



# Strive for, but do not demand perfection.

Janet Anne Young.

Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

## 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.

**Key words:** Perfectionism, Beliefs, Positive attribute, Psychology.

**Received:** 12 September 2010

**Accepted:** 14 October 2010

**Corresponding author:** Janet Anne Young, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.

**Email:**

[Janet\\_young7@yahoo.com.au](mailto:Janet_young7@yahoo.com.au)

## 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.

POSITIVE PERFECTIONIST	NEGATIVE PERFECTIONIST
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to view him/herself successful even if not the 'perfect performance' – enjoys his/her accomplishments</li> <li>• Ability to accept personal and situational limitations – realistic in monitoring and evaluating own performance</li> <li>• Motivated to excel and focuses on doing things right</li> <li>• Relaxed but careful attitude; confident in abilities</li> <li>• Disappointed with failure but renew efforts &amp; commitment</li> <li>• More likely to complete tasks on time</li> <li>• Balanced thinker</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rarely satisfied with achievements - tendency to see him/herself as a failure</li> <li>• Preoccupied with, and overly critical of, results. Inability to accept mistakes</li> <li>• Motivated by fears of failure and concerns about disappointing others</li> <li>• Tense &amp; anxious about tasks; compulsive tendencies; doubts abilities and concerned with quality of performance</li> <li>• Self-worth dependent on results</li> <li>• Tends to procrastinate</li> <li>• 'Black and white'/'all or nothing' thinker (perfect or failed; good or bad)</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Differences between the positive and negative perfectionist (adapted from Burns [1980], Hamachek [1978] and Pacht [1984]).**

To briefly summarise the features depicted in Table 1, negative perfectionists set extremely high standards however, being overly critical and intolerant of mistakes, they are never satisfied with results (believing results could always be better). In contrast, positive perfectionists accept personal and situational limitations, and the inevitability of making mistakes, and in doing so, enjoy their purposeful pursuit of excellence.

It has been suggested that the critical distinction between positive and negative perfectionism lies in an individual's demand for perfection (Gotwals, Dunn & Wayment, 2003). While all perfectionists strive for perfection, negative perfectionists also feel a need to perform flawlessly (i.e., unable to accept being, and performing, less than perfect). As summarised by Zinsser, Bunker and Williams (2001), there "is always value in striving for perfection [in sport] but nothing to be gained by demanding perfectionism" (p. 302).

**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 (Hamachek, 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.

RECOMMENDED APPROACHES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on doing one's best rather than worrying about mistakes and errors</li> <li>• Enjoy striving for perfection rather than being afraid of falling short of it</li> <li>• Appreciate what has been achieved rather than pondering or stressing about the discrepancy between what has been achieved, and what might have been achieved, if everything had worked out perfectly</li> </ul>

**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

- Bloom, B. S. (1985). Developing talent in young people. New York: Ballantine.
- Burns, D. D. (1980). The perfectionist's script for self-defeat. *Psychology Today*, 34-52.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity: Flow and the psychology of discovery and invention*. New York: Harper Collins. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.1996.9651177>  
[https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326934crj0902&3\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326934crj0902&3_11)
- Flett, G. L., & Hewitt, P. L. (2005). The perils of perfectionism in sports and exercise. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 14, 14-18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0963-7214.2005.00326.x>
- Gotwals, J. K., Dunn, J. G. H., & Wayment, H. A. (2003). An examination of perfectionism and self-esteem in intercollegiate athletes. *Journal of Sport Behaviour*, 26, 17-38.
- Gould, D., Dieffenbach, M. S., & Moffett, A. (2002). Psychological characteristics and their development in Olympic champions. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 172-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200290103482>
- Gould, D., Tuffey, S., Udry, E., & Loehr, J. (1996). Burnout in competitive junior tennis players. *The Sport Psychologist*, 10, 341-366. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.10.4.341>  
<https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.10.4.322>
- Hamachek, D. E. (1978). Psychodynamics of normal and neurotic perfectionism. *Psychology*, 15, 27-33.

- Hardy, L., Jones, G., & Gould, D. (1996). *Understanding psychological preparation for sport: Theory and practice of elite performers*. New York: John Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.10.2.140>
- Pacht, A. R. (1984). Reflections on Perfection. *American Psychologist*, 39(4), 386-390. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.39.4.386>
- Stoeber, J., & Otto, K. (2006). Positive conceptions of perfectionism: Approaches, evidence, challenges. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10(4), 295-319. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1004\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1004_2)
- Zinsser, N., Bunker, L., & Williams, J. M. (2001). Cognitive techniques for building confidence and enhancing performance. In J.M. Williams (Ed.), *Applied sport psychology: Personal growth to peak performance* (4th ed., pp.288-344). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield.

## RECOMMENDED ITF TENNIS ACADEMY CONTENT (CLICK BELOW)



Copyright (c) 2010 Janet Anne Young.



This text is under a [Creative Commons BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

You are free to Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format – and Adapt the content - remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially under the following terms:

Attribution: You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

[CC BY 4.0 license terms summary](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) [CC BY 4.0 license terms](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)