

Head Games

Four top American pros offer their sports psychology secrets by John F. Murray

HOW IMPORTANT DO TOURING PROS think the mental game is? When I surveyed 20 players on the ATP and WTA Tours, they indicated that the brain game accounts for anywhere between 70 and 99 percent of their tennis.

Clearly the pros believe in the power of sport psychology.

Here is a look at what four American pros do to mentally prepare for their matches. You can adapt their techniques to make your game better, too.

Maintain a high level of confidence

MEGHANN SHAUGHNESSY believes that positive feelings and expectations are extremely important to playing well. "Confidence is very key for me," she says. "I like to think positive thoughts while listening to dance music on my walkman. I think about winning points with quick feet. This positive mindset boosts my confidence level for the match."

Like Shaughnessy, you should get excited about performing your absolute best. Do whatever it takes to believe that you will perform well, and learn to love the toughest challenges. Positive self-talk and thoughts of playing great tennis should become a habit.

Shaughnessy also works on improving her confidence on the practice courts. "I am very serious in practice and go all out with total purpose and intensity," she says.

Her recent practices have aimed at developing herself into a more aggressive player and becoming more confident going for her shots. Learn from this! Even when you are developing an area of your game that needs improvement, get really excited in believing you can do it.

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SUSAN MULLANE, GETTY; SUSAN MULLANE, FRED MULLANE

Work toward realistic goals

There is no substitute for work in tennis, and US Open champion ANDY RODDICK is one of the hardest working players on tour. His success can be attributed to an old-fashioned work ethic and solid mental training habits.

In 2001, Roddick says his goal was, "to make the main draw of the Grand Slam events." In 2002 it was: "to make Top 10 in the world and stay there." He began with a modest goal, reached it through hard work, and then raised his expectations even higher. He keeps his perspective by setting reasonable goals.

You can take a lesson from Roddick and make

goal-setting an asset. Start with a dream of where you want to be one year from now. Perhaps you would like to be a more successful player at the net and a better doubles partner, but your volley is weak.

First translate your dream into measurable behavior. For example, you want to improve the percentage of points you win at the net from 40 percent to 60 percent over the next year. Begin with a three-month plan to achieve your goal, then re-evaluate and set another goal for the next three months. It's fun to set goals, but, as Roddick knows, it's even more fun when you achieve success.

Take away the pressure

LISA RAYMOND likes to reduce the pressure she feels during a match. Before playing, she tries to relax. "I like to be alone and read a magazine or listen to music," she says. "I give myself the idea that the upcoming match is not that big of an occasion." Raymond effectively reduces negative competitive pressure by downplaying the importance of the match.

If you're a player who succumbs to pressure, you can learn from Raymond's strategy. The key is to appraise the match differently. Learn to laugh during competition and pretend that matches are just practices. Competitive pressure is always self-imposed.

Raymond also minimizes pressure by, "going point to point and not getting too much into the occasion," she says. Pressure often comes from focusing on the outcome of an event. By focusing on one point at a time, it's impossible to think about the set or the whole match, and your focus improves. Stay hungry for improvement rather than just "winning," and you'll play even better in tight situations.

Prepare well in advance

TODD MARTIN has learned over the years that a consistent pre-match routine is essential to playing his best tennis. "There are certain steps that I have to take before a match that lead to my playing well," Martin says. "And I cannot ignore the details."

Martin's routine includes proper sleep, eating the right food and preparing raquets and other essential equipment the night before a match. Your routine should be equally thorough. Pack your bag with every essential item the night before. You never want to worry about grip tape, stringing, towels or extra clothing the day of the match.

Martin also prepares a game plan well before match time. After discussing various strategies with his coach, he finds it easier to envision how the points will transpire. "Tennis is a game of patterns and repetitions," Martin says, "so I imagine how the points will likely play out." You can do this, as well. Before going to sleep the night before a match, spend 10 minutes imagining a fine warm-up, realistic tough points, solid execution of strokes and strategy, and a successful outcome. When you awake, you'll be mentally ready to go.

One to two hours before your match, spend another quiet ten minutes imagining successful point sequences. If you've scouted your opponent's game, imagine yourself exploiting your opponent's weaknesses with your own strengths.

