



# Considerations on how to finish off 'key points'.

Guillermo Ojea.

National University Mar del Plata, Argentina.

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses how to finish off a point in a match. It provides examples of key points in a tennis match and describes the most common behaviour in tennis players. It also provides some brief psychological recommendations and behavioural patterns to address this issue in an efficient way.

**Key words:** Finishing, Pressure, Behaviour

**Received:** 29 March 2011.

**Accepted:** 15 April 2011.

**Corresponding author:** Guillermo Ojea, National University Mar del Plata, Argentina.

Email:

[guillermo\\_ojea@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:guillermo_ojea@yahoo.com.ar)

## CASE STUDIES

"Silvia is winning 6-0; 4-0. Everything is going smoothly. But, all of a sudden, she feels she is away. Her mind starts wandering away from the match. Her gaze gets lost among the seats in the stands. Then the score reaches 4-3..."

"Gabriel serves to win the third set tie-break. He has been hitting consistent groundstrokes during the whole match. But now, he starts serving and approaching the net..."

"Hugo and Diego were about to win the doubles match. They had three match points in a row. Because they did not take the initiative to win, their opponents made good use of the situation and they are now in the third set..."

## PRESENTATION OF THE SITUATION

One of the main problems tennis players face is finishing off a point, a game or a match. For some players it is a pressure they find difficult to cope with.

Anecdotal evidence shows that it is the 'key situations' in which some players forget what they have to do. That is to say, they develop a certain strategy until they reach a certain turning point and at that time, they change their minds and use a different strategy. Sometimes, players get so anxious that they lose sight of the match. They act without thinking and do not know how to manage the pressure, and subsequently fail to plan the point adequately.

Other players, generally younger ones, show evidence of boredom at key points, generally when the score is favourable. Testimonials reveal that in these situations they feel urged to do something different to overcome this boredom, with a subsequent risk for the match outcome.

It is also common to see players, as Maure (2011) points out, who behave in an inhibitory or conservative way. By this the author means that players put off attacking at the right time and give their opponents the possibility of taking the initiative, instead of hitting the right stroke or developing the right strategy themselves.

At key times, some players feel burdened by pressure and neglect the relevant cues, that is, instead of focusing on planning the point, they constantly focus on performance.

Another example is what we call "now or never", a polarity that may bring about a catastrophic performance for the player in competition. It is important to stress the fact that this emphatic statement makes the player more likely to try to finish off the point prematurely, and also makes it more difficult to recover mentally following an unsuccessful point.

Professional practice shows evidence of players who having played the right shot, miss by just a few centimetres. In these cases, after exhibiting the right decisions, players get frustrated for having missed the shot because of the lack of the mental skills they needed to face this key situation with control.

## HOW TO FACE 'KEY SITUATIONS' EFFICIENTLY?

It is a virtue of great players to know how to manage pressure at key times in an efficient way (Buceta, 1998). It is interesting to identify certain patterns and behaviours after analyzing great players.

1) First, it is important for the player to focus on the present, on what he or she has to do, by means of a task based excellence model, and not on an obsessive search for immediate results. There is a huge body of research evidence from sport psychology, supporting the importance of focusing on the task over the end result (see Roberts, 1992).

2) Second, mental skills training is fundamental, so that in competition, decisions can be made regardless of the result, and knowing how to differentiate good decision making from mistakes in performance, and how to avoid confusion between both. For a guide to practical mental skills for tennis, see Crespo, Reid & Quinn (2006).

Players who hold adequate mental skills, and have the ability to stay constantly in the present. They are typically players who project an image of confidence in these situations- which is conveyed to their opponents. They develop a flexible mindset which is far from rigid statements like "all or nothing", and are always striving to recover even from extreme situations. Likewise, they do not perceive or behave poorly in 'key situations', on the contrary, they take them as a great challenge they want to face. They strengthen their self- confidence at key times, relying on those strokes with which they are highly effective. That is, they are players who know how to make good use of their opportunities, doing what they have to do, controlling key situations as part of their everyday tasks, by means of practising key situations during their training sessions.

## CONCLUSION

As a summary, we must remember that good management of extreme situations is a key skill that can be improved with mental skills training. However, it does not always involve winning, as Weinberg & Gould (1996) state, winning and losing does not depend only on what you do, because there are situations in tennis are not in your control.

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