

Determination Under Adversity

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J: Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialists, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA player development. Today we're going to get into talking about determination under adversity and setting the context of using the clay court tournament, national tournament that's just passed as a reference for our discussion today. We do so many training camps here at campus and around the country, sectional camps, regional camps, and you know, we get, uh, we get to connect with so many players, parents and coaches, but, and we do a lot of competition within the camps. There's only a few times a year where we actually get to just go out there and enjoy watching all these players compete and play and then connect with the parents in these environments. So I'm always excited for clay courts. Obviously it's in our backyard in, in Florida. I'm really excited this year because we saw a lot of real, what I thought was a lot of positive behaviors all around. So a lot of positive things on the court with the way that the kids were playing. So a lot of really positive things with the way the parents were interacting with each other. And it was great to see coaches here, you know, coaches here watching their players and, and so I thought we would dive into that. I know I've got some observations. I know you, you were down watching the, did you go watch the fourteens girls and boys or.

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L: Boys 16's, 18's, 14's.

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J: Wow, you got around?

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L: I did, yes. I was around South Florida quite a bit. A lot of miles on the rental car.

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J: Yeah. I just come back from vacation midweek through the clay. So I predominantly more watched the twelves boys here in Orlando. But yes. So let's, let's get into, uh, talking about some of our observations.

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L: What do you see from the boys twelves I'm curious because we haven't talked about this.

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J: No, we haven't. Um, no. Well, first of all, again, everything that I saw was in there the first few days, but everything I saw from, from basically Wednesday onwards was nothing but what I would think is pretty positive behaviors. I think the biggest thing that stood out to me, first of all was I just talk about the parents that were, you know, they were chatting to each other in the middle of matches, sitting on the bleachers together, asking each other questions at the end of matches. They would shake each other's hands and shake the player's hands of, you know, not their kids and the other kid whether they won or lost and we're congratulating them saying well done and these are parents that don't necessarily know each other. And so that was just really great to see. We always hear stories and negatives, which I don't really like diving too much into

because I'm a really big believer that we need to highlight positive, positive, the positive behaviors that go on. And so a thing that's what we can use today for his is highlighting that but then also discussing some of the challenges we're still seeing with, with overall development as well.

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L: And kudos to the parents because that's kind of their, isn't that their real first entree into...

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J: At the 12 yeah.

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L: To the national tournament scene and to be able to do that cause I know just being around other adults when for example in other sports, when playoffs come, everything gets ramped up another level and, and the intensity of the parents is, is one of those things. So it's great to hear that the parents manage things in a great way. I mean I, I guess I'll speak to, I didn't interact a lot with the parents cause I was trying to really focus in on what the players were doing. But, and in talking with some coaches as well, I get the feeling and just talking to people who are watching probably more tennis than I am at the junior level, that they're seeing a change that the kids are being even more sportsmanlike than in the past and are really competing very well. What I watched, and we can dig in deeper, but in terms of what the effort, the determination, the fight to win the match was outstanding from these kids. Just tremendous. And you got to think about the conditions in South Florida which were similar to Orlando, 95 extremely humid. And really they're playing these main, especially the main draw matches, uh, around lunchtime, one, two o'clock in the hottest part of the day. And so it is a very tough environment to compete. And there was a specific moment where I was watching two matches and I won't name the folks that were playing, but one was a backdraw match and these two young boys played for three hours in the heat and battled through a third set a tie breaker. Impressive. Especially eight, you know, our previous podcast about backdraws and people.

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J: The beauty of the backdraw.

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L: A lot more players playing the backdraw this year and not pulling out. Awesome, awesome. I think coaches and parents were doing a much better job with communicating about importance of playing the backdraw. While I'm watching this three hour match, at the same time I'm watching a four hour match going on simultaneously and these kids are just fighting their guts out and it's emotional, it's intense. And of course there's moments where they argue about line calls a little bit, mean to be expected in that environment. But then they moved on and they played tennis. So I was really impressed with just the effort level, the determination. There was less whining. Obviously if they're doing that, then they're refocusing better than they have in the past. I believe if they're able to, to keep persevering towards their goals, despite all of these, like I said, conditions, you know, it's hot out there and you get down a set, pretty easy to kind of give in to that, I would say as a youngster. Even an adult would potentially give in.

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J: That's awesome, that's really, I mean, and that's pretty consistent with what I saw here too. I mean there really wasn't hardly any withdrawals in the backdraw. Kids really competing hard till the last day that they could play. And then the main draw obviously doing the same. Have to. But they were competing hard. I mean, they wanna win and, and that's really great to see because again, I mean the, the tendency can be when you go out of a tournament is, okay, well, you know, I'm out of a tournament that sucked and I'm a loser. And all those things that people say about themselves, which, but to see people bounce back, play that. And again, we won't go dive too deep into that. You can go back and listen to the beauty of the backdraw podcast if you want to dive into that a bit.

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L: Almost exactly a year ago.

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J: Almost exactly a year ago, I think that podcast was sprouted from what we saw last year at clays and nationals and what we were saying was happening with all the withdrawals, but to highlight some of the off court behaviors. So one of the brilliant things I saw too was kids finishing matches and then going and sweeping and lining their own courts.

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L: Ah, that's awesome.

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J: Now won't say this, not every kid was doing it. Probably there should have been a lot more that could have done it. But again, it's maybe their first tournament. Some of them may be, it's that, you know, that first national tournament may be, for some of them it was their first tournament on clay. I don't know. But, so they don't know the protocols. But to see a lot of the players, especially the ones in the back, in the main draw, sorry, and especially the final two players to immediately finish their match and the first thing they did, obviously they shook hands, shook the referee's hand straight to the sweepers, and in fact in some of them the referees were like, Oh, you don't need to worry about that because the court maintenance staff are going to come and sweep the courts and do the lines and you still had the players go, no, it's okay, I'll do it. I got it. And that to me was absolutely fantastic. I can only encouraged some of those behaviors more now. The importance of that sweeping courts and doing their own lines. What, why is that so important? Well, this is really that first stage of taking responsibility, taking ownership, doing the right thing, having a sense of again, sense of doing the right thing, whether winning or losing right, especially when you saw the losers come off the court very disappointed and down on themselves, but they still have it about them and the maturity to go and then sweep their own courts. So that was really great to see and I can't speak highly enough about that, those types of behaviors and just speak so much volumes to them and may and also their families that are instilling those types of behaviors and values into their kids.

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L: I think it's great to see, and I know that didn't happen at every site, but what I would say is when you're doing that, those little things, they may not seem like a lot at the time, but you're stemming that natural trend towards entitlement, I

believe. Because when you start giving players a lot of opportunities, traveling to play tournaments, coaching a lot of time on the court, it's easy for them to take it for granted, to expect it or feel that they deserve it without having to earn it. But something small like sweeping the court and doing the lines is a great way to remind them that, you know what, you're not above this whole tennis thing that's going on. You're a part of it and it's great and you can sweep the courts and do the lines because you played on it. So I think it's a respectful way obviously to take care of your business after a match. And um, you know, we always talk about, at PD, about the idea of hitting some more after the match ends to begin that process of, of moving on and learning from the match or having a conversation with your coach. Interestingly enough, uh, I would say, you know, in these post-match situations, I don't know what players do a lot of times when they come off the court. I think a lot of times they're greeted by their parents and they go off and they do whatever. Probably talking about the match, which is great. Personally as an athlete, I liked my space. Uh, so win or lose, I wanted my space. I wanted to be able to take some time to cool down and think about what happened, especially if I lost and be able to kind of review it before I went and talked to anybody. So I know people are different and kids obviously when they're younger probably are, are more open to speaking to their parents about their matches immediately. But uh, you know, so definitely something for everyone to think about. How do you want that post-match to look like, right? Because again, building habits sweep to court, do the lines, write in your journal, go for a jog, cool-down, call your coach or talk to your coach if he or she is there, have a process. Start building that now. Little kids obviously aren't good with schedules and routines and these kinds of things, but if you begin bit by bit early on teaching them how to take care of their bodies and their minds and to learn from their match in respectful ways, then they become much better learners. We know that reflecting on matches enhances retention greatly. So if you want your kid to do well in tennis, why would you not have them take the time to speak with whatever expert coach you have working with them to review what happened, right. Timing is everything. More emotional kids need more time to calm down so they can actually think through things and process it and actually have a conversation. So you need to allow that time. But I think it's important that those post-match time periods are thought about and planned out a little bit better. If you leave kids to their own devices, they're going to go watch other matches honestly, and talk to kids and which is normal. Yeah.

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J: And they're gonna go learn stuff when they go do that as well.

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L: Well, yeah.

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J: Watching other matches.

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L: They can, I guess my point was, but that can't be in place of the cooldown and, and learning from your match and then then you go and it's great to watch other matches and break it down. And what am I seeing? But only after you're

done with what you do, because I always think about when your match ends, you're already preparing for your next match by the way you do things.

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J: So what are the, what are the, some of the things that we could do a little bit better, in your opinion from what you saw around the tournament's maybe some of the things that we can emphasize more in the camps we do and so forth.

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L: Well, I think it's, it's really comes down to how we work together. My understanding of this is that at national we're not going to change all these kids' behaviors. We're gonna create awareness, we're gonna provide resources, we're going to do camps. But habits are never formed in a one week camp. It's impossible. They're formed over weeks, over months, applied in different situations and then they hold up or they break down and then the kid supported to do it again. This is a process of learning, right? And so what we have to do is we need to be really good at communicating with the private sector and with the private coaches, with the parents about things that we know make players successful, being reasonable for their age and stage, but we'd like to see more of a couple things. I think we do those things in the camps. It's not like we don't do them, but if you want it to be there, then has to be there after the camp. And so that's we're working together and really asking the coaches and parents their ideas to on what do you think a post-match should look like for your daughter? What would you want her to do? What do you think is going to be best for her to perform and to learn? And, and I think having those conversations, it's hard because we're limited in our capacity. We can't get to every single parent, every single coach. And we don't have all the answers. We don't know every single kid, kids are different. But if we have principals that we know that work such as taking time to cool down and stretch, we all kind of understand that it's useful, uh, and, and the benefits of that. Well, how can we make that happen? I know that your, your child has came off an epic match and they're coming off the court, hug, high five. Okay, now let's go and do your cool-down and we can talk later. Right? Just go. That keeps things in perspective. It keeps things in the process. It's just one match. You win the final, you sweep the court, you do the lines, you do your cool-down, your journal. Right? Because this is going to keep their head, that's going to keep me grounded. What do you think Johnny?

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J: Absolutely, again, it's taking care of the small things that lead to the biggest improvements. Again, I mean you're forming the habits and it starts with 12 and unders because those, when your first big events start happening in your life, going to nationals, things like that. So that is the age group where you start really solidifying forming those habits because you're starting to probably play moral travel, multiple national tournaments, and then as you go through fourteens and sixteens, you'll solidifying those routines. You're solidifying the habits and now it just happens automatically without giving much thought. And it's that belief and knowing that those little things will make a difference in the long run, no matter whether you win the tournament or you lose in the first round and then maybe when a couple of backdraw matches and then lose, you stick to that process and then eventually it will reap its benefits.

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L: Right. And you're just thinking about during the match I saw players being better with their routines. It depends on the level. I think again, as you described, it's, it gets better as they get older, cause more aware, and they're able to manage their behaviors even better under stress, under adversity. But we saw for them to be able to compete the way they did under those conditions, the routines had to be really good, taking time, going to their towel, taking deep breaths. Although that needs to improve, it can be better, but we saw more, these things were better in general. I saw less rushing between points and I saw people responding well to losing points or games and coming back. And so you got in these long matches because neither player was giving in, you know sometimes the juniors you when the first set 7-5 and in the second set 6-1 over in 15 minutes, that wasn't happening very often. These kids were there to fight, they were working through the situations and the routines are better than I have seen in the past, I think.

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J: That's really good to hear and that's something we stress a lot at the camps is working on routines. And obviously when we bring in a lot of players here and know that you do a lot of that and you get on court with the players and we go through routines, so that's really great. But getting back to a little bit more of sort of the adversity side and the conditions and obviously you mentioned it was like 95 degrees. I mean you're 70, 80% humidity, heat indexes, you know, through the roof. How does a player stay determined towards their goals when they're having to deal with those conditions and probably conditions that they haven't experienced much before.

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L: Yeah, very challenging and that's why I was so impressed with so many of these kids that were playing these matches. I think you, you've got to try and take it point by point, game by game and just get into your routines and stay present. I think staying present is the biggest thing because when your mind starts to go to, how long do I have to do this or how hard this is, I don't know if I can keep going. If I lose the first set. Some of these thoughts that are normal to have in these situations, these extreme temperature environments. They were doing a good job of not giving in to those things. I'm sure they had some of those thoughts. I didn't talk to many of them. I was just there observing. I'm assuming they were having these thoughts and they were choosing to stay out there and fight and play their game. I think gap to train in those environments, honestly, you need to train under stress in different ways. As we've talked on many other podcasts, and heat is one of them. Humidity is one of them because what happens when you have that kind of synergistic effect of heat and humidity where you can get dehydration, you combine that with the stress level of playing a national, and maybe it's one of your first national tournaments. That's a good recipe for cramping and struggling out there big time and we saw some of that in kids really trying to fight through that. But I think you need to train in those environments some if you can. Not everybody can do it and I understand that. But when you can try to get out, in a healthy way, train in those environments and prepare yourself in that way, because again, you don't know how you're gonna respond until you're in that situation. And the more that you can be in a situation and training, it becomes easier to deal with when

you're there. So I think that's huge. I think, again, sticking to your routines. So these kids are getting better and better. I think at staying with routines, it's one of the most important things we talk about all the time and with the pros to when you need your routines the most. Well, when things are going bad, when things are not good, and so you're down a set and a break and it's 95 degrees, you better go to your routines. Too often I've seen players in the past just kind of rushed through like, yeah, this is not good. Um, I don't have it today. Most cases in this tournament, players were not doing that. They were slowing down, they were fighting, they were trying to play their game. They're running for balls, playing defense, throwing up lobs, doing whatever they could to scrap out and stay in the match. So fun to watch. Hey, let's talk about the emotional side though, right? What did you see? As we often talk about giant, the twelves and fourteens being very emotional, a lot of outbursts, ups and downs and a lot of reacting to what's happening emotionally, like a roller coaster, right? What did you see in terms of how kids were managing their emotions during these matches?

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J: I mean, again, overall, I mean, it was very good. It's very tough at this age because at this age they're really trying to figure out how to deal with these different stresses. The pressures they put on themselves maybe pressures they feel externally or perceived pressures. And so they're really trying to figure out how to deal with it all. And so..

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L: All at once in front of everybody.

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J: All at once. And then adding in the conditions, adding in the clay courts, which again, American players, young players won't play on clay courts a lot. Right? You know, we're a hard court playing nation, so you're adding all these things into the mix. And what's really cool to say is that those emotions under all those stressors seem to be better than say tournaments where you don't have this mix. And so it's almost like you put them in the environment where they have to show adversity and the determination comes out, but then you show, you put them in an environment that doesn't have as much a, where they don't have to deal with as much adversity with the external factors, the conditions, the environment, and it seems like it can be a little bit worse. It was really interesting to see that this time around all those external factors playing into each other and seeing the increased ability to deal with emotions better. I mean obviously you had players that would have highs and lows and as the tournament wears on, kids are getting more tired, you know, the having to fight through that as well. And so yeah, emotions can get a little bit up and down. But overall, just seeing how all the players were dealing with their was definitely better to say. And I would say that the routines, just like you said, the routines on court, were really helping them deal with those emotions.

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L: Yeah. Stands the reason that they would, right.

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J: Yeah. And at the same time as if you do go on this sort of negative spiral downwards, then that's when everything will pile on top of you twice as much

and feel like a thousand pound gorilla on your back. You know I, I was quite impressed with the ability to handle all of the external factors and whilst dealing with their emotions and handling those better and you know, why is that? I don't know. Maybe coaches, parents are doing a great job out there of helping their kids deal with their emotions better. Maybe they watched the Wimbledon final and saw that epic match and saw how they dealt with that and how they behaved and dealt with their emotions under the highs and lows that that match gave. But yeah, it was really interesting to see.

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L: A couple of thoughts Johnny, because again, really impressive efforts by these kids, when you're planning stream conditions, heat, humidity, you have to slow things down. You have to give your body time to recover, get your heart rate down. You have to slow your breathing so you can ramp it back up and go again. If you stay at a high stress level, you're probably going to struggle, right? I mean, you're probably going to run out of energy sooner. You are because you're keeping the motor revving at a higher level. So you have to learn to bring the energy level down to then bring it back up. The other part of that is, and I saw this sometimes when players, they're trying to conserve their energy between points, they get so low energy, they walk slow, they're taking time, they don't rev things back up to the next point.

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J: So to build back up.

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L: Yes, they fall in that trap of going low energy and not being ready to fully play. The next point you have to find a spouse. A flow between points is the point ends and your slow, your heart rate and your breathing. So your energy is dropping, right? The stress, the energy, the intensity. And then as you go through it levels out and then you start picking it up as you go to the line to energize again. Right. And I was thinking about when you're facing your opponent, your energy level's up usually. And when your back's to your opponent, you're, you're slowing things down, you're calming down, you're composing yourself to prepare to go again.

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J: So as we're winding down the episode here, what would you say are your three top tips with keeping determination under adversity? Like with the conditions we mentioned and other things?

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L: Well, I think number one, be prepared before you ever get in a situation by training in it, by hydrating, by eating healthy, sleeping, doing these recovery strategies. So when you get there, you're not already behind the eight ball. That's big. And then recovering every night. I think number two, follow your routines, easy to rush and get away from the things that make you successful. But we also know these extreme environments that the top players take more time to prepare themselves. Our young players need to do the same, have a consistent routine, do your deep breathing, your diaphragmatic breathing, slow things down and then learn to rev things back up. That's the flow, the between points time period. So I think that's huge. And then I think it's a pre-match and making sure you're doing a good warmup. You do your visualization before you

go out on a court, you're mentally ready, you're emotionally, you're physically ready, and then your cooldowns and making sure you're taking time to stretch and to eat something and do the things that help your body recover from what you're putting it through. So to me, those are the biggest things. But you have to understand the human body is capable of more than we realize, but sometimes we don't want to have to find out, right? So if we can make sure we're taking care of these kids, they're hydrating or eating healthy, they're getting enough rest, they can do pretty incredible things. But at this age, you're gonna need the support to do that. And it seems like the parents and coaches are doing that and helping these kids, uh, perform in these pretty tough conditions.

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J: Yeah, absolutely. It's just so important this time of year, summer hall, humid, we got to take care of the rest and recovery and not commit any unforced errors on that. Hydrate, eat well, rest, sleep, take care of all those things that we may take for granted.

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L: Right. And again, we know that young kids aren't very diligent with routines. They like to play tennis. The other stuff is stuff that leads up to playing tennis. So we have to teach them and help them understand the importance of why we do these things and connect it to how they feel on the court. Right? So we have to show them that connection. And when they start to see how A plus B equals C what they're getting from doing these off court things, then they become no diligent with it because they know what, what it does for them.

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J: Awesome. Well, that's a wrap for today's episode. That was determination under adversity. As always, for more information, go to our website, playerdevelopment.usta.com. Dr. Larry, thanks for today's episode.

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L: Thank you JP.

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J: And until next time.