



# Seeking momentum.

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## ABSTRACT

This article reviews the phenomenon of momentum. This psychological construct denotes an advantage for a player and is associated with peak performance, confidence and self-esteem. A plan of action to attain, maintain and recapture (if required) momentum is proposed.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a recent Grand Slam women's singles match the momentum flowed and ebbed in an enthralling encounter over several hours. One player played almost flawlessly to lead 6.2 5.3 and match point with an unexpected win against a higher ranked player firmly in sight. It was then that the momentum swung to the fancied player who recovered to take over the lead and herself to face victory in the third set, only to lose in a heart-stopping long final set after holding match point. This match had it all and illustrated 'momentum', 'turning points' and 'shifts in momentum'. How do players get 'on a roll' or 'winning streak'? Why do 'momentum shifts' occur?

## WHAT IS MOMENTUM?

Momentum (referred to as 'psychological momentum' in the literature) lacks a clear definition and has been defined as "an added or gained psychological power" (Richardson, Adler and Hanks, 1988, p.69); "the results of purposeful striving for accomplishment (Miller and Weinberg, 1991, p.211); and, "progressing toward one's goals" (Vallerand, Colavecchio and Pelletier, 1988, p.94). What is, however, clear about the term momentum is that it denotes a sense that events are going well and moving in a positive direction towards a desired outcome. As such, momentum is a subjective feeling or state of mind that things are likely to progress in line with previous success. For example, a player who has momentum and won the first set is most likely to win the next set. Accordingly, momentum can refer to a number of possible scenarios including a series of points, games, matches, tournaments or even Grand Slam victories!

Players are thought to vary in their ability to get, and be aware they have, momentum. It is often in retrospect that a player realises he/she had momentum when something happened to change the course of the match (referred to as a 'turning

point'). In the case of the match described in the Introduction, the player pinpointed her nerves and emotions as the reasons momentum changed for her. As she said in her post match interview,

*"I got a bit nervous and tight. I guess it was just adrenaline (at match point in the second set) and all the emotions hitting you at once".*



Other factors that can influence momentum include interruptions to play [e.g., weather delays, dispute over line calls or score, injury] and the opponent's antics, tactics or change of play (e.g., Silva, Hardy & Crace, 1988). What is important here is a player's perception of such factors. For some players such factors may have no effect, but for others, they are perceived as the 'turning points' in a match.

It is interesting to note Csikzentmihalyi's (1992) contention that momentum is fragile such that, should a player stop to reflect on it at the time it is happening, this can cause momentum to change and/or disappear. Notwithstanding its unstable nature, players and coaches are encouraged to understand

momentum because of its positive association with peak performance and healthy self-esteem and confidence. Players who gain momentum are more likely to achieve a positive outcome and feel good about their game and themselves.

### HOW DOES A PLAYER GET MOMENTUM?

Unfortunately there is no easy step-by-step formula to guarantee momentum. Paradoxically, the best advice is not to think about momentum per se but rather to commit to a plan of action, the result of which facilitates momentum. While each plan should be tailored to the individual, the following suggestions are offered to players:

**1. Take a game plan into the match** – define what you want to achieve in playing the match and develop a set of strategies to get you there

**2. Take it one point at a time** – only the point you are playing has any relevance so keep playing the points, one at a time, until there are no more points to play and the match has finished

**3. Commit to giving your best efforts and endeavor to win each point rather than playing to the score** – this will help to avoid anxiety and nerves that occur when one attaches specific importance to particular score lines (i.e., adopt the approach “my plan for playing this point is .....” versus “this is match point, and if I win this my ranking will go up and .....”)

**4. Expect the unexpected** – interruptions (e.g., poor line calls, opponent stalling between points, changes in weather conditions) are examples of a myriad of things that can happen during a match. Do not let them distract you from what you want to achieve, albeit you may need to adapt your game plan to address changing events and circumstances

**5. Enjoy the game and its challenges** - remember tennis is fun and generally we perform at our best when we are enjoying and fully engaged in what we choose to do

These five elements of the action plan are interrelated and momentum is most likely to occur when all, or almost all, are present. These elements are also helpful should a player feel he/ she is losing momentum or has lost it. What do they do? They can:

- Return to their plan of action and refocus on a new set of strategies (to accommodate the changed circumstances since the beginning of the match)
- Recommit to playing each and every point to the best of their ability and

- Reassure themselves that they can address anything that happens out on the court and the fun is in meeting the challenges as competently as they can.



### CONCLUSION

The benefit of adopting the suggested plan of action is that it facilitates possible ‘turning points’ or ‘momentum shifts’ in a player’s favour. Every point is played to the best of a player’s abilities and efforts so that there are no regrets in hindsight about the points and games that got away or ‘turned’ the match. The player who is committed and motivated with a game plan, competes intensely on each point, enjoys the challenge and expects the unexpected is primed to find his/her groove, rhythm or flow. It may not happen each time a player plays but the chances are it will become more frequent.

Returning to the match described in the Introduction, it is most likely both players have reviewed and learnt from the experience. It certainly provided spectators with a real-life illustration of what tennis is all about - being challenged to take a lead, and then recover a lead, over the course of a match. Matches seldom go ‘without a hiccup’ but rather tend to flow and ebb. Momentum may very well all be in the mind but it certainly feels good when it happens and the match results are generally better!

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