Developing Emotional Strength

00:05  J: Welcome to compete like a champion. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA Player Development. Today we're going to talk about developing your emotional strength. Dr Larry, this is a is a great title.

00:18  L: Yeah, I know. I came up with it. So is that why you're saying it? It hit me like at 6:00 AM this morning.

00:24  J: Well, what's great about this is, and we'll see where it goes, but I think we've got some great things we're going to talk through, but I think this is a build-on from a previous episode we did, which was around, "Has old school coaching seen its day?". So I think this is something that we can get into that might build on top of that, but who knows, maybe it won't. We just go down rabbit holes here and, and talk about different things. So...

00:45  L: I think what we might hope to talk about is your lack of emotional control when you're playing sports when you were younger and really try to dissect that live on air.

00:56  J: Well my mom's visiting at the minute. Maybe we should get her on the podcast so she can tell you.

00:59  L: [inaudible] find a truth. Little Johnny...

01:03  J: So we all know that emotions play a massive role in competition, right? So talk a little bit about how deep of an impact they actually play when competing.

01:15  L: Well, I mean they are part of everything that we do in life and they make life good. They make the experience great. Emotions impact our ability to learn and they certainly color the experience. Your emotions color the lens at which you perceive your experiences, right? If you want to think about it that way. And so in everything we do, the emotions are going to play a role. And you talk about sport where something matters, a result, a performance, your team, for your country, it matters so much to the athletes. Emotions are going to be extremely high and there's going to be a lot of it. I remember Andreescu, Bianca Andreescu, talking about the morning of the US open final versus Serena. And she was saying in our conference about how she was like feeling these feelings and this is different. Like it wasn't a normal morning for her. And then she went about her business, her routines, do what she would do, breathing and prepared and did a great job. Won that US Open. But it just goes to show what role emotions play. You can look at every single match and you, if you listen to the announcers, they're talking about emotion. This player is full of emotion. They're excited, they're fired up. You know, this one looks down, they look disappointed in that last break. This player is very angry right now, has lost his focus, right? So emotions are innately, inherently is a better word, part of the
experience. And they make the experience good. You know, when you watch a player coming from behind and you just feel this energy, right? This confidence growing, this momentum. And the emotion that's in there, that excitement and you're feeling that with them many times, right?

And so you, you really feel that those emotions are driving behavior, pushing behavior. And then on the flip side, emotions can push behavior in a way you don't want to. A player's getting down, they're upset, they're really, really frustrated with themselves or with what's going on, and you can see them getting down on themselves. Shoulders drooping, the head going down, the feet slowing down. The emotions are dictating behavior. So I like to think that emotions, if thoughts are the drivers of behavior, our goals, our expectations, our values, our fears, thoughts are drivers of behavior. Your emotions are the hijackers. They come in and they take over. Oh no, I got the wheel. Let me drive for a while. Maybe it's going to be for five seconds. Maybe it's going to be longer than that, but I'm taking the wheel and we may crash and we may get to where we want to be, but emotions are very much, they're very powerful. They're momentary, they dictate behavior and that's what they're meant to do. Evolutionary, there's a reason why we have emotions.

J: Yeah. It's funny you say that the mind gets hijacked. Great book out there, one in the UK, it's called the Chimp paradox.

L: Oh yeah, yeah, I'm aware of that one. Yeah.

J: In that it's all about basically the emotional part. When the emotional part of the brain takes over again, it gets hijacked. They call that the Chimp. You know. And then they call, and when we're thinking clearly with the front part of our brain, our frontal lobe, and we're able to digest tough situations better and we can think clearer and make better decisions. That's our human brains. That's us. That's me, Johnny, that's you, Larry, thinking clearly. But when we're not thinking clear, we've been hijacked, the chimps hijacked our thoughts and our brains.

L: So the chimp's driving the bus?

J: The chimp's driving the bus.

L: That's not good.

J: And the book talks about, we want to label our chimps. So one of the first exercises of the book is naming your chimp.

L: Naming the chimp...

J: So at this little chimp of a, I don't know, a toy bear or whatever, when I was a kid called Grilly, so I just called my chimp Grilly.
L: I like that, Grilly.

J: Yeah, I had a player I did this exercise with. It's hilarious and she labeled her chimp Pablo.

L: Nice.

J: Pablo the chimp.

L: I'm naming mine like Caesar from Planet of the Apes or something. He's a beast.

J: Caesar. But it goes to this point so that you know, when this hijacking happens, I mean, do we really understand emotions?

L: No, I don't think we do. I honestly, I don't think that we take the time in school to really understand and dissect emotions and the role that they play in our lives. And oftentimes we're parented to actually just control our emotions. Don't show emotion, right? Okay, you're going to love this. You know, conceal don't reveal. Elsa from Frozen. Right? Okay.

J: I know all about that at the minute.

L: Yeah I thought he could connect with that, right Kate? So he watches that every day I think. He sings the songs.

J: Absolutely, we watch every day.

L: Yeah. But this idea that being strong is to actually not show emotion. I think we got it all wrong. Actually being able to have those emotions, which are natural and to be human because they're instinctually in us. That's the chimp idea. They're instinctual. Then to honor those, we can actually start to have a conversation about responding to them in effective ways. But if we're always trying to suppress them, ignore them, push them down, what happens? I'd like to talk to the players that I work with about a volcano and I'm really interested in volcanoes, but I won't bore people in this podcast about volcanology. But anyway, and it has nothing to do with Star Trek, Johnny. But anyway, when a volcano is about to erupt, there's pressure that has been built over millions, thousands of years, right, inside of that mountain. And eventually, uh, you know, even though it tries to vent, these fissure cracks are on like on the sides of the, of the volcano and steam's coming out. Eventually the pressure becomes too much and it blows its top, right? And sometimes in magnificent ways in what we see, and it can do a lot of environmental damage, but I kind of equate that to emotion in that if we're always, like when I was young, trying to suppress it, not knowing how to understand it, how to deal with it, thinking it was bad to show it, but not being able to control it. Eventually it would just go boom and explode and it would come out in an exaggerated bad way. So this is where the
racket goes flying through the air. This is where people scream out vulgarities
this is when bad stuff happens when we're just trying to control it and push it
down versus actually feel it, understand it, and then move through it.

07:11  J: Well, and then they get accentuated even more or accelerated even more
when you've got that person telling you this and everyone's had it told to them,
calm down. When someone tells you to calm down that eruption wants to
happen even sooner. You're like, you're telling me to calm down?!

07:26  L: I feel like you've said this to your wife and it didn't go well. That's why you're
saying this.

07:29  J: She's probably said it to me and it hasn't gone well.

07:31  L: Oh, okay. Yeah, sure.

07:32  J: So it's actually vice versa. But it goes back to, so sometimes you know, you see
a lot of coaches or parents and, and you know, kids are on the court and you
can see them getting frustrated and they're kind of talking through the fence.
It's like, you know, don't get angry, control your emotions, calm down. You
know? Well, reality is is that they don't know how to comprehend that. They
don't know how to, they actually don't know how to receive that information
because of the state that they're in, which is, they're under a little bit of
hijacking. And again, depending on what age they are and how developed their
brains are, we know the brain isn't fully developed until the mid twenties in
most cases. Right? So dealing with emotions. So I prefer to use the terminology,
learning how to manage our emotions versus control them. Because you know, I
think the expectations are, the older you are, the more you should be able to
control your emotions. But the younger you are, there should be, I don't think
there should be any expectations that a young 10-year-old, 11-year-old, 12-
year-old, 13-year-old, 14-year-old should be able to control their emotions. But
they can manage them by putting things in place that can help them manage
them. But even through doing that, there might still be patience required until
that person is at a maturity level, let's say, or a stage where they're able to
receive information and actually then implement those management strategies
in a more effective way.

08:47  L: Yeah, and talking about effective coping skills and this is something, if I could
go back, I would change it. We used to talk about emotional control all the time
and it's even in the skills and drills book, but I really agree now the idea would
be to manage those emotions and honor them and respect them because
they're normal and they're natural and...

09:05  J: You called it control, but it was, but then when you went through the
exercises, they were management strategies.
L: They were, yes. It was just the way we were using the word at that period of time. But you know, I think it will help the listeners to think about, you know, where did these things come from? You talked about the Chimp paradox and how these things are written into us instinctually is not like a baby has to be taught to be disgusted by something, right? If they taste something they don't like, they make a face, they have an emotion, right? So these things are hardwired into us to keep us safe. Okay? That's the first thing. Uh, if you go back in time and people, it was a much more violent society, you know, and we're cave men, cave women and people are attacking one another and living off the land. And there weren't many rules of society. There weren't any rules really. And, and there were no laws to protect people. People would just do what they wanted to do. And those that were able to use the, the emotion, the anger, the fear, these kinds of emotions that are deeply hardwired into us had a better chance of surviving and therefore procreating. And those things then become a part of our genes, right? They become written into us. So these emotions are there to help us be safe and you know, and more about, our environment now more civilized, you know, then maybe 10,000, 15,000 years ago to be productive, to be successful. But our brains are hardwired to pick up these things quickly. And it uses emotions to direct our behavior. And this is why emotions hijack our conscious behaviors because they're meant to. So if you're walking somewhere downtown and you see a dark alley and you hear a noise, you're gonna feel a sense of fear and what comes with that, the heartbeat is, is going to get fast. Breathing is going to get shallow. You're going to start sweating, the hair is going to go up in the back of your neck, right? Blood's being pumped to the extremities so you can take flight or if you have to, to fight. And there's a good evolutionary reason for that because that's a survival instinct, right? So that fear is there to protect you. Now how we do, again, in more civilized society, this fear is being placed upon things that like threats to our ego, to being successful are, you know, self esteem, et cetera. Right? And so, you know, we, we fear things that maybe aren't really that big a deal, but they are in our minds, right? And so this fear gets, gets kicked off, but we have to understand that these emotions are there to help us. And so we're going to do, can we do an exercise really quickly, Johnny?

J: Absolutely.

L: All right. So you're going to be the student here.

J: Okay.

L: And it's a question I asked athletes often, and that is do emotions have benefit in tennis performance? Do they benefit your performance?

J: Yes.

L: Okay. Let's go through them. Does anger help your performance?
J: Me personally?

L: Yeah.

J: It can.

L: And how?

J: Sometimes I get, if I got angry with the way that I'm playing and it helps motivate me to give better effort or to problem solve better than yes. If anger though took the form of swearing, throwing racket, going into that [inaudible] mode, then absolutely not. Performance goes down.

L: So what you're talking about is channeling a response to an emotion. You're still having the emotion.

J: Yes.

L: Step number one is to be aware of what you're feeling and to recognize that you don't control the fact that you had that feeling.

J: Okay.

L: Remember, it's instinctual. A part of being able to channel that is to also accept that this emotion can give me something, can give me a performance advantage. It can help drive behavior in a way that I want it to. It doesn't have to drive it in an unintentional way. That's not good for me. Or at least leaving it to chance. And so things like anger, anger gives you what? It gives you energy. You want to take action when you're angry. It's just typical that we're not taught how to channel our anger. Don't get angry, don't get angry. Especially young girls. You can't be angry. That's not appropriate. What do young boys do? We get angry and we, we try to get revenge. We try to get back at somebody, right? We don't, we're not taught how to use this anger in a way that is pro social and is positive, but it gives you energy and I didn't learn this until my early twenties so I'm not acting like I had this figured it out early you learn that, okay, that energy, it's just energy. How do I want to use it? So if I can move my focus from the fact that okay, this guy hit me with his hockey stick and everything in the world, every part of my being wants to punch this guy in the face is to focus on, okay, stick down, move your feet, play the puck and bringing that energy to my feet, to my effort to play the game. I had a problem, as I've told many of my athletes when I was younger, of being aggressive as a hockey player. That's why I did the work I did when I was in my twenties and thirties of working with hockey players and teaching them how to be tough and yet clean hockey players. The idea was that you can channel the emotion. You don't have to suppress it. You have to be aware of it, understand what it gives you and control what you can control and that's your response to the emotion. That's it. And all the work I've done with hockey players, including myself over the years and, and
I have to thank a couple people for this, Dan Gould, Peter Haberl, Cal Bateral, Wayne Hollowell, people who really either directly or through reading their work have helped me a lot to understand this and get better at it. When you feel a feeling, you can't stop that feeling from happening, but because of the way you're managing your response, you can de-intensify that emotion. Right?

If that makes sense, Johnny?

14:39

J: Yeah.

14:39

L: So I'm angry because I just missed an overhead and then if I stand there and stare at it, guess what's going to happen? The anger is going to rise and it's going to rise. As much as I try to push it down, my mind is focusing on how bad that is. That should never happen. I'm blowing it. Why do I always do that? And then boom, and a behavior comes out. But there was a lot of stirring on the internal before we ever saw the behavior, right? Is to be able to, emotional strength is to recognize that emotion accepted as normal, but the fact that I don't control that, I feel it, but I know that that emotion is passing through me. It's going to go out the other side. What I want to do is control my response so I breathe so I can turn my prefrontal cortex back on. Cause it really kind of gets turned off right when you're getting instinctual and start to make good decisions. Does that make sense? So now instead of letting my emotions hijack and dictate my behavior unintentionally, I'm still feeling the feelings, but I'm choosing the response. And that's, to me, that's emotional strength. It's not pushing it down, ignoring it. I never get sad, you know, I never get scared. No, everybody has those feelings. That's human. But it's to be aware of those things except them and embrace them and use them. Use what they give you. What does frustration give you, Johnny? When you get frustrated does it have some benefit.

16:01

J: Frustration. No.

16:04

L: It does. Believe it or not. People will say yes to anger about half. Frustration, almost everybody says no when I asked them, but it truly does. It's just harder to find it. In fact, frustration is a signal from your brain. Hey Johnny, guess what? The goal you had is not, you're not reaching it, it's being blocked. You need to do something about that. So your brain is telling you to make a change, to recommit to your strategy, to figure it out. Imagine if we didn't have that emotion of frustration when we really try to problem solve that much. Think about a kid who doesn't care about what they're doing. You take him to play a sport and they don't like it and they don't want to be there. They try to problem solve. It's like tanking, right?

16:43

J: Within that level of frustration be divided up versus what can be done short term versus long term because I felt, I feel like my frustration in the longterm is beneficial in that if I get frustrated for long enough, I'm going to come up with a strategy.

17:01

L: It's directing behavior.
J: Right, to direct that. But in the short term that frustration can be outside of your control in a lot of cases. So therefore it could lead to that frustration. Does it become productive? Because maybe that then leads to making irrational short term decisions that aren't helpful.

L: But now you're talking about letting it dictate your response versus you choosing the response. And I'm not saying that it's easy. It's hard sometimes. Cause I again, I, I've been studying this and working at it for over 25 years and I still find it difficult sometimes. The point is that that frustration that you feel is normal and it's going to be there. How is it that you want to respond to it? It could take a few moments. That's why players have routines and go through their breathing rituals and look at their strings and take time so they can calm down just enough so they can start to think clearly again, right? So you're pointing that out JP, with your own behavior, right? Longterm being frustrated actually has some benefits if you can direct it in a good way. Short term, the same thing. It has benefits because that gives you a push to try to figure things out. But you can go multiple paths. You can get frustrated and then angry and then not really change anything and just use an ineffective strategy, but you're stubborn, so I'm going to make this happen and it didn't work. You can get frustrated and down on yourself, so now your energy is dipping and maybe this is where people start talking about tanking and going away or you can get frustrated and then determined, like okay, I want to figure this out. And that's what you see, you know, if you look at like, like Dweck's work with growth mindset and people that have a growth mindset still get frustrated when they can't figure something out, but they get determined to figure it out. Right? And that's what you're talking about at first. I'm frustrated and it's annoying to me. I'm having these feelings, but it's driving behavior.

J: Yeah. We're giving some nuggets to the listeners here with reading books. There's another one that I just finished going through and read it because I'm, you know, I've got a two and a half year old that's a borderline mini terrorists at the minute, but I love her to death. But, uh...

L: You know, the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree.

J: Well yeah, that's what I get told all the time, especially from my wife. She blames it all on me, which she's probably not wrong.

L: I agree with your wife.

J: But it's a fantastic book. I was moved onto this book, my wife actually made me read this book, and I'm, I'm really pleased she put it in my hands, but it's called a Whole Brain Child by a guy called Daniel Siegel and, uh, I believe Tina Bryson. Either way. And in the book, it talks about these, I guess, these revolutionary strategies on how to nurture your child's developing mind. So it often talks a lot about rewarding, consequence, punishment, things like that. It gave a lot of examples about, you know, most of us, I'm sure, many of you on the listeners here of you know, put your kids in timeout or you've, if you're a
coach, you've sat your kid down on the court and you've, you know, you've told them that they've got to sit out. That's essentially a timeout. And the book talks about how every stage, even until that brain is fully developed through the mid twenties the brain is, is always changing. It's changeable and it's complex. And so it came at it from a whole brain strategy, which is, essentially, if we go back to that previous episode that we talked about with the, the old school coaching, it talks about how we want to take a learning approach, an understanding approach. How do we help the child, how do we understand our child and what they're thinking, and what they're feeling more. But I really like it. It came down to those three things. I mean if we, if we, if we realize that the brain is always changing, it's changeable, which means it's adaptable and it's complex, you know, meaning that there are many, many things that are going in and out of the brain at a given time, then that can help inform the way that we help our child understand emotions. So knowing that their brain is always changing, that works both ways. It's changing biologically. It's changing through experience. It's changing through knowledge. It's changing through... I'm just tying all that to experience, right? And then changeable meaning every experience that we get, either good or bad is helping change the way that we think, the way that we feel, the way that we behave.

21:11 L: Yes.

21:12 J: And then understanding the complex nature of each individual, which I think, you going through that exercise with me there, I'm sure answers are going to be very, very different based off each person. Right? So, but I really liked that. And I think it's understanding that we are molding brains for a long time and we're molding brains so they understand the, you know, their emotions and how to deal with them and how to manage them. And it's, it's gotta, it's gotta be on a two way street of listening, learning, understanding, and coming up with exercises like you just did with me that can help us move forward with, I guess, those right management strategies to, to understand emotions.

21:49 L: Yeah. And I'll go back to what we talked about in the old school coaching episode that a lot of times as adults we're under a time crunch or we're feeling like someone's disobeying us or disrespecting us. And that's when we often don't, we do not use these strategies. But one of, one thing you have to remember is that children typically are not trying to disrespect you. They're not thinking about that cause they're focused on themselves, right? They're focused on their needs and that's their capacity at that point. And through time we teach them to consider other's needs and consider how others are feeling and those kinds of things, but they at a young age, it's hard for them to even process that. So I think it's very important that we honor emotions that we, that we talk about them, we talk to players and our children about how to manage them, how to control them. You know, your strategies at a young age are far more structured, you know? Okay, count backwards from 10 when you get angry, make sure you get yourself out of the situation, breathe, and then come up with a good thing that you can do instead of something that might hurt somebody, right? So you give them very structured things and then as, as players or people
get older, really diving to this understanding of where these things come from I think is so important. But I think one thing we’ve got to do here is that we have to normalize these feelings and understand that feeling this way does not make you vulnerable. It makes you powerful because of the energy that these emotions give you. Even when you feel sad, there’s a reason for that. It’s to reflect and to learn from this experience. It’s going to make you wiser. It’s going to make you more connected either to the memory, maybe of a person that you’ve lost or to people that are close to you that are, that are still living. So I think that all of these emotions serve a purpose. And we need to talk to young people about this so that when they go through these tumultuous teenage years and they’re struggling with their emotional responses because of their hormones and changes, the brain is changing a lot during these years as you were pointing out that we can help them to manage those things. And, and instead of, we say, don’t get angry, just calm down. We’re not honoring that. And in a simple technique that I learned in a book from, I can’t remember the book now, I’d have to go find it, but from a elementary teacher was just that honor the emotion. Oh, I see that you seem frustrated. Do you want to talk to me about that? And I tried that with a player that I struggled to get through in tennis and she was younger, she didn’t really want to open up. So one day on court she was getting really upset and I’m like, all right, I’m going to try this approach. I say, hey, you know I see that you’re, you’re getting upset, is there anything you want to tell me about, and then this is kinda like the, she started talking more than she had before. And so I think it, it just showed me that when we start to honor people’s feelings, they start to feel like, you know what, yeah, they’re not judging me for how I feel. They respect me that I’m human and it’s okay to feel this way, but you control how you respond to it and that’s the key. And once you take ownership over that, then big changes can start to happen. That’s when it happened for me. The hockey players I worked with, the tennis players I work with, when you understood what you can control and actually started taking steps instead of saying like, wow, it’s like that light switch. I flip it, the lights come on. You hit me with your stick, you’re getting punched. I can’t control it. Actually I can, as can other people, but it’s going to take an understanding and it’s going to take skills.

J: That’s great. And so if we wanted to give, we’re short on time here, but I want, I want to, if you’re talking to players about the best way to help channel their emotions, how would they do that?

L: Yeah, so if you want to develop your emotional strength, I think first thing is to listen to this podcast. Yeah, right there.

J: There’s a little self plug right there.

L: Self plug... But understand what your emotions give you and to respect them and understand that you don’t control what you feel. Very important, secondly, is you control how you respond to how you feel. I always think of what Jerry Seinfeld said in his stand up. If all of our thoughts and feelings were facts, then we either all be dead or murderers. Cause everybody has these things, right,
these urges and anger and frustration and wanting to act on that. But we don't because these things aren't facts. So you control your response and then switch the focus to being determined to taking an action that's going to make things better, whatever that might be in that situation. In my situation in hockey, it was to get my stick down on the ice, move my feet, and really use that energy just to be determined to make a good hockey play and in tennis it can be to recommit to your strategy and to being physical and moving fast and playing your game.

J: That's awesome! Well, Dr. Larry Lauer, that has been an incredible episode of how to develop your emotional strength. If you haven't listened to the previous episode, go ahead and take a listen to "Has old school coaching seen its day", so it tees this one up pretty nicely and hopefully players that are listening to this particular podcast have got a lot out of that. For information, you can always go to our website playerdevelopment.usta.com. Go to our review page, scroll down to the bottom of the podcast page and leave us a review, leave us comments about what you'd like us to discuss and talk about. Happy and always open to suggestions. So until next time, Dr. Larry and I are clocking out.