



Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook

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Tension, Tears, and Twitches! The secret to managing stress

BY ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

How many of you get nervous before a critical point in a match? How many of you can feel the pressure when serving to close out a match? Nerves play a key part in tennis, golf, and any sport. Nerves will make a player tight: physiologically they get a surge of adrenaline in their central nervous system, their heartbeat pounds like a drum, beads of sweat start forming on their skin, their breath gets short and shallow, their muscles contract, and their blood pressure increases.

A common misconception is that the great players don't feel nerves, tension, anxiety and fear. John McEnroe says, "Everybody chokes - it's just a matter of how you deal with it." However, there are mental skills that great players utilize to thrive despite such emotions. Such players are able to effectively *accept* these emotions as part of their individual process, and consequently *release* them so they can play in a relaxed state of focused awareness. How many times have you heard a player say, "If only I wasn't nervous, it would have been a different score!" or, "If only I didn't choke with the lead I would have won!" The reality is that you can't separate the mental game from the tactical, technical, and strategic part. It's a critical component of the game, especially in high pressure situations, and the top pros know it.

Effectively managing pressure is a counter-intuitive process. Rather than ignoring the pressure, it's necessary to accept it. This acceptance neutralizes it or takes the edge off. This is much like the well-known "elephant in the room scenario" we all encounter at one time or another. Rejecting, ignoring, or denying that the elephant exists simply leads to greater and greater discomfort. Only upon the acknowledgement that a situation (in this case, the existence of stress) exists in the mind are we able to reduce the tension.

Media, fans, coaches and even players often

misunderstand nerves and how to manage them. During the Australian Open quarterfinal coverage, commentator Chris Fowler repeatedly stated, "Great champions don't like to admit to nerves." In many cases this may be accurate, but it seems some elite players are not afraid to express how they experience their emotions. Federer, in his post-match interview, admitted to feeling a "little nervous." In fact, during his epic Wimbledon final against Andy Rodick, he said, "I used to get nervous when a friend would come to watch me play as a kid, and then it was my parents, and then it was the legends and people who meant something. Today it's ok, anyone can watch me play. But today with Pete, when he walked in and I saw him for the first time, I did get more nervous actually."

In the finals, the media suggested that Andy Murray's jaw tightening was a sign of a fragile emotional state. No doubt this was a sign of tension; however, the twitches were an instinctual way for Murray to try to release the tension. In actuality, Murray's nervous mouth twitch is no different than when Rafael Nadal pulls at his shorts before most points. It's simply an instinctual or in Nadal's case a habitual way of trying to manage and release stress.

Professionals and juniors alike are too often discouraged from being honest about their emotions and are consequently compelled to fight an internal battle to deny what they are feeling. Mind you, it's one thing to openly publicize your nervousness to your opponent, but the real trouble comes in when an athlete does not privately allow themselves to acknowledge what they are already experiencing. When the athlete fights the emotion, their focus stays on the emotional state (inducing concern or panic over what they are suppressing), rather than accepting it for what it is and making the choice to move on. Resisting an emotion's existence only makes it stronger.

One of the things that makes Federer so amazing is

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that he is not afraid to show his humanity. For example, remember when Federer broke down after losing to Rafael Nadal in the finals of the 2009 Australian Open? Many fans and media didn't know what to do with Roger's outburst. Some thought he was a baby, others thought he shouldn't show his emotions like this, lest it be a sign of weakness. In reality, all Roger did was release his emotions. He even blurted out "This is killing me." Such a revealing statement is somewhat rare in modern sports, and it was profoundly honest. We should remember that crying is one of the most instinctual releases humans have, and in this case allowed Roger to begin the mourning process and move on. Certainly, his results in the proceeding Grand Slams, especially the French Open (where he had never won before), point to this successful reaction.

Behind Andy Murray's choked tears and sniffles

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following his loss in the 2010 Australian Open finals he quipped, "It's a shame, I can cry like Roger, but I can't play like him." Hopefully Andy will realize that Roger's crying is part of his instinctual personal process which helped him release the mixed emotions he has stored up- the emotions that he can't put into words. Similarly, it illustrates in color Roger's intense competitiveness, and his fearlessness to show his emotions.

In conclusion, the machine-like mentality that many people have regarding nerves is misdirected. In fact, it pushes athletes farther from peak performance because they are scared to be themselves, to fully acknowledge their own mental and emotional experience. Great athletes instinctually understand a key mental edge secret -that it's ok to have nerves. In fact, accepting the experience of acknowledging tension is the first step towards releasing it.



Rob Polishook, MA, CPC is the founder and director of Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group. As a Mental Training Coach he works with athletes and teams at the middle school, high school, national, college and professional levels. His work focuses on helping athletes and teams gain the mental edge, often the difference between winning and losing. Rob has spoken to athletes, coaches, parents both nationally at USTA, USPTA, ITA conferences and internationally conducted workshops and worked with top ranked juniors in India, Israel, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. He was awarded the 2008 USPTA - Eastern Division High School Coach of the Year award. Additionally he has published articles in national publications including USTA and USPTA publications. Rob can be contacted about his private or team consultation at 973-723-0314, rob@insidethezone.com, www.insidethezone.com.