Self Control is a Myth

00:00  J: Welcome to the compete like a champion podcast. You're here with mental skills specialists, Dr. Larry Lauer and coach Johnny Parkes with USTA player development on today's episode. Self-control. Is it a myth Dr. Larry?

00:22  L: Yes. Johnny, how are you man?

00:24  J: I'm good. How are you doing?

00:25  L: I'm great.

00:25  J: Great. So this was an extremely intriguing article that you sent me recently and the title of the article was 'The Myth of Self Control' and is by an author called Brian Resnick. It was off an online website that you found, Vox, and started circulating it around and it was extremely interesting to go into it because it explored a lot of things of maybe the reasons why we premise certain things within our coaching in terms of uh, how we apply some of our teaching and coaching techniques and how we get our players to do certain things. And a lot of it we may be premise because it's down to a lack of self control or self discipline. But this article almost talks about how it might be a myth and there's a lot of other reasons centered around why we shouldn't be solely relying on self control. The words I think they used here was effortful restraint.

01:13  L: Yeah.

01:13  J: Why don't you walk us through?

01:14  L: Sure. I think it starts with a central core question here that I think a lot of times coaches and I've probably been apt to do this as well, bring everything back to willpower, back to effort, motivation and I think we do that to a fault and I think it has real consequences because if you’re asking someone to do something that they’re unable to do or you’re not putting them in an environment to be able to do that, then you’re really zapping their motivation. You’re demotivating them and you're not going to have success. And this is why I think sometimes coaches are banging their head against a wall thinking why can't I get this person to change? Why can't I get them to change, when in fact, maybe it's not a matter of willpower or self control, it's something else that Resnick is writing about in his 2016 article, which I've read about some in the past and I thought it was a good time to bring it back up. And you know, the suggestion is that your ability to control your own behavior and force yourself to do a certain thing might be a myth. And in fact, as human beings, we're actually not that good at it. Uh, that we're not good at resisting temptation. I dunno about you but for me, like snacks at nighttime, I'm not very good at resisting that temptation, Mick, like I, I'm snacking, I'm watching the hockey game or, and suddenly it sounds good to have that snack, right? And it's, it's hard.
J: Or when some of our staff members bring in cookies and leave them on the kitchen table upstairs and you're going, nah, I'm going to resist it. And then you have that moment of weakness and you just destroy two cookies.

L: I've seen you do that JP a couple times this week probably. But on a post Superbowl Monday? Wow. There's always a nice spread in the kitchen at, at player development, but the leftovers from the Superbowl party. But the interesting thing is if I were trying to change this behavior, which I probably should be honest, but it wouldn't be to just be like, all right, stop that. It would be to actually possibly change some things in my environment and change maybe the way I look at my snacking. So instead of saying, wow, I'd really like to have that, you can have that. And part of what they said doesn't work is that we shame ourselves into trying not to do things, but it doesn't work. So you shame yourself eating those cookies, like don't eat that. That's bad, that's bad. You're doing something bad for doing that. That doesn't really keep you from doing that. You're not able to resist that temptation. There's a, there are a few other things that that do help but, and we're going to get into that, but do you, how is this relevant to tennis, Johnny, and how do you, how do you think this plays out in the minds of coaches? I mean is this like an explosive, implosive moment here like Oh my God, I've been doing everything wrong for the last 10, 20 years. Like what are we talking about here?

J: No, I think when, when I was reading the salts it was sticking out to me was, is probably one of the biggest things with the juniors that you're getting to buy into is giving a kind of unconditional a hundred percent effort, focus, engagement, the respect and the things that challenges the players over the course of training week is tiredness, being disciplined with doing the right thing. Whether it's the journaling, whether it's cool down routines, warm up routines and being a hundred percent engaged in those things before they step out on court. And you tend to see those areas break down first as opposed to, you know, on court they might start off a little slow, but then you know, they get up to speed pretty quick. But it's the other little things that they actually, all the big things in terms of what can help them in the long run. And we tend to look at that and going, well, it's because, okay, they're tired, they're being challenged with their effort and they're being challenged with their focus and it breaks down, which means that they don't have the self control to maintain these things from one day to the next. And you know, you sort of come at it from that standpoint and going, gosh, like, you know, you know, where's the self control from the kids to want to do the right thing? Or you know, a kid, you know, as the week goes on and players show up, maybe a minute or two late or a few more minutes late from what they have been waking up on day one or day two. So when you think about, I think there's a very real things that probably coaches deal with is, is maybe tardiness, punctuality, you know, maybe some of the respect, maybe some of the, the effort levels when they're being challenged. And so, you know, I think we come at it from that standpoint of saying this player just struggles with the self control, but you know, and this article got me thinking of kind of otherwise is maybe some of the things that we haven't set up prior helping them with some of that willpower prior. You know, maybe maybe
down to a few other things. And I don’t know if you want to get into the bullets first and sort of dive deeper in that or whether you had something to premise it with first, but...

L: Well I think, you know, one thing would be, you know, talking about this that I pulled a couple of quotes from the article and one is says, you know, from a national survey from University of Chicago, they found that 75% of Americans say a lack of willpower is a barrier to weight loss. So if we use weight loss, for example, this is a big one in this country, right? With the obesity epidemic. They find that 75% of people that they pulled felt that willpower was a barrier to weight loss and yet scientific consensus is that obesity is a result of a number of factors including your genes and the food environment and crucially not a lack of willpower. So Dr. Phil right now is somewhere saying, I told you so, you know, TV's Dr. Phil, that why you need to do is get those snacks out of the pantry, right? So that they're not there. So when you have that temptation, you're not facing that bag of Doritos or those cupcakes or whatever it is, right? That they're not there. Only you, you have veggies and you have fruits and you have, you have healthy foods and, and then actually setting up healthy foods to snack on or eat keeps a person in control of their eating behaviors for example versus saying shaming like, no, it's wrong, it's bad, but then having the stuff in front of you, but this, our willpower doesn't hold up that well. And that's, that's one of the cruxes of this article is that, you know, it's a myth and actually has some ramifications because we don't, in America, do a very good job of helping people if we're talking about weight loss for example, and it's creating environments that help them to make healthy choices, right? If you go to the grocery store, what do you find? The healthy foods are most expensive often and the bad foods are cheaper and they're easy to grab and you have to walk the furthest distance to go get them. Yeah. So it's interesting how that's been set up so we don't do a very good job of removing some of the, or creating a food environment that keeps people healthy. And I think that's an important point here. A second thing I wanted to mention from this article, you know, the prototypical model, this comes from a [inaudible], I think this is one of the researcher's prototypical models. Self-control is the angel on one side, a devil on the other. You ever used that? I've done that with the players. Like okay, here's the angel, here's the devil. You know, who are you going to listen to? And they battle it out.

J: I think when I was growing up, it was a, my mom always said it was more my devil acting on behalf of the angel.

L: Yeah, I tend to believe that. So we tend to think of people as strong willpower as people who are able to fight this battle effectively. Actually these people who are really good at self control never had these battles in the first place. So if you think about it, if you, if we're getting, we just go with food for now cause that's what I'm thinking about a lot, most of the time. That actually it's not about self control or willpower, it's, it's creating an environment where you're not facing those temptations. And interestingly and I've had this experience, when you change how you view something, then you can start to actually create
[inaudible]. So, for example, instead of saying it's bad for me to eat chocolate to say I don't like chocolate, or when you see that chocolate, you're like, Oh, I don't eat chocolate. That actually works far better than saying, Hey, I can't eat that even though it's good. Does that make sense?

08:37
J: Yeah, but isn't there an essence of training that?

08:39
L: There is, but you got to do this over time, right? So maybe you get some really bad chocolate, but I, like I said, I've had, there is bad chocolate. I personally, I like chocolate as a kid, but it was something that I took out of my diet, because I took caffeine out of my diet when I was around 18 or 20 and I've looked, I would look at it and say, I don't want that. I don't like it. That's disgusting to me. And that's, that's when I, I never eat chocolate and I don't even have a temptation. When I see it I'm like, ah.

09:05
L: You wouldn't feel that way if you had Cadbury's chocolate from England. It wouldn't matter. I wouldn't touch it.

09:09
J: Oh my goodness.

09:10
L: I wouldn't even, it would look bad to me, Johnny.

09:12
J: See there is it. That that I've been removed, removed from that environment so I no longer have access to it. So now I'm also that way where I can't eat, because if I can't have good chocolate, I won't eat chocolate.

09:21
L: Exactly. So there you go. You're like this is not good so I don't eat it. Right. That's the what these researchers are saying, instead of turning it into this back and forth battle. I like it, but I am not supposed to have it. They're I don't want it, so therefore I don't even have to try to have that battle. But it's interesting though, like if we, if we try to draw this back to sport, okay, how is this relevant? If I, if I look at this again, I think oftentimes I hear people say, well he or that team, she or that team, they wanted it more. I'm like, really? I used to buy into that, just like I wanted it more. Is that what it is? I mean I've, I, if I look at these events, you know, pro events. It's not like, you know, in most cases that one player wants it more than the other. They both want it. They have a lot of reasons to want to win that match. That's not what it's usually coming down to. Okay? It's not coming down to more willpower or it's, it's coming down to some of these other things that we talk about on this podcast. And it's interesting cause if you, if you look at, we'll take the Patriots for example. Okay. Cause they're pretty successful and even know you, you made a face when I brought them up. They, they have this culture and, and players come into this culture and there are certain keepers of the culture, Tom Brady, Bill Belichick, and players come in, they assimilate to that culture. So they do things because they realize that the greater goal can be achieved if they buy into this culture. Right? Because the Patriots have shown it again and again, if you, if you buy into the way we do things, you can win a championship and they've won six in 18 years.
So it can be done, has been done every third year. And they've been in nine, nine Superbowls overall. I think maybe eight in the uh, Belichick years. But so the point is that, one of the other points is if you can connect with a greater goal, you can actually begin to get the behavior that you want. So it's not necessarily about controlling yourself versus saying, Hey, there's this greater goal that I have that's more important than these other things, these immediate gratifications. If that makes sense.

11:15  
J: Well then it comes back to what you mentioned earlier is being a product of the environment. Like you talked about food, like if you have a bunch of junk in your house, then you become a product of your involvement with what you're eating. Right? And so you're saying you remove that and you become more healthy and then you start becoming more of a product of a healthy environment. Right? So in tennis it can be no different, right. I think maybe talks about this before where you know, you're talking about culture and being immersed in a culture and you essentially become a product of that culture and that system and playing into that.

11:43  
L: Because to do otherwise is not something that you want to do.

11:46  
J: Right. So then if you're a tennis player and you know, I think part of it is, is some of it is your right genetics, the way that you're wired and some of the things that you've been exposed to it for as a young child. But there may be, you'll have a, a coach that has the culture of discipline and maybe some have of, of high decision making. So, and maybe they have a combination of all these. So essentially the player being immersed in that environment, it starts becoming a product of that environment that they're being taught in, but not only that. At home as well. So we have some kids that always come to our camps and you know, the Texas kids because they come up to you, shake your hands, look you in the eye and call you sir. You know? So that's obviously been taught somewhere from a very young age because it was just completely automatic. And that's a product of an environment they've been taught in. Yeah. You know, and then so you kind of get a sense of, you know, what, what's going on, you know. So that's that, that, that to me is kind of what you're talking about here is, is that, you know, almost this ability to, to have better self control started because they, they enjoy doing those things or has been taught in them so early.

12:45  
L: I think so. It becomes part of how you see yourself. Right. And you, you enjoy that. And I think that's one of the points that the authors talking about what you can learn from people who are good at self control is that you know, that they actually enjoy eating healthy. They enjoy saying, yes sir. Yes ma'am. Because they feel good about themselves when they do that. Right? So they've changed because of the environment that they're put in. And that was my point about the Patriots is that when you go into that environment, you become a Patriot. You don't change what it means to be a Patriot. You become what it means to be a Patriot in the Belichick era. Right? And that's what I'm talking about here. You see, you create this environment, so whatever you're looking for and, and it becomes this matter of, Hey, I want to do this versus I have to do it. And this is a
question I have for the players all the time. I say it is, is this something that you want to do or is tennis being done to you, do you have to do it? If that makes sense. You know, and that's a crucial piece because if it's something you want to do, you want to do, let's say the hard training, you want to run the sprints because you like what that creates. So you've got a delay gratification, right? Cause it, it can hurt and it's uncomfortable at first, but you know what that's creating on the court that you feel faster, you feel lighter, you feel more explosive. You connect to those things. That can overcome this temptation to slow it down, to pace yourself during the sprints, for example. So it's not going to be a matter of shaming yourself and saying, well, you're, you're not professional if you don't do this, it's going to be a matter of connecting with this greater 'want to' goal that I want to be fast, I want to be explosive, so therefore I want to do this, right? And you've got to get excited around that. And I think that's something that coaches can learn from this article. Instead of telling people what they should be doing or it's bad, help the player understand what they are creating because of their doing this as greater kind of purpose, if that makes sense.

14:29

J: And it also touches on that, that also touches on habit creation. That was the second point after, um, people who are better at self control is it talks about those who, who have learned better habits. And when you talk about learning habits, that means can, can we. Is it better to learn all these habits earlier on, again, as a product of the environment that sets those? Cause now that that got me thinking a lot is actually really interesting today on court. So we just come off court and uh, generally I go in the gym before, you know, early in the morning in there, sort of 5-6 AM with, with a couple of the guys and we're, and we're training, you know, we're not training for anything. It's just for me, it gets my mind right. And, uh, and it's something that I just love doing, right. I'm not doing it for any reason other than that. I love doing it.

15:09

L: That's point number one, right?

15:10

J: That's point number one. And the player actually asked me, a kid, you know, he goes, coach Johnny, do you do that every day? I said, yeah. He's like, how long have you been doing that for? I said, probably since your age, 13 years old. And he looked at me like, really? I was like, yeah. He was like, why? I was like, I can't answer it other than say I just love doing it. And uh, and it's just something that I do. It's when my alarm hits every morning I get up, I get my bag together and I leave and I go to the gym. It's something that I did when I was a kid, when I was at school. It's something I did when I was in college, you know, type of training changes and it's something that I do now even though I actually don't have a purpose of why I'm doing it other than it's a habit. Yeah. And so to me, I think back all the way back to when I was a kid and I don't know why this habit was formed. Maybe someone introduced me to her, I can't remember. But going back to those it's like that was formed in me at an early age and it's something that's never left. So.
L: But don't, don't you like how that makes you feel. Cause there's, there's a, a factor in here, you're being reinforced for doing that. You like how maybe how you feel physically or how you look or, right.

J: Sure, it's how I, how I feel physically, but mentally. Cause it gets me right. Like being able to put myself through something challenging in the morning before I've even started work makes me feel that I'm prepared to handle whatever comes my way for the day. And that's just me, the mindset that I want to get into before I start. And it's now got to a point where I feel a bit OCD that if I don't do that in the morning, that's gonna, I could have a bad day. I actually might not mean that. I might have a perfectly good day, but I have those doubts in my mind because I've broken a habit and I haven't done it. I might have a bad day today cause I didn't get my mind right by sticking to what I'm used to doing. So it all comes back to that being comfortable in your habits. It brings you back to, uh, you know, being, it brings you back to an equilibrium that you're, that you're happy with. And you know, I just, I can't get past that. Like that to me is now when a habit breaks, it plays with me.

L: Okay. So you're touching on something that we're talking to the juniors about a lot and the pros, but more so the juniors and that is instead of having to make a decision, you set these values, things are important to you. So it's very important for me to be physically fit and strong and fast and agile. So therefore I do my stretching, I do my training right to, to feel that way and that becomes a part of who I am. So what you're describing Johnny, it's a part of who you are and you don't see yourself being any other way. And so there is no decision to make, there's no self control decision to make, unlike the cookies in the kitchen where there's a self-controlled decision that you have to make. Do I want to eat that? Do I not? Right. In this case you, you have the value in place already of being fit of training yourself so you mentally are set for the day that you feel good, right?

J: Well, as well, I mean, I look at it this way, how many decisions we have to make and choices we have to make in our lives, whether you're a tennis player or for us in our work we have to make so choices every minute, every few minutes, every time we do something, we make a choice. So wouldn't it be easier to try and set as many habits and routines as possible, so it takes a lot of some of the decision making away on should I do this, should I not? Well, no, this is part of my habit, so I just take care of that. This has all the benefits in my mind. It's getting my mind right. It's whatever the, all the benefits are so that when on now faced with all these choices and decisions, I meet it with a confidence and a certainty that I can make better choices. If I confuse my mind in the morning about, do I want to get out of bed, don't I want to get out of bed? Am I going to hit the snooze button? I'm not going to hit the snooze button? Like no, you just get up and do it. It's part of the routine and habit that's been installed in years of, of training, uh, and practice. And so that, that now is to a point where it is in the subconscious that you just go and do it. But that takes away a lot of unnecessary efforts in having to make a decision over
something that really, you know, you don't need to make a decision over if you formed a good habit.

L: Since you bring up, you know, the sleep example, I was working with a player who has, who was having trouble getting out of bed and then being on time and being ready for the morning training. And our strategy was, all right, move your alarm across the room because it's going to force you to get out of your bed and take five steps to get. And by that time you're like, okay, I'm up. So I might as well get dressed and go have breakfast and do my mindfulness, do my journaling and, and get ready for my morning warm up. That was our strategy. And it works. But I think again, we don't give enough credit to creating an environment like the Patriots have that leads to the success or the change or the habits that you want versus saying, well, it's just all on you. You know, you need to have the willpower. You need to make that decision. Well, guess what, as you go through the research that's just not holding up. That the people who we say are very good, uh, like at self control, like yourself, when it comes to training in the morning, it's because they've made it a part of who they are. They value it, they enjoy it more than the opposite behavior. And they, they put themselves in this position. They create a routine, they create a schedule. Now maybe, you know, the last two points then, then we'll kind of wrap on this, but some people who have less control, self control issues, they might actually not have an addictive personality or be someone who is apt to not be as conscientious, let's put it that way.

J: Well, they told us about that. Some people just experience fewer temptations. When they experienced the fewer temptations, then it talks about how being a... It's basically a genetic lottery. Like it's, it's part of who they are in the, that they just might experience in the way that they're made up that they don't have these urges and these temptations to, to kind of break protocol or to reach for that extra cookie all to decide that they're going to be three minutes late to practice because they hit the snooze button. Right? They just might have these, there's something ingrained in them that says, you know, I'm just going to do it. Like it's not a big, not a big problem. I'm not going to be tempted by this. And you know, I mean that, that's also an interesting perspective because we just talked about how things can be learned and taught. But now talking about genetics comes into play.

L: Well, I think you, you know, again, it comes back to that point was made earlier. It's more than just, do I make the choice or do I not? It's the environment. There's, there's predispositions that are involved here and this is what the researchers are saying is it's not just coming down to the angel on one side, the devil on the other. It's actually multiple factors and you need to consider these factors. And certainly when we're working with our athletes and we're talking about things like training or you know, and I'm not going to get deep into this today in this podcast, but losing weight, uh, that would be a great subject for another podcast. Talk about how to do that ethically and professionally, but that your, you're focusing more on a number of factors, including the genetic factors and testing people to make sure that there isn't
something going on that doesn't allow them to lose weight or doesn't allow them to do what they need to do. So, you know, I, I, what I would say is, you know, one of the big messages here for our listeners is that for your athletes, if you're a coach for your players or your athletes, don't just turn us into, do it. Because if you don't, that's bad. That makes you less professional or less of an athlete that just, it doesn't work very well. Bundle that with things that they enjoy. Talk about the benefits of doing this and how, what it creates in them. Help them set up schedules and routines and strategies, like you talked about this, getting out of bed and moving the alarm across the room, for example, as ways to create an environment that allows them to be the kind of person that they want to be. Help them value these things and then certainly help them look at some of these things differently that I don't want to be that person who's gorging on desserts. I just don't like that. I don't like how it makes me feel and focusing on that versus it's bad if I do that.

22:31
J: Yeah, no, that's great. And I, and just the last side for me is I think it's extremely important knowing that you take these things into account in our, in our teaching coaching and players to take these things into account but also to really recognize we need to understand our players in the way that they tick. And in order to do that we need to get to know them that yes, within tennis, tennis is a great vehicle to get to know an, you know, a person athlete, but also asking questions to the parents maybe to friends of them, you know, how do they deal with certain situations? How do they approach, you know, what are they like getting, you know, getting out of bed in the morning. What's their diet like on weekends when they have more autonomy to cheat. You know, just little things like this that can relate back to how they make choices when they're on the call. I think definitely recognizing the type of people that we are with regards to that, that kind of takes care of, I guess of that genetic lottery part and understanding them better. And then we talk about what you just mentioned in terms of the habits.

23:20
L: And I do think some people, because of their personality, they might be a little bit more obsessive or conscientious. So for doing things like a routine between points or playing a certain game style, making the same decision that comes easier. Other people are more spontaneous and, and aren't as conscientious. So when you're talking about you need to make this shot in this position every time, it just doesn't work for them because that's not how they're wired. They, they like variety, they like to do different things and, and so again, you have to, I think look at that as, as less about willpower, or as more as some of these other things we've talked about today, including helping them see the greater good and doing the other behavior and how that's enjoyable. Helping them focus more on creating the right environment to get the habit that they want instead of just making and turning it into a choice. And here I am, angel devil, what am I going to do? The point here in this is that as human beings, we're not very good at choosing the angel.

24:15
J: Enlightening stuff.
L: Enlightening stuff.

J: Well, I mean this is, this is great.

L: Mick learned a lot today by the way. I think.

J: This article, I mean, what do you think, Mick. I mean this is this pretty high quality stuff.

M: Oh this is great stuff. This is great stuff. I eat this stuff up.

J: Yeah. The, this uh, this article really got our head spinning and we were like, we have to dive into this because it is, it could be a myth. Well it's saying it is a myth. There is a lot more behind it than, than what we think. So this has been fantastic. Just speaking through this and talking through this all. Thanks for guiding us through this, uh, this topic of self control and you know, we'll, um, we'll look forward to diving into more topics that come across our desk or come across what we read. So.

L: It's part of what we want to do here is bring the science to the listeners and, and break it down and help them understand what some of the latest stuff is. So I think this was a good example of that.

J: Awesome. Well, that's it for today's episode of compete like a champion podcast. As always, if you want resources and information, you can go to our website, playerdevelopment.usta.com. This has been Dr. Larry Lauer and coach Johnny Parkes. We're signing off until next time.