Strive for, but do not demand perfection.

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ABSTRACT
This article reviews the concept of ‘perfectionism’. Five common misconceptions about perfectionism are discussed. Contrary to popular belief, perfectionism does not necessarily represent a negative attribute in a player or coach. Rather, ‘perfectionism’ can be a positive and normal attribute associated with tennis excellence. Practical implications for coaches are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

"Today I left as a winner. (It) was perfect. ... Pete Sampras is perhaps the greatest player we've ever had. To be on the same level as Pete, my former hero in a way, is already very nice, but I'm not there yet. I haven't won Paris, Davis Cup, the Olympic Games, many other tournaments I'd like to win again. But, you know, if I don't win them, it's okay too. I'm having a great run. I just want to enjoy my tennis and not just put myself under pressure all the time. I'm just happy with such a good run, especially at Wimbledon, the most important tournament of my life. I'm loving every moment of it". (Roger Federer, 8 July 2007, after defeating Rafael Nadal to win his 5th consecutive Wimbledon singles title).

In a recent publication, Flett and Hewitt (2005) suggest that a number of champion tennis players, including John McEnroe and Serena Williams, share "a demonstrated history of extreme perfectionism" (p. 17). One may well ask, is this a good or bad thing to be characterised as a perfectionist? What does it mean to be a perfectionist? How does one become such and can/should one change?

This article explores these issues by examining several myths about perfectionism and highlighting implications and recommendations for tennis coaches. Let's start by examining common misconceptions about perfectionism and its relationship with sporting excellence.

MYTHS

Myth 1: Everyone knows what perfectionism means

It is understandable that perfectionism may mean different things to different individuals, given the numerous definitions of the term to be found in the literature. Perfectionism has been loosely defined as the setting of excessively high personal standards of performance (Burns, 1980; Pacht, 1984) to a more recent, and formal, conceptualisation as “a personality style characterised by striving for flawlessness and setting of excessively high standards of performance accompanied by tendencies for overly critical evaluations of one’s behaviour” (Stoeber & Otta, 2006, p.295). While no one single definition of perfectionism has been agreed upon by perfectionism researchers, it is universally accepted that the central aspect of perfectionism is the setting of, and striving for, high standards.

Myth 2: Perfectionists are all alike

As with any personality style or trait, no two individuals are the same and this is true for perfectionists. While perfectionists share the characteristic of setting and striving for high standards, they differ on a variety of other interrelated characteristics. This has led researchers to categorise perfectionists as one of two types, ‘positive’ (also labelled...
normal, adaptive, healthy, functional, active) or ‘negative’ (also labelled neurotic, maladaptive, unhealthy, dysfunctional, passive) perfectionists (Stoeber & Otta, 2006).

The key distinguishing characteristics of the positive versus negative perfectionist are listed in the following table.

Myth 3: Perfectionism is not associated with sporting excellence

The accuracy, or otherwise, of this myth depends on whether one is referring to positive or negative perfectionism (as described above). It is true to say research supports that negative perfectionism is an antecedent to burnout among young tennis players (Gould, Ulry Tuffey & Loehr, 1996) for example. It is, however, equally true that research (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Hardy, Jones & Gould, 1996; Gould, Dieffenback & Moffett, 2002) supports many of the most successful world class athletes are positively perfectionistic in their orientations. These latter research findings have led sport psychologists to propose the positive form of perfectionism is indeed “a trademark feature of high performance athletes” (Gotwals, Dunn & Wayment, 2003, p. 19).

Myth 4: Perfectionism can be traced to parental influences in childhood

This myth may have some validity but does not completely portray the complexity of the perfectionism developmental process. This process is thought to be an ongoing one that does not solely rely on the early experiences of children. Undoubtedly parental factors have a strong impact early on in instilling values and thereby shaping a child’s character (Bloom, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). However, other factors such as the role of significant others (e.g., coaches, teachers) and the impact of society’s values and cultural influences need also be considered.

Myth 5: ‘Once a perfectionist, always a perfectionist’

Since perfectionism is learned (versus inherited), most individuals can develop, moderate and/or change such an orientation (Hamacheck, 1978). Granted some individuals will require assistance in this process (e.g., work with a sport psychologist) but change is generally possible, and in some cases, desirable. While each case must be judged on its own merits, a possible case warranting change may, for example, involve a player who invariably ‘drops his/her bundle’ on the first mistake he/she makes in a match, continually berates him/herself on his/her standard of play and suffers badly from the strain of competition.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COACHES

Several implications for coaches can be drawn from the above discussion. Most significantly, it is important for coaches to be aware, and mindful, that perfectionism in themselves and/or their players does not necessarily represent a negative or dysfunctional characteristic. It can also be positive and normal, and indeed, a key quality for sporting excellence. Here are a couple of suggestions for coaches to consider in working with players.
Table 2. Recommended approaches for coaches to adopt and pass onto players (adapted from Stoeber and Otto, 2006).

In adopting these suggestions, coaches will embrace the benefits from the pursuit of perfection but avoid the perils of demanding perfection. Striving for, but accepting being less than perfect, is the perfect way to go – just ask Roger Federer!

REFERENCES
