J: Welcome to compete like a champion podcast. You're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skills specialist, and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA player development. On today's episode. This one is titled performing like you practice. And we're going to explore some of the concepts, the, the legendary UCLA basketball coach John Wooden used and create great discussion based off that.

L: Well, that's our hope anyway. The audience can judge that, not us.

J: We'll see if we're Alice and we go down the rabbit holes.

L: Oh, most definitely. There'll be rabbit holes.

J: So I, I've been reading a lot about John Wooden and I wasn't fortunate enough to be around when he was in his obviously element winning I think he won 10 championships in a 12 year span at UCLA, which is just unbelievable. And John nicknamed the, uh, the wizard of Westwood here as I, as I learned he was a legend in every sense of the game. He, he knew the game well. He knew how to teach the sport, but he was also, you know, what you would call a life skills coach. He really knew how to try and take care of all the things off the court as well. You know, one case being here, there's the legendary story about how he'd even teach his players about how to pull their socks up. Right? So they wouldn't have wrinkles if they had wrinkles, you'd have blisters, if you have blisters that affects performance, blah blah blah. Again, something we might have mentioned previously, but what, what we, we talk about when performing like you practice, I think first of all we need to talk about the practice environment cause we can't perform like we practice if we have a terrible practice environment.

L: Or even mediocre.

J: Or mediocre. So one thing, I wrote down a few notes here on something that I learnt and it reminded me of lot about, what a lot of our staff and a lot of people who have been fortunate [inaudible] to Jose Higueras, legendary tennis coach is that they were very similar, very similar in principles, very similar and philosophies and and so that was a pretty cool connection to see. But when we talk about the practice environment is like how are practices, what is required, what are the standards from our athletes and what are the, what are the qualities that the coach needs to exhibit in order to set, set those principals in stone for their players. And one thing that he, he'd mentioned was that practices were very, very businesslike and very grueling. So almost like he was trying to make the practices a lot harder than the, than the competition. And in order to do that, he talked about how important the preparation was, not only from a coaching standpoint but from a player standpoint, getting all the little things right before you prepare for practice. And then it was planning for practice, you know, mentally planning. We know we've talked a lot about the
visualization and all that, but he talked about a lot of being proactive and disciplined with the planning. And then then it was the practice itself. Practicing extremely hard, pushing yourselves, applying yourselves. And by doing that it was then then relying on the execution and believing in the execution. And so when I, when we talk about like that, what, what comes to mind with you, especially as, as you, you're out there a lot, Larry looking at a lot of our practices with like the pro players that are here, a lot of our junior camps that we have in. Well, what do you see in regards to the environment that is set for the practices and then what you’re seeing with performances out there?

L: Well I think, you know, first thing that comes to mind is that, you know, Jose Higueras does an amazing job of setting expectations and that's what you're talking about with Wooden too, right? There's a clear set of expectations of how practice is going to go, the way we're going to do our business. And Jose talks about that all the time as that you set the expectations and then you hold them accountable for it. As long as they agree to it. If they don't want to do it, that's fine, but they don't have to practice then with Jose or with John Wooden so that that comes first. And so as a coach, really what is it you're expecting out of your players in terms of how practices occur, how the effort is applied, the way that they work, the way they do things, even the way they move between drills or you know, the, the water breaks cause Jose talks about water breaks and how those should go and how much you should talk and sometimes being quiet. And so really the details, right? And so I think that that's the first thing that comes to mind is how are you structuring that? How are you creating those expectations with the player? And then the second part is, are you holding them accountable for those things? Are you letting them know what's expected and reminding them and then when you don't see it, how do you handle that, right? And I think Jose does a tremendous job of, you know, and, and very positive ways of, of letting him know what he wants from the player. You know, and he won’t always say it, but the way he does the drill that forces the player to move. It forces the player to work. He might make a joke about it, you know, not in a divisive way or to point them out, but just kind of joke about something in a fun way. And then if he's not getting what he wants and he moves closer to them and he starts saying maybe more seriously tune like no seriously like you got to get going here. If he's not getting what he wants then he might pull them aside. But I think what you find with Jose, and I never see one of John Wooden's practices, I've read about my, you know obviously quite a bit. There was a level of accountability that you may not see in other practices. You know, the, the intensity, the work on task and you talked about businesslike, so when I go and watch practices, players are getting better, are having fun, but it's not the goofy kind of just joking around kind of fun. It's the hard work, the intensity, enjoying putting the work in, knowing what that's going to create later. And I think again, another 'Jose-ism' is this game should be fun. The hard work should be fun because you know what's gonna make you better and you're gonna be able to play in the matches better. So yeah, many times I, I find that the, these great coaches practices actually are, are harder than the matches or the games.
J: Yeah, no, absolutely. And what was interesting is, is he, he was saying, John, John Wooden, was saying his daily goal was to focus purely on improvement and the ongoing maximum progress was down to and this is where the similarities came in, it was down to full effort, engagement. That was the standard. And that is something that the, I know Jose talked to us a lot, it's part of our, it's part of our training standards that we try to get right that we require out of the athletes is to have full effort and engagement. And so it was just very interesting that that's the daily goal. And, and, and by doing that he said he actually found that helped remove stress because the focus was purely on that, that relentless desire for maximum progress to improve.

L: Yeah. I remember, you know, a James Blake's book and his coach, Brian Barker, he talked about that a lot about how Brian's message was every day, just getting better, getting better. Let's not worry about the outcome. Let's just get better. You know, and keep being engaged in that, that kind of great project that you have that you have this talent, you have this skill level but you can, you continue to grow it and make it better. Right? And what a cool opportunity that is. But a lot of times, you know, players get lost in outcomes, winning, losing rankings and we talk about pros, money, glory, who's getting what from what sponsors, all this stuff. And what the great coaches are doing is saying, let's cut out all that noise. It's about your effort, your engagement in getting better.

J: Yeah, absolutely. So if you can set that training environment, and it's obviously going to take time, it's going to take time to make that the norm. It's going to take time to teach that to your, to your students, to your athletes. Now that we can get past that in that, that is our training environment. Now we get into that performing like we practice and there were six distinct things here that kind of stuck out to me. He said the difference between you and your rivals comes down to basically your organization and execution. So he said six things here was, you always want to be constantly thinking. That was the first one. Second one was you want to never be out-fought or out-hustled. Third one was to always have faith, so self-belief. Fourth, have respect for, but without fear of every opponent and have confidence without cockiness in regard to yourself. Enjoy the thrill of the hard fights and be a competitor when the going gets tough, really get going.

L: These are great ideas and in principles I find, you know, as I react to some of these, the first one be constantly thinking. I mean I think it sometimes we have different opinions on this where you'll have, you'll here coaches say, Oh I don't want the player to think, but in reality you need to think. You just need to think simple. And this is something that I hear from Jose, and I always remember from Jose is that keep it simple. So he's not asking the player to not think. You have to make decisions out there. You have to be able to read what's happening with your opponent and with the ball, the ball you send them, the ball they send back, but as a very simple, almost subconscious process, right, where you're trusting your training. So be constantly thinking in the practice environment. You know, that can be as simple as just engaging in what you're doing and, and being aware of the decisions that you're making, holding yourself accountable.
But that also can be okay. I just, I just messed something up. Instead of just saying like, whatever, it's just practice, let's actually learn from it. What, what happened and how can I make it better? You know what? What am I going to do about this?

08:44

J: Yeah. I like how he says, you've got to be constantly thinking because as it relates to tennis, any sport go to make decisions as a really cool documentary that's, that's going to come out I believe on Amazon prime around football and Lionel Messi and one thing Guardiola talked about with Messi was the first five, 10 minutes of the game, he's looking left and he's looking right, he's looking down the field. He's almost looking like he's in a bit of cruise control, but what Guardiola says is that he's actually assessing the field, he's assessing the formation that the opponents have. He's assessing how a defender's particularly moving so that when he does get the ball, where to exploit their weak areas and then that's how he, that that's his greatest strength is that the guys always thinking, he's assessing and he's trying to make a decision, the best decision on then how he's going to attack.

09:32

L: Yeah. That's, that's pretty impressive, huh? I'll have to watch, when I watch him play now, I'd be looking at it differently, right?

09:37

J: Yeah. Yeah. I mean it's, it's pretty, but the same thing goes for tennis, right? I mean, every shot that you hit is a decision you make. Every spot that you recover to in the court is a decision you have to make. Do I recover a little bit deeper here, do I recover closer to the baseline? Does this shot go in that position? Every shot is a decision. And so if you're not thinking and you're just relying on basically the subconscious to kick in and every shot becomes automatic, then, and I know you want an element of that, but there's gotta be an element of, of making decisions especially under pressure situations.

10:12

L: Well, I think what we try to do is to get into the automatic in many ways, but also have this switch or this ability to recognize quickly that those are poor decisions or I'm making mistakes. Why is that? I'm starting to lose. Why is that? And being able to catch that quickly and then processing what's actually happening. I think we don't want players thinking about every mistake that they make and trying to fix it because then they just overanalyze, overthink. But they have to think enough. If I miss the same backhand three times, that might be where I need to take a step back and be like, okay, why am I missing that shot the way I am? Well, okay, you're not getting behind the ball or whatever it may be. Um, you're not in a position for it. Or, you know, with my backhand it could be many things. So, but uh...

10:56

L: Watch out. Yeah, well it's gotten better over the last 25 years, but as some of these other things though, I mean I think all coaches would obviously, you know, attend to like never being out-fought, out-hustled. Then it just comes down to challenging people to be that way, right? And I think you, you actually, you probably see more of this like in combat or collision sports like hockey or football where we have, we put in place games where you have to really out-
hustle and out-work your opponent to win, you know, little small, 2V2 games. We're not supposed to them anymore, but Oklahoma drills, stuff like that where your success is often based on how much you're willing to work. We used to do these backchecking drills in practice, in hockey, and if you aren't ready to work, you had no chance because you weren't going to catch the guy in front of you, right? So a mean, I think good coaches, they ask for these things but then they, don't you think Johnny, they set up drills that require players to actually bring that level of hustle or work?

J: Yeah, well I think we're responsible for setting that environment. We're, we're responsible for setting up the drill so that it requires the hustling and the fighting for the balls and, and combining that with, with our training standards of you must give full effort and will full effort for this drill means chasing every single ball or you know, whatever that that may mean for that drill. But there's something also the, you know, the, that the book by Brad Gilbert, you know, winning ugly, something that he used a lot, and premised a lot was just fighting hard and now hustling and that sometimes you're not going to be playing your best, but you've got to win ugly by hustling hard and always trying to out-fight your opponent. And that's something he was known for as a player. And it's, and it's something that he talked about that he tried to, you know, he, he tried to instill in Andre Agassi and, and others that he's worked with. When you think about the modern game, you, you probably think about Rafa Nadal as a guy that out-hustles, and out-fights his opponent. And then maybe on the women's game at the minute, you're probably thinking about Halep. Halep is somebody that hustles very, very hard. Uh, you know, having one French Open title last year. She had that epic three set with Sloane, Sloane Stephens. Then this year, you know, just fighting and hustling, uh, at Wimbledon. I mean, it was pretty impressive to see. And then she just, she utterly out-fought Serena in the final, I mean, she, she chased down everything Serena was, was throwing the kitchen sink at her and she had a response to everything. Now I know it's not Serena's best match she's played, but you know, we can't take that away from Halep who just out-hustled, out-full. And that can create confidence that that self-belief, all these things can start going hand in hand to create the right nucleus to be able to come out and talk. But you gotta be thinking about she's that performing, is that what she's doing in practice every day? And you're thinking, well, you, I don't think you can perform like that and have those things come together in the right way unless you're practicing in the right way.

L: Right. Yeah. You're building habits. We're talking about habits, right? And habits come from values or choices that you make that I want to be a certain way. You do it often enough, it becomes a habit and you do your habits long enough you can create excellence. And that's what it like a Halep or Nadal have been able to do because of their work rate, their effort level, their intensity, they've turned that into an advantage. Right? But you, like for example, watching Nadal practice, it's not like he is laissez-faire in practice. He's super intense so there's a way that they do things that sets him up for the matches. And we always talk about, with players in training, try to treat the practices as much like a match as possible because if you want to be able to deal with the
stress of a match and you want to be able to perform at the high level, then you have to do it in practice. Build that habit. Don't be surprised when you go on a bus three out of five and you're playing a top 20 player and you get surprised at just how hard that they work. That that's a controllable. Jim Curry always talks about, you can't control a lot of things, but you can control your preparation and how you work. Right? Being in the gym and, and, and certainly you know, your effort level, you know, your attitude. So I think that that's something, again, if we go back and you're turning, how do you move from practicing and, and starting to perform in a certain way, performing the way you want, your intensity and practice has to closely or get close to what you do in matches. And that for young people is very hard.

15:11

J: Absolutely. There's an interesting quote we have. I think we've all heard this one. Failing to prepare is preparing to fail. I was just thinking about that, when you were talking about controlling the preparation, but as that famous quote, failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

15:23

L: I think that Vince Dooley from Georgia, maybe, I don't know.

15:25

J: He also talked about another one that was failing to prepare for failure can prevent success. So almost that, that proactive effort to keep striving, he always talked about how perfection was impossible and now we need to capitalize, capitalize on imperfection. And he talked about it in a way that, you know, not just failing to prepare, prepare to fail, but failing to prepare for failure, which I thought was just an interesting term.

15:46

L: Okay. So, and I love this and this, this piggybacks off another podcast we talked about failing, failing forward and using your failure to grow. There's so many instances in practice where you can take this quote and you can apply it, right? Because players are missing often in practice cause they're trying things, they're working on things and using those opportunities, not just to teach them something technical or tactical, but also from a, a mental standpoint of, okay, so you're struggling with this drill now how can we make a little bit better and can you continue to persist and, apply that effort that you need to make it better so we're not going to give in here. You gotta keep going, right? And that makes sense. And working on that motivational part as well, which I think good coaches do a really good job of motivating the players or facilitating their motivation to continue to persist and work at things in the practice. So when you hear something like that, they, the good coaches are using the failure that happens in the practice to help them learn from it so that they're ready for that when it happens in a match. So if in practice, when I make mistakes, I throw up my hands, I yell out, I curse, I do whatever. A good coach is going to help a player start to manage that. Now they may let it go sometimes, especially for the older ones, the pros for example, but they're not going to let it go too much because they know that they don't want to build a habit in the way that they respond to failure. They want to respond with accepting it, having a clear mind about what they need to do and making objective decisions, right? You're in an emotional situation. Can you make objective decisions? I just slapped one down
the line from way behind a baseline and started throwing up my hands and
yelling, I'm so bad. Being able to take a step back and let yourself know that,
you know what, that wasn't the correct decision. Next time you want to go
heavy cross, go high cross and keep yourself in the point. That's what good
coaches are coaching and they're, they're teaching the players how to think and
make those decisions and, and respond to failure. Respond to the mistakes that
they make.

J: Yeah. And obviously doing that enough creates then a positive habit, a good
habit of how we're dealing with that. So let's talk about, so we set the training
environment, we feel like we've got that right. We're starting to see
performances go our way. So now we're starting to win a lot and I want to bring
this to a quote the, again, I love this one. Winning breeds winning but can also
breed complacency, which is the most common offspring of winning. So, so now
we've gotten everything right, not everything, but we got most things right.
We're starting to see the performances pay off. The performances are starting
to turn out like how we practice and we're practicing like how we perform. But
now how do we deal with that winning and how do we do it in a way that stops
us from getting carried away, stops us from becoming complacent to a point
where actually maybe now we let our standards go a little bit and we start to,
the environment starts to break down a little bit because you're getting a little
bit too comfortable with now that you think that because you're winning that
now you don't need to put in the work. So how do we, how do we make sure
that that complacency doesn't come?

L: That's a great question. And it's one that winning teams are winning athletes
have to face, right? And part of that is finding ways to get better. You look at the
top of the game, those players keep trying to find ways to get better because
they know as soon as they stop, they're going to get past. And so that's part of
this, right? As you find new challenges. Uh, I remember listening to Alex van
Pell, who's a quarterbacks coach for the Packers and about Aaron Rogers and
finding, you know, when you have the MVP of the NFL and an amazing player,
how do you challenge a guy like that? Well, you have to find ways, you know, it
can't be superficial ways, but find real things that he can work on, that
challenges him that excites him, right? And getting better. So I think that's one
thing, you know, and then I think the second thing is when you have, when you
have a lot of confidence, when you're winning, I agree, that's when the seeds of
losing are sown. When you start cutting back on certain things, when you start
cutting corners, maybe not preparing as well, doing maybe less of a warm up or
a less engaged warm up, maybe cooling down less. You start, the routine starts
to crumble a little bit on the edges, catch it right there. Let your players know
that it's, these are the things that create your success. So don't go away from it.
As soon as you do, that's when you start, you're going to start to lose. And you
don't want to have to try and fight your way out of the hole when you're in a
losing streak, right? Nobody wants to be an ass situation. Catch it right now. I
think what Nadal understands, and uncle Tony had a huge role in his philosophy
and the way he competes, is that anyone can beat anyone. But if I play my
game, I'm going to find a way. Right? But he, he carries that little bit of fear that
if he doesn't prepare this, someone's gonna get him, right? So for a player, why isn't Nadal, for example, able to keep coming back and win and win and win? I mean, winning 12 French Opens, how does that, how does that happen? Because he does not take it for granted. He earns it every single time and he's willing to earn it. And he knows that if he slips on the preparation that he can get caught. I think Novak is, is very much the same way where he has, he feels like he has to prepare a certain way that gives him his confidence. Um, I think probably Fed, I don't know these guys personally, but he might not be as hung up on those things because he's, you know, just naturally, I don't want to say naturally, but he's so talented, right, that he can do certain things and still play but, kind of like Sampras, but uh, I think at the end of the day all those guys are finding ways to get better and they're motivated by that. So this complacency that comes with winning gets replaced by a lot of doubt and disappointment. You know, when you start cutting corners and you start to lose and inevitably that happens if you're not on top of it.

21:28

J: Yeah. So we're running short of time here, Dr. Lauer. I think three big takeaways have for me are for, for, for the listeners, please obviously chime in with yours. I think the first off is, is setting high training standards and expectations. I think the second part of that is to make sure we keep things simple. Sport, training, competition could be complex enough just as is within structure, so keeping things as simple as possible. And then third thing is making sure that you stay true to the controllables, the controllables, and the six bullet points we kind of went through, be constantly thinking, don't be out-fought or out-hustled, have faith, have respect, enjoy the thrill of a hard fight. You can control those things. So, so take care in knowing that you can only control what you can control and have confidence in knowing that, if you have the right training environment, you're, you're with, you're holding yourself to those high training, uh, standards and expectations. Things are simple so that you can process and comprehend things well then the controllables become, not easier, but probably easier to process as the performance kicks in.

22:33

L: And I think that's great advice. And you know, if you go back to, you know, coach Wooden's philosophy and the pyramid and it's a very much a values based approach, right? And understanding that every day we make decisions about how we're going to practice, how we're going to compete. And the more that you have certain values, I'll never be outworked, I'm always going to give 100%, I run for every single ball. And you turn that in a habit. Like I said, you can create excellence around that, that skill or that, that characteristic. And that's what you see the great ones do. You know, uh, whether it's, it's Halep or Nadal, who we mentioned here or many of these, these great players, they make those choices day after day after day after day, and they had coaches and parents at a young age that facilitated that, that held them accountable for that. And uh, and hopefully in a very supportive and positive way, but they chose to be that way in many cases. That I want to be the hardest worker. I want to be the most professional and Novak, you know, it seems to me that he doesn't care if sometimes he comes off a little goofy with some of the stuff he does or he does maybe things differently than other players because, or says different things
because he wants to be the best and he's willing to do the hours of preparation or the extra time and to cool down or to do all these other things that he does that maybe other players won't do, whether it's breathing or yoga or stuff like that that we talk about here on his podcast. But he's not worried so much about what he looks like from that sense because he knows what he has to do to be the best and he's willing to do it.

24:12

J: All right. Well Larry, this has been great. I mean, again, and just some more great information. I feel like we're really lucky in the, you know, we have, we have a lot of access to some great things and for a guy like me who wasn't around in the John Wooden era that fortunate enough to to be around guys like Jose Higueras and a lot a lot of these, and see a lot of these other top coaches. It's incredible to see how things were done and how things still are and how things still stay true and as, as the game moves on, as life moves on the, the, actually some of the, some of the standards they don't change, they don't change. And so it's just really great to look back on that and see how things were, how things are now and to see a lot of lot of similarities, commonalities on what it takes to basically perform like you practice. And so, so that basically is wrapping things up for this week's episode of compete like a champion. Dr Lauer, appreciate your time once again.

25:06

L: Thank you, JP.

25:07

J: Some great stuff. For more information resources, like always, please visit our website playerdevelopment.usta.com. Until next week, Dr. Larry and myself are signing out.