Mental Toughness in Tennis

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"You need the game, you need the heart, and you need the mind."

-Pete Sampras
Abstract

Tennis matches often are a battle of strategy and how hard a player can hit a ball. Although strategy and talent are important the mental toughness of players often determines who will win when the players are of approximately equal talent. Mental toughness is often the determining factor because so few players can control themselves on the court, and this is because there are no specific ways to practice the mental tennis game. The main thing that separates the best players and good players is how they approach every point. When a player comes to every point not worrying about the last one he has a much better chance of winning than the player who gets ready to play still frustrated.

Many factors contribute to success on the tennis court: skill, strategy, experience and mental toughness. Tennis matches are not only decided by talent; mental toughness often determines the winner. Although this is important it will not triumph over massive skill differences, but in matches that are balanced in talent mental determination is often the winning factor. Many high level tennis matches are long and grueling for both sides, this is because there are so many points and each point is intense.

Junior tennis matches are made up of two out of three sets, first player to win two sets is the winner. One set is six games, win by two, each game is first to four points, win by two. (USTA, 9) It is not hard to see that with so many points in one match it can be a grueling experience when the players are approximately even in talent. A tennis match is a rollercoaster ride, when a player is up he is happy, he plays better and he wins more points, however, when a player starts falling he gets angry, hits the ball worse and loses more points; a great player is able
to change the momentum when he starts falling. Great players start going back up by not letting anything bother them.

There are three main reasons for mental breakdowns in tennis, playing time and dead time, inner and outer events, and crucial situations. A big part of staying mentally tough is staying positive regardless of the situation. There is no time limit in a tennis match; therefore, a player must always believe that he is capable of coming back and still winning the match. This is difficult for players because they live in the past; what has happened is over and done with.

(David Stolle)

Players need to have a long memory of the good points and a short memory on the bad points. David Stolle a tennis coach at UTA used this when playing a tennis match “When I walked out on the court I pretended that the match had already been played and I had won. Therefore the stress of wondering the outcome was over with. If I was up, great, I was expecting myself to be up and if I was down, I would sit on a change over and say, Wow, this is amazing. I am down a set and 0-3; I cannot wait to see how I pull this one out because I know I have already won the match.” (David Stolle)

Playing time and dead time are crucial in a tennis match, two of the greatest players in the world, Roger Federer and Andy Roddick played each other in a match. The match was two and a half hours long, a bit below average, but in that time the actual time where a ball was being hit was only twenty four minutes. Many players get in trouble when they have too much thinking time. During down time the player thinks about the most recent points. The problem is that the player usually only thinks about the bad things or he lets outer events bother him. (Chomyn, 19)
Outer Events that can bother a player include weather, fans, and bad line calls. A player loses focus when he lets these things bother him, and this is where the rollercoaster plummets. Andy Roddick has two wins over Roger Federer in eighteen tries. It is not because Roger is that much better; it is because Roger Federer can stay calmer than Roddick, even when he starts to lose. A good tennis player can keep his momentum going when he is doing well, but he also finds ways to break his opponent’s momentum when the other side is going well. (Chomyn 19) Roger Federer can play every point more focused than Roddick because he does not let mistakes from previous points bother him.

Managing mistakes is another factor in a player losing focus in a match. While mistakes are an important part in improving a player’s game, many players have a hard time getting over missing a shot. Rituals are another way to cope with setbacks, the tricks that feel the most comfortable for a player will often be the best way for him to stay calm in a match. “By the time you get to a match it is time to turn on the automatic pilot switch and trust your training. The less you think often the better you will perform” (David Stolle)

There are four main parts of a tennis player’s performance, skill, physical ability, mental toughness and strategy. Physical ability helps players immensely in a match, although there is a lot of downtime, when a point is being played it is exhausting for both sides. It is important for a player to stay intense and stay extremely focused by moving his feet fast. Many mistakes are made when a player is not in position. Even if a player can stay extremely calm in a match if he cannot stay intense with his feet during points he will lose anyway. (UTA)

It is important for a player to be thinking about himself in a match but it is often equally important to think like the opponent. When a player begins to think like his opponent he creates a
huge advantage for himself. A player begins to understand what shots the adversary likes and does not like, and the player feels what confidence they have and what they are struggling with. Opponents let their emotions be read and a player will learn a lot by reading their opponent’s court presence. “Tennis is a marathon and not a sprint. Do not get caught up in the little things. Take a step back and see the big picture. It is a little like going to war. You do not have to win every battle to win a war but you need to be ready for the long haul.” (David Stolle) A player must think, stay intense and be positive on the tennis court to be successful.

Mental toughness is not about showing no emotions on the court, it is good to care, positive emotions will only help a player in a match and small negative outbursts are fine as long as the player can approach the next point without thinking about how unnecessary it was for him to lose that last point. Rob Norton a tennis coach at UTA gave this advice, “After missing a shot you know you shouldn’t have you can tell yourself come on make that shot as long as after that you go to the fence and talk to yourself a bit to calm yourself down. Talking to the fence will give you the fake confidence to approach the next point calm, intense and ready to go.” (Rob Norton) To stay calm, intense and ready to go a player must control his thinking.

Tennis philosophy consists of controlling a player’s thinking, managing intensity, controlling the aspects of tennis a player can control, improving concentration, and using visualization, emptying the mind and building confidence. These are a great set of principles that if followed will improve a player’s game dramatically. Why is it so hard to improve the mental tennis game? The reason is that a player cannot measure anything when practicing mental focus and there are no drills that help stay calm, the only way to use mental toughness to a player’s advantage is to play matches, trial and error. (Mencinger 1) “Staying mentally tough is a
practiced skill, just like a forehand or a backhand, but to practice it, doesn't require hitting any tennis balls, so most kids don't bother to practice it because it isn't "fun".” (Rob Norton)

To be effective in any sport a player must have a champion’s mentality. Even the best players strive to improve and one of the most important aspects is mental strength, Simon Shelton wrote in his article Have a Champion’s Mentality: Continually Strive to Improve your Game. Mental Strength is… “The ability to perform at a consistently high level regardless of external circumstances coupled with the ability to pull out a victory when you’re not performing at your best.” (Shelton 27) This summarizes how mental toughness consists of blocking outer events, staying intense and being able to win even though a player might not be playing his best.

Tennis is a sport where some days a player might be playing great and some other days he might be playing awful. There are a few things he can control in tennis regardless of how he hits the ball, they are: staying intense, moving his feet, how he prepares for a match and, most importantly, how he thinks during the match. An average player would think to himself during a match, on an “off day”, that today just is not his day, but a great player will understand that he is not playing his best and he will try to win the match even though it will not be his best play. (UTA)

Differences between rankings of players is not all about how well a player can hit, it is also about how he thinks during a match. Mental toughness is the deciding factor in every equally talented match because it is so hard to have, the player that can stay motivated and positive will win because of how he approaches every shot. Although mental toughness is not the biggest factor for success in tennis; to compete at a high level of tennis a player must be able to stay intense, calm and motivated. Mental toughness is so important in winning because so few
players have handled this important part of the game. “Next comes mental toughness, but it is important to understand why it is 3rd (in importance), yet why it is so important. When playing at a high level, in college or in the pros, everyone has physical ability and strength, the first two most important things. So if you want to be better than someone, it now comes down to mental toughness, emotions, where you can beat them.” (Rob Norton) In every tennis match that is even in talent the winner will be the player that is mentally tough; that player will be focused, intense and ready to win.
Appendices

While collecting information for my research paper, I asked some of my coaches what is a decent reaction after losing a point and I recalled advice from coaches that they had given us in previous practices. It is also interesting to see how the coaches, who teach us how to hit the ball well, give us a lot of information on different aspects of the game while few players notice it. That is why so many players cannot control themselves when they start losing, more emphasis needs to be placed on how you think and act on the court, as much as how you play.

Also, coaches that used to play tennis on a high level have a much different perspective on mental toughness, they understand that it is alright if you get frustrated after a point as long as you do not think about the next point, even though it is bad to get angry on the court, many players show no emotions at all on the court which is also bad, many of the coaches with a lot of match experience realize that it is better to care than not to care at all. When Players "lose" themselves in the emotional storms of the mind and play tennis well below their potential. When a player realizes that something in his mind is preventing him from reaching his full potential, he becomes the inner player. Now he knows what to work on. But most of the time – he has no idea HOW to do that.

Interviews
Rob Norton

Why do you think so many players can’t stay mentally tough and positive in a difficult match?
The same reason a players strokes often break down, or they begin to tighten up, the answer is not enough practice. Staying mentally tough is a practiced skill, just like a forehand or a backhand, but to practice it, doesn't require hitting any tennis balls, so most kids don't bother to practice it because it isn't "fun". Kids training that have goals to become world class tennis players train their mind constantly with certain drills and exercises to make themselves better at it.

What specific tricks do you use to stay calm in a tennis match?
Every player is different, and can find different ways to get their mind where it needs to be quickly in a match. When I need to calm myself, I take a slow walk back to the fence, fix my strings (even if they don't need to be fixed), I touch the fence with my racquet, and that is my reset. Once my racquet touches the fence, I have gone through the three steps all good players must go through between points.

1) Have an emotion (positive, negative or neutral, there is always an after-point emotion)
2)Learn from the previous point (there is always something to learn from every point)
3)Prepare for the next point.
What can you do to break your opponent’s mental game in a match?

Every opponent is different, and can lose their mental toughness due to different things. Personally, I always found that being mentally strong myself was the most frustrating thing for my opponent. If he plays an unbelievable point and ends with a smash, and I react by getting the ball quickly, hitting it right to him, and getting down in my ready position for the next point right away, before he has even finished celebrating, that has always gotten to opponents. Leaving an opponent thinking that no matter what they do, you aren't going anywhere, no matter what the score, no matter how you are playing, you aren't going anywhere, and you are going to fight every point weather he likes it or not. It is a trained skill to be able to do it, but having that skill will take a player to the next level.

Rate in order of importance to win:

Excellent strokes
Physical abilities
Positive emotions and mental stability during a match
Strategy

Due to the topic of the survey, it would make sense to have emotions as most important, but they simply aren't.

The order is...

B ...D ... C ... A

Nothing can top the natural abilities of a player. If you give me a player that is mentally a rock and will never give up, yet he can't swing a racquet and can run, that doesn't do me much good. Certain things can be taught, but Talent is something people are born with, some are born with more than others.

Next is strategy. Let's say we have B, Physical Ability, we now need to know what to do with it. If I have a player with a large amount of physical ability, but he has no idea what to do, and just tries to blast every ball, again, he can be as mentally strong as you would like to make him, he will still never win a match.

Next comes C, but it is important to understand why C is 3rd, yet why it is so important. When playing at a high level, in college or in the pros, EVERYONE has B and D, the first two things. Everyone has strong physical ability and everyone has strategy, so if you want to be better than someone, it now comes down to C, emotions, where you can beat them. Another that would fit in this area would be * Work Ethic*. That has a lot to do with how a player does. And it would go between D and C on the list.

Lastly we have Strokes, which are the least important of the 4. Don't be on the belief that strokes aren't important, the most certainly are, but look at the pro tour, or even the kids at the academy, EVERYONE has different strokes. By looks, a player in Jr. Ex. may have better LOOKING strokes than an excellence player, yet isn't anywhere near their level. Stokes are different for
everyone due to the game style and body style of all players. Nadal's strokes are far from perfect, his form is awful as compared to what coaches teach, yet he is #1 in the world. Strokes are important, but they are different from anyone.

David Stolle

1. I think a big part of being mentally tough is staying positive no matter the situation. One of the great things about tennis is that there is no clock. You do not run out of time. Therefore, you have to constantly believe that no matter the score or situation that you are capable of finding a way to win. This can sometimes be difficult for people because they live in the past. What has happened is over and done with. The ability to live in the present can be difficult. Playing one point at a time is not always easy. A trick I used to play with myself involved a technique that went like this. When I walked out on the court I pretended that the match had already been played and I had won. Therefore the stress of wondering the outcome was over with. If I was up, great, I was expecting myself to be up and if I was down, I would sit on a change over and say, "Wow, this is amazing. I am down a set and 0-3, I can not wait to see how I pull this one out because I know I have already won the match." Being mentally tough comes down to a few basis points: You can not be afraid to put yourself in a vulnerable situation, always compete hard, and have a long term memory of your good shots and a short term memory of your bad ones. Your attitude and effort will ultimately decide your long term success. It is important to look at the big picture.

2. Rituals are very important for every tennis player. Staying calm comes from feeling comfortable in your surroundings and having positive repetition in your actions. Practice is the time to learn technique and different strategies. By the time you get to a match it is time to turn on the automatic pilot switch and trust your training. The less you think often the better you will perform. It is a lot like riding a bike. Once you get the hang of it, you do not think about every little detail other than where you want to go. Centering yourself and understanding your breathing is a very important part to staying calm. In between points and on changeovers you have the opportunity to reset your heart rate and breathing patterns. This can help you to stay relaxed and be able to prepare for each point the same way.

3. Every player has a breaking point. The question is do you have the patience and skills to help your opponent reach that point? It is important to think about yourself during a match but it can be equally important to focus on your opponent and what he/she is thinking or feeling. When you can think like your opponent it gives you a huge advantage. You know what shots they like and don't like. You can feel what they have confidence with and what they are struggling with. You
can recognize how they are trying to play you. Also, people allow you to read their emotions and you can learn a lot by watching a person's demeanor, body language, and court presence. It is important to look like you have everything together and you know exactly what you are doing. It is one think to be losing but it is another to show your opponent that you are being beaten. You may not be under control on the inside but you need to look that way to your opponent. Remember, tennis is a marathon and not a sprint. Do not get caught up in the little things. Take a step back and see the big picture. It is a little like going to war. You do not have to win every battle to win a war but you need to be ready for the long haul.

4. Emotions and stability- you could be the best player in the world, but if you can not handle the pressure or have a negative attitude it will be hard to sustain long term success.

   Strategy- everyone has holes in his/her game. If you can find them and exploit them, you will give yourself the opportunity to succeed. We play for opportunity.

   Physical ability- when all else is even, the better athlete usually will succeed.

   Excellent strokes- It is nice to have great strokes but it you do not have the right attitude, know what to do with your strokes, and have athletic skills, beautiful strokes will only get you so far.
Works Cited (MLA)


UTA coaches, Universal Tennis Academy

David Stolle, Personal Interview


Pete Sampras

Rob Norton, Personal Interview


USTA, *Rules of Tennis*,