



Mental obstacles to tennis performance in stressful match situations.

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ABSTRACT

Tennis performance is determined by potential minus interference. Negative mental paradigms are often the cause for such interference. They provoke psychological switches that determine momentum changes within a match. Subconscious paradigms are subjective and they are made up from the nervous system to avoid and overcome stressful situations. By cognitive training it is possible to work and resolve such interferences. Elite players have a competitive advantage as they cope with the above interferences in tight match situations with a positive and functional mind frame.

Key words: Brain, Subconscious paradigm, Self-fulfilling prophecy, Critical mind.

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INTRODUCTION

A human being is said to have 60.000 thousand thoughts per day (Murray, 1999). Usually a tennis player is asked during a match to make between 800 and 1200 decisions (Weinberg, 2002). However most of the cognitive processes on a tennis court can damage tennis performance. Since tennis is ranked second for mental sports and includes several in-play situations that can turn out to be extremely stressful for the nervous system, we built up a diagram which relates to game situations, harmful cognitive subconscious paradigm, and positive counter-statements.



Table I includes examples of game situations where the player is already leading.

GAME SITUATION	SUBCONSCIOUS PARADIGM	POSITIVE COGNITIVE RESPONSE
15:40 on own serve	If I lose this point I lose my serve. FEAR OF LOSING	Play one point at a time. Do what you have to. One point of the game is not the whole match even if it is a break or set point. The final result is what matters.
2-5 on own serve	If I lose this game the first set is gone. FEAR OF COMPETITION	You are anyway in a good position. The mental factor is with you. Take advantage of it. There are two sets in a tennis match. Losing one does not mean losing the match.
5-2	Reverse angle. I must win this game to win the set.	Reverse angle. You are leading, so keep up with good work or imagine you are down 2-5.
OWN SECOND SERVE 30:40 ON 5-6	This is a weak shot of mine. If I serve poorly I Lose the set. FEAR OF MAKING MISTAKES	Use your energy to focus on the next point. Remember (from visual, auditory or kinaesthetic sources) a nice second serve you did and keep repeating within your mind where you want to place it. Follow your service routine
4-2 AHEAD	I am winning, now I can't afford to make any mistakes. WRONG FOCUS, FEAR OF WINNING, OR FEAR OF LOSING ADVANTAGE.	Keep your attention on the next point and focus on your game plan. If you are too rational, bring back your attention to present by visualising a specific piece of your game plan. Try to set yourself back on the automatized processes that brought you there. If you are ahead, there is no reason to worrying. It is not time to think negatively. Enjoy the process

Table 1. Examples of game situations in which the player is leading.

Table 2 includes examples of game situations in which the player is behind or has made a mistake.

GAME SITUATION	SUBCONSCIOUS PARADIGM	POSITIVE COGNITIVE RESPONSE
<p>6-3 5-4 40:30 all for your opponent</p>	<p>Match point against. If you loose this point everything is over.</p> <p>IDENTIFYING SELF WORTH WITH TENNIS ABILITY.</p>	<p>The match is not over until it is over and the score is very tight. Keep your opponent on the court for longer both playing and slow down the tempo. Test him.</p> <p>Please Note that statistically pressure is bigger on the player who is almost to win. The more you stretch the time, the harder will be for your opponent to win the match. Remember that momentum and balance can switch very suddenly within a match. If you win the point, the momentum could swing in your favour.</p> <p>Even if you lost the point and the match that means that you just lost a tennis match. It does not mean that you are a loser and does not say anything about you as a person. You must accept the match outcome without making excuses. Tennis is your responsibility. Even top players lose matches but at the end of the season they end up at the top of the ranking and can win many tournaments. As a tennis player your objective should not always be to win but also to improve your game. Give the best within your ability and you should be satisfied.</p>



<p>4-3 up; 30:40 break point for you. You miss an easy volley.</p>	<p>What an error. You cannot handle the pressure moments.</p> <p>CRITICAL MIND</p>	<p>Remain calm. Focus your energies on the next point. Bring yourself to the present time. Stick to your routines. Remind yourself about your game plan. Each point is the first point; each game is the first game.</p> <p>Please Note. Maybe you lost the point because you were thinking thoughts like "go for this point" or "don't miss the next one". The above thoughts can provoke stress in the nervous system while damaging performance. Moaning and complaining after a lost point on a tennis court in most cases can produce poor performance:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Usually the player alternates between winning and losing strikes according to their emotional up and downs. 2) Can produce fear which creates doubt in capabilities and shot production. 3) It brings the player temporary out of emotional balance. 4) A further step to losing overall emotional balance. 5) It produces too much stress to play at personal best on important points. <p>Truth is the last point is already gone and one must focus on the next point. Above all, you cannot change what happened already. As Nadal states, "This is tennis. You just make a nice winner after a long, intense rally, but for the final score, it is no more valuable than the unforced error you made. Here comes mental strength, the ability that distinguishes champions from nearby champions. You must throw your failure away, free your mind, avoid thinking it over" (Nadal, 2011).</p>
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Miss an easy approach to net.	What are you coming to net for? You know that you are poor at volleying. PSYCHOLOGIC DEFENSE SYSTEM	If you had already planned tactics in your game plan, follow it. Do what you have to according to chances offered by the tactical situation and accept everything that comes out of it, whether good or bad. Please note. Very often what makes yourself at ease on a tennis court is not what allows you to win a match. Trust and self esteem are the abilities which allow a tennis player to explore the space which is out of his/her comfort zone (Fox, 2010). In a match you can control the process but you cannot control the outcome.
Miss an easy mid-court shot.	You always miss easy shots at important times. PUT DOWNS	Help yourself with mental abilities: get back to normal breathing patterns, relax your muscles, keep your focus on a neutral aspect, visualise the next rally's tactics, check your optimal arousal and stick to your routines. Manage your emotional balance whatever just happened. It is just a question of will.
You miss a smash in the net.	It's always like that. You never make that shot. LACK OF SELF ESTEEM. POOR PERCEPTION OF SELF. INFERIORITY COMPLEX.	Keep your eyes on the ball and focus on your target. Please note. You don't miss smashes while training. You are capable to manage similar situations on a tennis court but in match situations. Trust your skills.

You miss an easy winner, open-court.	Why are you playing tennis? You are a total failure. LACK OF MOTIVATION AND PERSPECTIVE	You like playing tennis so you should try to enjoy the sport more. Welcome the challenge of testing your own abilities. Try to assert your personality and win the match if possible. Whatever the outcome, you are capable to react positively and with the correct perspective. If you cannot handle losing perhaps you should dedicate yourself to some other activity. You will lose matches, everybody does (even Rafa Nadal). Tennis is a highly stressful game and understanding that fact will allow you to be more prepared for matches. Find practical solutions, believe in your ability, put in 100% effort, and accept whatever the outcome assuming complete responsibility. If you are a true competitor, setbacks during the process will further reinforce your determination to succeed. If you play tennis for fun and lack competitive abilities, work and train on reprogramming paradigms and defeating harmful psychological mechanisms. If you want to compete against your opponent, first you must win the battle with yourself. Competitors are nurtured, not born, and you can become one with the right attitude.
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Table 2. Examples of game situations in which the player is behind or has made a mistake



CONCLUSION

The brain is extremely powerful and it works for or against tennis performance. Tennis player performance is often harmed by poor mental skills. A tennis player's mental strength can be enhanced by education (parents, school, social background etc.) and specific onoff court training, work and application (Di Carlo, 2012).

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