

Case Study 1

This player has improved win% by 15% in the last 4 months (at 2nd tier tour level). In this time the player's ranking has gone from 250-300 to 150-200. All references that could identify the player and coach have been deleted to maintain confidentiality.

I have included 2 email exchanges in which the coach contacts me in black writing, I reply in blue, the coach then comments in red, and I reply again in green to any of coach comments.

##You will not understand some of the terminology in the communications as it comes from the 4A Cycle Course learnings.

Email 1 (At this point the coach had been in the program Approx. 2 months)

Thoughts? (Player) won first set 7-6 after losing first 3 serves. Good effort. Up 1-0 in second and lost 6-1. Had break point on second serve at 3-3 in third. At 3-4 served 2 doubles and lost game to 0. Seems similar to last week in that (player) is having doubts when ahead. Also doesn't seem to enjoy the battle unless winning...

I would be inclined to get (player) to do a match report where (player) goes through the match thoroughly recalling action commitments, difficult passengers, and actual actions at certain stages and then use this to try to develop (player) simplicity of action commitments, and understanding of how (player) was responding to difficult passengers when you chat (was (player) caught up, was (player) controlling passengers, etc)

Definitely similar pattern to last week. Was it that (player) had doubts last week when (player) won first. A really common passenger that players can get caught up with after winning tough first set is the "Oh I'm so happy to get that set" passengers.

Regarding (player) becoming caught up in winning passengers one activity I would encourage is to always review the 'competitors score' as more important than the match score for our purposes. So the goal of the match in terms of (player) improvement and winning more over time is simply: What % of points did (player) actually commit to action commitments?

One activity I used to do regularly with players when I was coaching was that they would call without me knowing anything about the match and we would do the whole review without me ever finding out whether they won or lost. We only talked about commitment to actions, responses to passengers. You might consider this.

Good idea.

Just based on what (player) said like you it seems strange that (player) would lose it at 4-3 in first set. Would seem important to explore. Also I am very interested in (player) statement 'stayed calm'- it is one like 'got angry'- we need to separate feeling calm and acting calm to understand experience where we are not trying to feel calm- we are trying to act calm while feeling not calm.

Good point. It seems like (player) needs more practice of ideas both on and off the court. I was thinking that in practice (player) can practice going into non-judgmental, observational mode of own thoughts/feelings after each rally/point for 5 seconds - accept whatever's there, rest attention, and simply bring attention to the present moment externally before the point/rally starts. What do you think?

Absolutely- great idea. This is the routine (player) definitely needs to practice- (player) needs to develop skill in awareness of internal experiences and how (player) is responding- am I caught up? am I controlling? And then shifting and not starting next rally/point until (player) is completely committed to a helpful process.

Also, I thought your text exchange with player gave good insight into the to be expected intensity and frequency of (player's) thoughts about the importance of outcomes- this would encourage me to really work hard on the competitors scores idea and make my complete focus trying to help (player) improve application of our process while showing as little interest as possible in outcomes as possible.

The goal of your work is simply to increase the amount of times in practice and matches that (player) finishes the rally or point saying 'I committed to a helpful process' and that is how we will judge success- Are you increasing the amount of points you achieve this? Why- because we know if you get better at this

through all the challenges such as sickness, travel, pressure, expectations, etc that being a professional player present, results will take care of themselves over time based on your skill.

(Player) clearly at this point thinks the goal is to control emotions. If we look at what usually stops the majority of players competing well it is this- they go on court with a process focus but soon enough they become caught up in internal experiences (and sometimes will start unconsciously controlling them) and from that point they spend the rest of the match with their actions either based on the difficult unintentional internal experience, or accidentally trying to control it (e.g., acting angry, getting tight, acting helpless, tanking, etc).

So in this case much of what we have talked about becomes irrelevant- the player will never achieve committed actions until they develop the skill of awareness of internal experience (rather than being caught up) and how they are responding to those experiences (am I driving bus based on what the passengers are saying, or am I in the back of the bus trying to kick them off)...until this understanding and skill is developed the other stuff is meaningless.

[Email 2 \(Several Months After Starting the Program we review a match we both watched\)...](#)

He is definitely improving and agrees he is playing the best tennis of his life. His goal last night was to be more aggressive with his targets and he did it really well. Great serving and much more aggressive on 2nd serve returns. Also hitting targets better off the ground which he is finally doing nearly every shot as his committed action. He is also responding to the difficult passengers so much better and that's got him through a couple of these tough matches in last couple of weeks...

Yes agree that was a great, tough win for (Player). Good commitment and way to respond to the difficult passengers he would have had on the bus when he got broken...

Overall reflections on where he is at and what to work on with him:

1.) The bigger the match the more important it is to connect with improvement/value performance aims. To do this we can remind players that points are a mirage that last for 12 months and then disappear. So ultimately all that counts is enjoying the process of competing and improving skills because they are the 2 things we carry forward throughout a career.

2.) Keep working on (player's) tolerance (I like the idea of trying notice-look-describe- I find players need to be very committed to do it though

3.) He is improving, no doubt. It has been a good week and he is developing important competitive skills. But can he push himself to practice and apply what you are working on with him to make the improvement accelerate and get more joy out of the process of competing?

Case Study 2

This 16 year-old player has more than doubled in 4 months. All references that could identify the player and program participant have been deleted to maintain confidentiality.

I have included 4 email exchanges... In all of these the program participant contacts me in black writing, I reply in blue.

##You will not understand some of the terminology in the communications as it comes from the 4A Cycle Course learnings.

Email 1 (A couple of weeks into program)...

I have explored further with (player) and (player) says that in matches (player) doesn't feel particularly nervous or frustrated. (Player) notices that (player) doesn't move well in singles matches. I told (player) for next match to commit to having good energy/footwork on the court. (Player) reported trying to do this last weekend but wasn't able to. (Player) lost 6-0 6-0 and didn't move or play well at all.

Ok so indicates at moment (player) is unable to commit to helpful actions.

(Player) has noticed that (player) plays well in school tennis and doubles matches but not well in tournament singles.

Probably more pressure/fear...

(Player's) dad said that when (player) was 10 competed hard and used to cry after losses. At 12 (player) no longer cried but competed well. (Player) had 2 try outs at (National Organisation) and was almost selected, however, they said had to improve ranking. (Player) then got fixated on improving ranking and dad said that the 'blank, neutral' state started appearing in singles matches. No emotion but no fight and not playing well.

Ok this is great because it indicates that (player) is extremely competitive. Super competitiveness makes players very motivated to do well but it also means they naturally feel more pain when not doing as well. So if (player) was not competitive there wouldn't be much we could do but it appears like (player's) high competitiveness (which means more pain when losing) made (player) vulnerable to developing habit of accidentally kicking difficult passengers off bus. The (National Organization) experience may have been the trigger that started this.

Also the few times that I have seen (player) get frustrated she 'switches off'.

Ok so more evidence that (player) disengages to get rid of difficult passengers. In (player's) case it seems that (player) has got to the stage where in higher level of pressure (player) actually unconsciously makes whole objective to not let difficult passengers on the bus. So it is like (player) has got to stage where (player is standing at the bus door and putting all efforts into avoiding difficult passengers, not allowing them on the bus. This is likely why (player) reports that no longer experiences difficult passengers. But by putting all efforts into avoiding the fear and potential pain of competing (player) is not able to get in the driver's seat and drive. In practice where there is less fear and pain (player) is in the seat driving but as soon as there are enough fear and potential pain passengers (player) gets out of the seat and stands at the door and won't let them on so can't engage in driving.

The ultimate goal here will be to get to the stage where (player) is able to get back in the driver's seat and to be able to better stay in present and connect with values, and committing to helpful actions that increase chance of achieving performance aims, rather than what (player) is doing now which is

successfully not allowing difficult passengers on the bus. For me it is really helpful to reflect on (player's) current circumstances to guide plan. Currently, (player's) brain has come to see it as urgent to avoid the difficult passengers (sort of like avoiding getting bitten by a snake), and is addicted to avoiding difficult passengers once the fear and potential pain get to certain point. (Player) is refusing to allow the difficult passengers on the bus. Just like the addiction has become stronger and stronger (after all it serves the purpose of feeling less bad), over it sounds like a couple of years, it is VERY UNLIKELY that (player) will be able to go straight to sitting in the driver's seat and committing to something helpful. This is because (player) won't be able to commit until develops the tolerance to move away from the door and allow the difficult passengers onto the bus

So overall the general process that will need to occur is:

1.) Helping (player) understand what is occurring and work to normalize this experience (e.g., frame it as being because player is so competitive which is great but makes more vulnerable to developing these habits because although competitive feel more joy when they win, they also fear losing more and feel more pain when losing occurs. So competitive players can accidentally come to find ways to stop feeling the difficult stuff). Use the bus story to help (player) understand. Use examples of pros like Kyrgios and Monfils who this has happened to. Also help (player) understand that the better (player's) brain has become at avoiding the difficult passengers, the less fit (player) has become over time in being able to have them on the bus. (Player) has lost practice in being able to cope with them, so you might use the example of physical fitness in becoming tolerant to physical discomfort in allowing fitness (you could also use physical activities to help (player) understand here). Help (player) understand that the goal will be to increase fitness in being able to have the difficult passengers on the bus again

2.) Next, once (player) understands what is happening we want to help (player) bring it out of unconscious and have more of an awareness of what is happening as it happens (with no expectation of behavioural change). So see if (player) can notice the process of difficult passengers showing up and getting out of driver seat to avoid them.

3.) Next, try to help (player) develop tolerance of difficult passengers. So the goal here is to help (player) feel fear, frustration, and pain again without getting out of the seat to avoid, reduce them. Mindfulness is key here- noticing the

feelings, practicing observing them as passengers, notice-look activity. It sounds as though (player) already does a better job of this in school tennis so you could have (player) practice in those matches. You can also set up activities in practice where (player) notices urge to avoid/reduce. So at this point when increased tolerance is achieved (player) is able to spend more time sitting in the driver's seat and should be practicing allowing the fear, pain, and frustration to be on the bus.

####A key point here is because (player) has done such a good job of avoiding the passengers at the cost of being able to engage in competing, (player) has lost emotional fitness so when (player) starts letting them on the bus (player) will become quickly caught up by them at the start. So the first goal is to feel more fear and pain, and then over time it will be to learn to not get caught up in them.

4.) And finally we would want positive behaviour change where (player) is more able to commit to helpful actions. So the clear process of change in this case is understanding, followed by increased awareness of what is happening as it is happening, following by increased acceptance, followed by being less caught up, which leads to behaviour change.

Please note this doesn't mean that you shouldn't work on commitment to helpful actions, you could still do some but the key is that I wouldn't expect behaviour change in matches to occur in under 6 months in a case where you are dealing with a highly competitive person where the addiction has developed over years. If you got to the 4th stage of change quicker than this then that would be a huge bonus.

So in this case, my focus would be to help develop player's understanding and establish a plan. If you can work with (player) to successfully get to compete effectively again it will likely change the trajectory of (player's) life in all areas. This will translate to all areas of life and set (player) up to have an understanding and skill to navigate life with better capacity to cope with fears and pains and go for things (player) wants. I would be very encouraged that (player) can become a very effective competitor but I would be looking at that happening over months and years, not weeks.

I told (player's dad) that probably the most important thing is that (player) practises at a level of pressure that is challenging but not too challenging. I said it may be best not to play (#specific tournaments#) for a while and play some

16s events. I am going to video player hitting 10 x seconds serves each session (5 each side) so I can rate (player's) commitment to an aggressive swing in order to simulate a pressure environment.

All good ideas. You should be driven by the understanding of what is happening for (player) and what (player) can currently cope with and the goal to increase understanding, then awareness of what is happening when it is happening (without expecting tolerance or commitment), then increase acceptance, then increasing ability to not get caught up, which then allows increased commitment.

First you should help (player) understand what is happening. Next the idea is to expose (player) to experiences where can start to gain conscious awareness of what is happening as it is happening (the hardest thing for most coaches to get here is early on there is NO expectation of increased acceptance or commitment because (player) won't be able to do that as long as (player) has no conscious awareness of what is going on. It is only when (player) starts to recognise in the moment that (player) is out of the driver's seat, at the door, and putting all efforts into avoiding passengers that (player) will be able to start to work on tolerating them.

Here is good article to read. <http://coachingmentallytoughtennis.com/?p=353>

In this Email approx. 2 months after beginning program the Participant reports on a session he did with the player...

During the session we did attention drills: watch ball, listen to ball, watch and listen to ball, feel of ball (calling out 1, 2 or 3). (Player) hit particularly well during watch/listen. We did tactical attention of calling out 2 to attack and 1 for any other shot. (Player) did this well although didn't execute as well as watching the ball. We tried various committed actions playing short tiebreakers to 5. (Aggressive; Free; Target each shot.) In all breakers (player) didn't execute her skills as well as when hitting, although did hit some great shots. (Player) played best committing to aggression. We defined 'aggressive' as trying to hit the 'best shot possible'. I also said that to me aggression means to play with full focus and good energy.

We practiced a between point routine.

1. Rate commitment to being aggressive by saying 'Yes' or 'No'. (Also, give a fist pump and say 'c'mon!' after a good shot. (Player) doesn't like to do this.
2. Take one deep breath to connect to the moment
3. Say key word of 'Aggressive' and commit to that for just the next point

We played a final breaker and (player) executed pretty well doing this routine and committing to aggression. We finished with a second serve game against each other. (Player) went through her routine between serves and committed to an aggressive swing with lots of spin.

Most of your work should be trying to move (player) to exposure level where (player) starts to enact avoidance moves and try to develop understanding and awareness of what is happening as it happens to start with...

Any advice would be appreciated. Main question is how do I help (player) learn not to control the passengers?

See above--- start with helping (player) understand what is happening, normalize it and aim to increase safety in exploring, also educate parents on situation so they provide appropriate support and expectations. Follow the steps I outline.

Do I tackle it head on by setting up drills where (player) is likely to get frustrated and see if can notice the urge to switch off?

First (player) must understand the whole process of what is occurring and perceive it from a perspective of it being a normal habit that has been developed based on being competitive. You must set up an environment where (player) feels most supported and safe to try to gain awareness of what is happening and start to expose to the fear, frustration, and pain. Then yes try to give (player) experiences of increasing pressure over time where (player) tries to not only notice urges but also can also practice feeling more fear, frustration and pain and tolerate it.

Eventually, the goal will be to relearn and become fit again like (player) was when she was 10-12 when could respond well to passengers by remaining in driver's seat and committing to helpful actions.

Regarding commitment, should (player) commit to aggression and practice fist pumping and saying 'c'mon!' in practice? This would make (player) uncomfortable and would practice having to tolerate that discomfort? Or should (player) commit to something less confronting like 'watch the ball'?

You should choose activities and focuses based on where you are on path to change and what you are trying to help (player) achieve along that path. This is a potentially great opportunity to separate yourself in working with very common issue that basically 0% of helpers (even psychologists) can effectively work with. If parents are supportive and there are no other deep developmental issues you could see amazing changes to (player's) competing and life over time.

Email 3 (Approx. 3 months after beginning program)

(Player) hasn't been doing any of the things I've asked to do. (Player) couldn't really tell me why. I was surprised as I thought we were on the right track and that (player) understood the importance of helping compete more effectively. For each squad session this week player's agreed to do the following:

1. Take one slow breath between rallies/points to connect to the present moment. Ideally this should take 5 seconds but it could be a bit shorter during drills.
2. Before each rally/point say key word: 'Target'.
3. For every shot have a clear target in her head focussing on the arc of the ball over the net and where it lands in the court.
4. After the session review what percentage of all shots that (player) had a clear target for.

My understanding is that each time (player) fully commits to a helpful action (in this case having a target for each shot) (player) is sitting in the driver's seat driving the bus rather than being controlled by own thoughts and feelings. We'll see how things go this week.

I suspect that in (player's) case the answer 'I don't know' can be translated to mean: "When I go to do what you ask it exposes me to difficult passengers that I can't tolerate".

Remember that on the journey to change in these sort of cases behaviour change comes last and typically won't be achieved until understanding, awareness, tolerance stages have been achieved. At this point a good option to approach (player) when you think the task is something that will challenge (player) is when asking to do something say (player) has 2 options: 1.) to do what you have asked, or 2.) player can choose not to do it but if (player) doesn't do it try to notice what prevents them-- then even if (player) doesn't do the task you celebrate with (player) regarding developing awareness if 2nd option is achieved.

It is about trying to match expectations to (player) skill level where possible and helping (player) feel proud of even the tiniest things that indicate movement in right direction, which at this point might be simply understanding more about what is happening and starting get some more awareness of issues in real time.

[Recent Email \(Month 4\)...](#)

We're definitely headed in the right direction! (player) just played (#tournament) and competed really well. A really good day for (player). Player beat (Former top 500 player) 6-1 6-1. Very focused, movement was great and few errors. (Player) lost to (opponent who was top 20 ranked NCAA Div 1 in 2017) 7-5 6-2. Very few unforced errors...(opponent) could dictate off (player's) serve otherwise (player) held own. (player) is now doing what I am asking so things are going great.

Amazing work! I really didn't think you would see improvements for several months ...