e. don't rush ahead and compose your response or argument, simply breathe and stay with the moment. Get out of your own head and listen intently to the parent while still keeping an eye on your body's reactions. Accept the emotions you are feeling as normal. Take time with your response and be empathetic so as not to let the situation escalate. Indeed, evidence in prison settings suggests that mindfulness can reduce anger, hostility, and mood disturbances (Samuelson et. al, 2007) implying similar improvements in everyday settings for a tennis professional/coach who encounters situations of tension are certainly applicable.

For a player - when nervous before serving out a match

Focus on your breath (or any part of your body that you feel most natural to focus on). Use this focus to bring you back into the present. What is controllable for you? Your breath, this point, and how you are going to play it tactically. Focus on what is controllable and gently guide your attention back to this.

USEFUL REFERENCES FOR DEVELOPING MINDFULNESS SKILLS

As stated previously, mindfulness is a practice. That means that to be truly mindful, one must incorporate the practice into their daily routine. There are several free resources available online

where audio material can be accessed for mindful breathing, mindful yoga and mindful body scan exercises. Jon Kabat Zinn's work, in particular, has been applied to a variety of different settings and can be helpful in developing your practice. Useful phone apps that offer mindfulness tutorials and quickly accessible audio material include "Headspace", "Stop, Think & Breathe" and "Smiling Mind."

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness is a way of 'being' that has been shown to have significant performance effects when translated to a sporting context. Well known for its application in tennis and other sports, this article has summarised the key tenets and given some practical applications for coaches and players.

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