

Creativity on court II: Playing with emotions

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes regulating emotions, and returning to the enjoyment component of the sport, since it is the reason why all players take up tennis. In order to do so, the cognitive-behavioural vision of emotions has been taken as a basis. Exercises for all practice levels are suggested.

Key words: Emotions, game, cognitive-behavioural perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

"Rather than being a luxury, emotions are a very intelligent way of driving an organism toward certain outcomes." - Antonio Damasio.

"For the first time in my professional career, I have not been the owner of my emotions on court, I have had no control of my nerves, I have had tough times, but I have managed to get over them" - Rafael Nadal.

Emotions are psycho-physiological reactions to environmental issues that crop up (Lazarus, 2000). In psychology, the cognitive behavioural perspective is one of the main perspectives and approaches. From this vision, and just as Epictetus pointed out some centuries ago, "It is not things that torment people, but the opinion that people have of these things", that is to say, it is not the external circumstances that determine how we feel, but rather, the interpretation we make of those events. In this sense, given an annoying circumstance, as losing the first set could be, there might be many different reactions, and depending on the thoughts the player may have, both the emotion and what happens later will be determined.

This article intends to work on-court emotions, by means of the conscious modification of thoughts and behaviour, the main responsible for such emotions. For that, the notion of "play", that is inherent to tennis, will be taken into consideration, and it is applicable to all practice levels.

PLAYING WITH EMOTIONS

It's hard to imagine a boy or a girl, regardless of their origin and personal circumstances, who would take up tennis for reasons others than fun, spending hours on end hitting a ball against a wall, or against different "victims" (coaches, parents, mates ...), to satisfy their desires and the desire to improve and have fun. The emotions that arise in those circumstances (joy, happiness, love, surprise, anger, fear, etc.) put the engine to work, beyond fatigue, or the stress of the moment, and we cannot forget that all emotions, including those we call negative, have an adapted, social and motivational function (Reeve, 1994) that stretch our energy towards unsuspected limits.

Taking for granted that we want to help our players to awaken emotions that will help them to persist in improvement and giving effort, and at the same time are helpful for effective learning for other circumstances in life, why cannot we go back to those initial sensations that drove the player to continue playing back during his/her beginnings? Fundamentally we are talking about enjoyment. In the real expression of our sport, the idea of playing is important, i.e. we talk about playing tennis. And it is not a coincidence that human beings, and exceptionally talented boys or girls, learn just by playing. Proof of this is there is a great deal of documentation showing the relationship between fun and optimal performance in sport (Jackson, 2000), and in tennis in particular (Young, 2016).



"The moment I stop enjoying tennis, I will quit playing" - David Ferrer.

We can therefore ask: when is this idea of playing a game forgotten? Even though tennis players become professionals at an early age, there is a lot of money at stake, contracts and commitments of different sorts, what does remain constant - beyond the practice level- is the notion of enjoyment.

Money and fame make up a powerful engine, but if we want players to persist in practice, we must encourage enjoyment and agreeable emotions. But careful, it does not mean that disagreeable emotions should not be present, they must be, but in the right amount.

When we say enjoy we do not mean that we should be laughing all the time, we mean being able to see tough times as growth opportunities and challenges, and enjoy them all.

Guidelines to playing with emotions

There are no set rules. As a coach, take the opportunity to awaken your creativity in the exercises you suggest, you will be surprised to see how, as a result, your players will begin to be more creative as well.

1. Relativize your emotions, do not take them so seriously". By definition, emotions are psycho- physiological responses that last seconds or minutes (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996), and then, vanish; it is a question of time.
2. Normalize their appearance. Emotions are rooted in our nature, they are always with us. Start thinking with this idea in mind, and the intensity of the emotion in times of stress will decrease considerably.
3. Take advantage of them all. Emotions provide a lot of information about you, profit from the occasion to observe your most common thoughts and behaviours.
4. Encourage positive emotions. It has been proved that they enlarge the thinking and action repertoires (Fredrickson, 2013), apart from generating a positive relationship with attention, creativity and decision making (Fernández-

Abascal, Jiménez Sánchez, Martín Díaz, & Domínguez Sánchez, 2010).

5. Enjoy. One of the main gaps between your current situation and playing at your top level, is in the presence of enjoyment (Loehr & Fiske, 1995).
6. Panoramic vision. Not everything is emotional. Make a mental photograph of your situation, perhaps you need a technical or physical aspect?
7. Red lines. Set those attitudes that under no circumstance will you trespass.
8. Allies: All emotions have a very useful message, including disagreeable emotions. If only, instead of being frustrated because of them, and getting furious with ourselves, we used these emotions as our allies, we would change the negative consequences, and take them as an opportunity to improve. One example is anger, even though it is one of the most damaging emotions and, most unfortunately, one of the most common in the tour, it is also true that it activates a great deal of energy. What would it be like if we re-addressed this energy; instead of hitting the racket against the ground, we fight for every ball during the rest of the match.

Exercises

From the behavioural-cognitive vision, there are a number of exercises that help to modify or induce certain emotions. Here are some examples:

1. Face your emotions: It is difficult, in general, to name emotions simply because as we are not familiar with them, we have a very limited emotional vocabulary which terribly limits our expressive capabilities. Let's start with a very basic and very effective exercise which consist of simply naming the emotion. To do this, we will use emoticons (emojis or pictographic expressions) that players are already familiar with. By using these emoticons, we open the door to our emotional state, and this will give way to a deeper conversation later on.
2. Characters: When your player is trapped in an emotion, what character does he/she look like? What role are they representing? Firstly, decide on this character with them, ask them. It might be: a Tasmanian Devil, who demolishes everything regardless of the moment in the match; a Woody Woodpecker, who just hits strokes without thinking; a Superman/ Wonder woman who has to do everything perfectly and at the right time; a submissive Butler who would walk head down and asking for permission; a Fire Truck that only reacts when the going gets tough; or, a Kind Soul who puts the interests of the others before their own.

There are thousands of possibilities, but mind you, it is important for your players to be involved in the choice of character, and in no circumstances should they be imposed, mainly because it was this character who helped them to evolve to where they are now, and thus, deserves gratitude. It is just a matter of being aware that when in this state, they are led by emotions-thoughts-actions that prevent them from giving their best.

Secondly, suggest that your player exaggerates the character to the absolute limit. Taking the character to "the permitted extremes" in which they are emotionally trapped can relativize very easily, and allow the player to realize how "ridiculous" it can be when you identify with him/her for a long time.

Finally, and once the first two phases have been fluently mastered, establish - again and together with the player - a character that makes them reach their potential and give it their best. They must put this in black and white, write their habitual thoughts, their ways of moving, of dressing, of walking on court, gesture, emotions.... And every day they should try to be him/her.



Suggestions:

- Read, train and invent your own dynamics.
- Set progressions according to the ability of your players to talk and acknowledge their emotions (Jiménez-Almendros & Graupera, 2017).
- Do not fall in the trap of judging emotions as good or bad, go beyond that and profit from everything that comes to you, even if it is not agreeable.
- Remember this is a task that needs some time to master.
- Practice the exercises yourself, before you use them with your players.

Table 1. Suggestions for Coaches.

3. Mantra: What is the message, way of thinking, or belief that you need to repeat to yourself, so that you do your best, make you best effort, or simply relax in order to enjoy your

tennis? Set and write one or two statements, and repeat them on different occasions: before training, during training, and before going to sleep. You can even put them in your pocket or hang them in a visible place. Do it over three weeks, then change them and put up others.

CONCLUSIONS

In recent years, it has become very trendy to talk about emotions, how present they are during matches, and how to regulate them... In our opinion, it is particularly important to start from the most basic concept of identifying, naming and admitting them in order to act accordingly. Of all the different ways of working with them, we suggest some exercises that approach emotions at the behavioural and thinking level, they are as simple as they are efficient. Table 2 shows some key concepts to follow when working with your players.

Normalizing or changing the course of an emotion during training or a match provides a totally different experience of the situation, with totally different and much more satisfactory, long lasting and constructive results. It is up to you as a coach, to provide players with learning and cheerful experiences. Remember, you are their best role model, if they see that you are enjoying, most probably, they will enjoy it too.

3 Keys

- Emotions are temporary.
- Encourage agreeable emotions without looking down on the disagreeable ones, make them your allies.
- Play with emotions. Challenge your players so that they enjoy while doing their best to improve.

Table 2. Keys to remember.

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