The field of sport psychology has contributed to the improvement of tennis coaching and playing at all levels of the game. At the higher levels of tennis competition, when physical skills and tactics of players are more comparable, psychological skills take on even greater importance. However, despite widespread agreement regarding the importance of psychological factors such as intensity, confidence and concentration to successful tennis play, coaches often fail to make mental skills training part of the daily practice schedule. There are many reasons for this, including lack of knowledge, misconceptions about mental skills, perceived lack of time and personal coaching habits. However, mental skills should not be treated casually. Rather, just as technique, tactics and physical skills are addressed on a daily basis, mental skills training needs to be integrated into the training schedule and practiced on a regular basis.

An Integrated Approach to Mental Skills Training

by Paul Lubbers, Ph.D.

What Are Mental Skills?

Mental skills are internal capabilities that help athletes control their minds efficiently and consistently as they execute sport-related goals. Mental skills training provides the methods and techniques to not only develop skills such as concentration and positive body language, but also to foster personal characteristics such as self-esteem and positive competitive skills and behaviors.

Mental skills techniques help athletes adjust their actions, thoughts, feelings and physical sensations in order to improve their games. Mental skills techniques do this by helping the player to:

- Develop self-confidence
- Set goals and create a positive long-term vision
- Use imagery and visualization to work on competitive skills
- Focus concentration and attention
- Deal with adversity
- Improve error management
- Develop a positive approach to competition
- Create on-court routines

Off-Court Issues

The use of sport psychology may extend far beyond mental skills training. For example, problems related to growth and development issues, academic stress, strained relationships, time management, family conflicts and financial concerns affect everyone at one time or another. These issues may easily compromise a young player’s tennis performance. When such problems arise, it is important to establish open lines of communication, discuss the problems with your players and parents and seek professional assistance when needed. It is important to remember that as coaches we are called upon not only to guide our athletes as competitors, but also to help them develop positive personal life skills.

continued on page 4
DEAR COACH

In this issue, we feature an article on An Integrated Approach to Mental Skills Training. We feel this is a critical component to the successful development of High-Performance Players and as such we hope you will review it closely.

We want to thank each of you for your comments and feedback regarding the newsletter. Your input helps the USA Tennis Coaching Education Department to continue to meet its mission of providing the highest quality educational information available to you, the coach in the field.

As always, we hope you enjoy this issue of High-Performance Coaching and if you have any questions or comments please contact us at Coaching@playdevusta.com or 305-365-USTA.

Sincerely,

Nick Saviano
Director, USA Tennis Coaching Education

Paul Lubbers, Ph.D.
Administrator, USA Tennis Coaching Education

USA Tennis High-Performance Coaching Program Update

In this issue, we feature an article on An Integrated Approach to Mental Skills Training. We feel this is a critical component to the successful development of High-Performance Players and as such we hope you will review it closely.

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Nick Saviano
Director, USA Tennis Coaching Education

Paul Lubbers, Ph.D.
Administrator, USA Tennis Coaching Education

Program Dates for 2002

The USA Tennis Coaching Education Department is accepting applications for the 2002 High-Performance Coaching Program. The program is intended specifically for the serious developmental coach working with players who are striving for excellence in competitive tennis (i.e., sectional junior players to collegiate and young professionals). See page 12 for dates, locations and application deadlines.

Applications for the USA Tennis High-Performance Coaching Program are available by contacting 305-365-USTA or emailing Coaching@playdevusta.com

Attendance

The following coaches attended the May 2001 High-Performance Coaching Program in Houston, Texas, and successfully completed all three phases of the program. Congratulations Coaches!

Bill Adams, Allentown, PA  Bob McKinley, San Antonio, TX  Johnny Tallent, Carrollton, TX
Greg Alexander, Tyler, TX  Rick Meyers, Abilene, TX  Todd Taylor, Austin, TX
Philip Baillos, Lawrence, KS  David Muir, Blue Island, IL  Thomas Walker, Kalamazoo, MI
Andy Bruner, Katy, TX  Bob Pass, Falls Church, VA  Will White, Aurora, IL
Kathi Eckel, Dallas, TX  Brian Poynter, Houston, TX  Glenn Williams, Watauga, IL
John Foster, Houston, TX  Ricardo Rubio, Fort Worth, TX  Anthony Woodworth, Lansing, MI
John Kreis, St. Simons Island, GA  Bill Schillings, Charlotte, NC
Roberto Maggio, Lindenhurst, IL  Sally Schwartz, Plano, TX
A new era in American tennis is about to begin. Significant developments both on and off the court at the 2001 US Open hint at a prosperous future for American tennis, both immediately and long into the 21st Century.

An estimated 22.7 million viewers watched 21-year-old Venus Williams successfully defend her US Open women’s singles title against her younger sister, Serena. The first live, prime-time Grand Slam singles final (men’s or women’s) on network television was a direct result of the growth in popularity that tennis, specifically the women’s game, has enjoyed in recent years. The men’s game witnessed a strong showing by a talented crop of young Americans, led by 19-year-old quarterfinalist Andy Roddick, who are set to challenge the tennis establishment.

While the next wave of American champions was shining on court at the US Open, the USTA Board of Directors adopted a new position and policies relative to USA Tennis Player Development. The new policies are designed to ensure the position of the United States as the pre-eminent power in men’s and women’s professional tennis, which includes Grand Slam, Olympic, Davis Cup and Fed Cup champions. This action supported the Board’s decision earlier in the year, to designate Player Development and the USTA Professional Circuit as the third Level 1 strategic priority of the organization (along with the US Open and Community tennis).

Along with the new paradigm, the name of the program has been changed to USA Tennis High Performance. The new name reflects with USTA’s commitment to the highest level of excellence in our efforts to facilitate the development of world-class American champions—the new mission statement for the program. The name also challenges everyone playing a role in the development of our best players, from the players themselves to the coaches, USTA sections and communities from which the players come, to seek the same level of excellence.

The immediate future of American men’s tennis looks good as evident in the United States’ victory over India in the Davis Cup Qualifying Round in October. Our singles players in that tie, Roddick and 21-year-old James Blake, represent a promising group of young players ready to make waves on the professional circuit and Captain Patrick McEnroe’s commitment to utilize the next generation of American stars. The team not only maintained its World Group status, but also built momentum as a cohesive unit going into the 2002 competition.

The U.S. remains the dominant force in women’s professional tennis. Lindsay Davenport, Jennifer Capriati and Venus Williams swept the top three places in the year-end Sanex WTA Tour Rankings. Capriati and Williams combined for a U.S. sweep of the women’s Grand Slam singles titles. Americans occupied half of the year-end Top 10, followed closely by No. 12 Meghann Shaughnessy, and led all nations with 17 players in the Top 100.

Another significant event that was held in conjunction with the Davis Cup tie was the first in a series of USA Tennis Gold Medal Training Camps. The camp, funded with a grant from the United States Olympic Committee, brought together successful boys and girls under the age of twenty to work with USA Tennis High-Performance National Coaches, including U.S. Fed Cup and women’s Olympic team captain Billie Jean King. The Gold Medal camp represents the commitment of the USTA and its Sections to work with their partners to create the optimal developmental environment for American players. This optimal environment will be achieved through the dedicated efforts of the USTA national and sectional staff, academies and personal coaches, the ATP, WTA and USTA circuits and the teaching professional organizations.

The USTA is meeting the challenge of the professional game by establishing a unified effort to help create a new system for our country’s best players to stand atop the world of tennis.
Mental Skills Training

Factors That Influence Mental Skills Training

Mental skills training for tennis does not occur in isolation, but rather takes place in a dynamic environment that is influenced by the core beliefs and values of coaches, players and parents. A brief discussion of four influential factors follows.

Philosophy of Coaching

A strong philosophy of coaching lies at the core of every great coach. It consists of principles and beliefs that guide actions and decision making in dealing with players. A philosophy is not acquired from any one source, but rather from a compilation of experiences. These beliefs about life, coaching and sports guide and impact us as we coach, teach and motivate our athletes both on and off the court. It is difficult to discuss mental skills training effectively without a clear understanding of one’s philosophy of coaching and how it impacts implementation.

Coaches must apply their philosophy of coaching within the context of three broad perspectives: coaching to help athletes develop physically, psychologically and socially; coaching to have fun; and coaching to win. These three converging perspectives are complex and unique to each person. In addressing these three areas, expert coaches integrate their knowledge with experience to bring out the best in their athletes.

Love of the Game

At the cornerstone of tennis development lies a common thread, which perhaps stands out as the most important ingredient to success. This is the development and maintenance of a love and joy for the game (Bloom, 1985, and Saviano, 2001). Research shows that athletes who develop a deep love for a sport and are not pushed into serious and heavy competitive environments too early have the proper basis to excel later in their careers (Gibbons, 1998). A player’s love of tennis must be consistently nurtured within the framework of mental training.

Role of the Family

The family is a very important part of the support team for a developing player. In today’s game, the role of family members varies tremendously from that of active on-court coach to that of supportive sideline spectator. The evidence is quite clear that for a young player to have a healthy approach to competition and training, a parent or significant individual must help create an environment that is both supportive and conducive to excellence.

Planning Skills

“Success is peace of mind, which is the direct result of the self-satisfaction in knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.” — John Wooden

Success is the direct result of doing one’s best. However, in addition to this obvious fact, having a vision and a plan can bring life to an athlete’s hard work and commitment.

A plan can be seen as a basic psychological process in which a person visualizes the future and develops a framework to guide action in order to achieve this future. The assumption then is that planning affects in some systematic way the manner in which coaches interact with their players. Martens (1997) brings this point home by stating: “Failing to plan is planning for failure. Regardless of the competitive level at which you coach, you need an instructional plan. Without a plan you will not know where you are going and thus end up where you do not want to be.”

A developmental plan is one way to bring structure and life to a player’s quest for success (Saviano, 2000). This plan is a blueprint for the long-term development of a player that provides focus and clarity to the coach and the athlete on what needs to be addressed and how it is to be accomplished. A developmental plan should include the following:

- A long-term, comprehensive vision of the type of player the athlete wants to become (style of play, weapons, conduct, physical conditioning, etc.)
- The strategies and patterns that need to be mastered and the weapons that need to be developed
- The training needed to make sound basic tactical adjustments and good shot selection
- The techniques to be developed
- The emotional/psychological approach the player will take to competition
- Scheduling and periodization
- Physical development
- Goal setting

Evaluation of Mental Skills

One benefit of a mental skills training program is that it enhances performance on the court. Winning is one of the objectives in tennis, and winning requires consistent performance at a high level. One way to better ensure consistent performance is to individualize the mental skills training program to the athlete. Individualizing a mental skills training program can be accomplished by evaluating an athlete’s mental skills set within the framework developed by Gould (2001). According to Gould, some of the areas that coaches need to analyze and evaluate include:

- Goal setting
- Personal motivation
- Practice intensity
- Imagery skills
- Error management
- Positive self-talk
- Positive body language
- Confidence and composure
- Concentration
- Routines
- Stress management and arousal control
- Sportsmanship
- Pre-match preparation
- Competitive skills

continued on page 11
One-Handed Backhand
by Nick Saviano

Just when you thought the one-handed backhand was a dying breed, some great young talent arrives to save the day! In these sequence pictures, we see three of the bright young stars in the game—Roger Federer, Justine Henin and Gustavo Kuerten. All three possess world-class backhands that are, in fact, one-handed. The intent of this article is to point out some technique fundamentals as well as differences in style and strengths and/or drawbacks of each player’s technique.

In the sequence pictures, these players are hitting a “standard” one-handed backhand where they all have time to set up and hit using a slightly closed stance (stepping forward and across toward the direction of the oncoming ball). As with any aspect of technique, there are elements that world-class players do differently and fundamentals that they follow in a similar manner. As we have consistently seen in the sequence pictures over the past few years, fundamentals tend to transcend the various styles of technique.

Nick Saviano is the Director of USA Tennis Coaching Education.

Top to bottom: Roger Federer, Justine Henin and Gustavo Kuerten.
• **Preparation:** The players have already recognized that the ball is coming to their backhand. They have made their initial unit turn and are starting to take the racquet back.

• **Grips:** It appears as if Federer has a standard Eastern grip, while Henin and Kuerten have a more “Extreme Eastern” (closer to a Western) grip. Federer’s grip is more suited to dealing with lower balls.

• **Right Arm:** Federer and Kuerten start their racquet preparation with their right arm bent significantly, whereas Henin starts with the arm relatively straight and then bends it as she takes it back. This is more a function of style.

• **Footwork:** The players have used their footwork to establish good position. They have planted the back foot and are about to step into the shot.

• **Balance:** The players possess excellent upper body posture and dynamic balance.

• **Racquet Head Above the Wrist:** All three are preparing with the racquet above the level of the wrist.

• **Racquet Take Back:** Due primarily to their more extreme grips, Kuerten and Henin have their right hand further away from the body as they take it back.

• **Early Preparation:** Notice how early they are preparing in relation to the oncoming ball. This guarantees they will not be rushed.

• **Weight Transfer:** The players are starting to transfer their weight forward and onto the front foot with a slightly closed stance.

• **Shoulder Rotation:** The players continue their upper body rotation as they take the racquet back.

• **Level of the Shoulders:** Henin and Kuerten approach the ball with their shoulders relatively level. This is ideal technique. Federer dips his front shoulder down significantly, which can adversely affect his balance and ability to deal with power.

• **Loading:** All three players are getting into a fully “loaded” position in which they are storing energy in the large muscle groups (legs, hips, back and shoulders).

• **Shoulder Rotation:** Henin and Kuerten have tremendous shoulder rotation. Federer has less rotation and more dip in the front shoulder.

• **Racquet Preparation:** Notice how Henin and Kuerten take the racquet back further (actually it raps partially around the body) than Federer. This is due in part to their grips and their relatively level shoulders.

• **Balance:** The players are displaying beautiful balance with their heads level and eyes focused on the ball, the knees are bent and the center of gravity is directly in the middle of their base (feet).

• **Creating a Solid Base:** The players take a large step into the shot, which creates a solid base and lowers their center of gravity thereby further improving balance.

• **Optimum Hitting Zone:** All three players are about to contact the ball in their optimum hitting zone (ideal distance to the side of the body and well out in front of their bodies). Henin and Kuerten will contact the ball further out in front because of their more extreme Eastern grip.

• **Use of Legs:** Henin is drawing significant energy from the ground by using her legs to explode up into the shot. She is dealing with a higher ball and appears to be hitting a heavy topspin shot.

• **Head Relatively Still:** The head is relatively still for a split second after contact.

• **Stability:** Kuerten and Federer display great stability, balance and leg strength as they stay “down” after contact.

• **Racquet Head Acceleration:** Henin is showing an incredible amount of acceleration as she explodes up and through the hitting zone.

• **Follow-through:** The players are showing the classic low-to-high follow-through with the finish off slightly to the side of the body. Henin appears to have used more aggressive wrist extension (“snapping forward”) on the follow-through than the other two players. As indicated earlier, she looks to be hitting a far more aggressive shot.
Inside-Out Backhand
by Rodney Harmon

Gustavo Kuerten, Justine Henin and Roger Federer are a few of today's players with one-handed backhands who utilize the inside-out backhand from the middle area of the court to take control of points. One of the main reasons that the best players in the game today use the inside-out backhand is to counter and neutralize the aggressive shots now routinely made in the game.

In the following patterns, let’s assume that both Player A and Player B are right-handed and that Player A is choosing to hit the inside-out backhand on a ball that lands two to three feet from the center of the court to the backhand side.

Pattern 1
Neutralize the Inside-Out Forehand

Player B hits an inside-out forehand that lands slightly to the left of the center of the court. Player A hits an inside-out backhand to the deuce court to gain control of the point. This pattern works best when trying to neutralize the opponent’s aggressive inside-out forehand.

Pattern 2
Gain Strong Net Position

Player A hits an aggressive down-the-line forehand. Player B is in a defensive position deep in the backhand corner and hits a mid-court return that lands slightly to the left of the center of the court. Player A moves aggressively to the shot and hits an inside-out backhand to finish the point or gain a strong net position. This shot could be hit either with topspin or underspin, depending on the height of the response from Player B. This pattern works best for players who are comfortable in the mid-court area and can transition to the net.

Pattern 3
Passing Shot

Player A hits a mid-court rally shot to Player B. Player B hits an approach shot that lands slightly to the left of the center of the baseline. Player A hits an inside-out passing shot. This pattern works best when the opponent is hitting an approach shot over the middle of the court.

Rodney Harmon is the Director of Multicultural Participation and Development, USTA.
Playing in the Heat
Reducing the Risk, While Enhancing Performance

by Michael F. Bergeron, Ph.D., FACSM

Whether you are getting ready to play some winter events in the South, or even if you will not be competing in the heat until next summer, now is a great time to reassess your strategy for minimizing the risk and problems associated with hot weather tennis. Why now? Well, if you had problems during the past summer, the circumstances leading up to them still may be fresh in your mind. Secondly, having a plan well ahead of time will help you to organize and implement your strategy for playing in the heat more effectively. Moreover, some aspects of enhancing your tolerance of the heat cannot be effectively addressed if you wait until the last minute. With this in mind, let’s look at a few of the factors that will help you be ready to play in the heat.

Preparation

• Get fit. High aerobic fitness can give you a big advantage when it comes to tolerating the heat, reducing heat storage and effectively regulating your body temperature during play.
• Taper your training. Reduce the volume of training during the days preceding a hot weather event. This gives your body a chance to recover, so that you don’t start the event fatigued or overtrained.
• Acclimatize to the heat. Training in the heat will promote heat acclimatization, which reduces the risk of heat illness and helps you to perform better. If possible (especially if you are traveling to a much hotter environment), plan to arrive at least a few days early. Even though full heat acclimatization takes 10-14 days (if you are not used to the heat at all), 2-3 days can really help.
• Be sure that you have the proper clothing on hand. White or other light clothing reflects solar radiation (which can readily heat you up). Use a single layer of loose fitting, lightweight cotton/polyester blend rather than 100% cotton or tightly woven nylon. Sweat-saturated clothing should be replaced by dry clothing whenever possible, so pack plenty of extras. Lose the dark cap—wear a light colored one.

Hydration*

• Drink plenty of fluids (water, juice, milk, sport drinks) throughout the day. Avoid excessive caffeine intake (soft drinks, coffee, etc.).
• Check your urine—it should be fairly light-colored or almost clear. Note: if you are constantly in the bathroom to urinate (e.g., every 45 minutes), you may be drinking too much!
• Drink regularly during all practice and warm-up sessions.
• Drink at each changeover. Typically, older adolescents and adults can comfortably drink up to 48-64 ounces per hour (younger players need much less) during play. This rate of fluid intake can prevent large fluid deficits from developing for most players.
• Continue drinking after play to restore any fluid deficit that still remains. If you sweated a lot and have to play again soon, fluid intake should begin immediately.
• Add some salt to your diet (by eating certain high-salt foods or adding it to meals or drinks) before and after you play, especially if you are prone to cramping. This helps your body to retain the fluid that you drink and avoid problems such as heat-related muscle cramps.

Other Factors

• Eat plenty of carbohydrates (bread, cereal, potatoes, rice, fruit, etc.). Playing tennis in the heat causes the body to use carbohydrates faster; thus, your requirement for carbohydrates is greater.
• Get plenty of sleep. Insufficient sleep increases your susceptibility to heat illness.
• Stay in a cool environment (especially just before play) as much as possible. This can reduce the physiological and psychological strain when you are on the court.
• Practice early in the morning or in the early evening when the weather is not as extreme.
• Medications—ask your doctor about any medication that you are taking with respect to its potential effect on hydration or tolerance to the heat.
• Recent illness—especially if it involved fever, a respiratory track infection or diarrhea, a recent illness (within the past week) can make you more susceptible to problems in the heat. Consult your doctor about participation.
• Sunburn—sunburn can increase your susceptibility to heat illness. Use sunscreen (SPF 15-30) on all exposed areas of the skin when you practice and play.
• Players, coaches and parents should be advised of the early signs of heat illness—these include headache, nausea, dizziness, clumsiness, weakness, muscle twinges or cramps, irritability, apathy and confusion. One or more of these symptoms may be enough to discontinue further play and seek medical attention.

Addressing these factors will help you to play longer, more effectively and safely in hot weather. The courts will be heating up before you know it—will you be ready?

*See High-Performance Coaching Vol. 2 No. 2, 2000, pp. 10-11 for more information about the key points of hydration.

Dr. Bergeron is a member of the USTA Sport Science Committee.
Mental Skills Training

This analysis and evaluation of a player’s mental skills set can prove to be difficult due to the many variables that affect on-court performance. For example, Loehr (2001) states that it is important to note that emotional problems during match play can just as readily be caused by physical deficiencies as by emotional ones. Lack of physical recovery due to inadequate sleep, rest, nutrition or hydration can completely derail a player’s ability to summon the right emotions at the right time. This is particularly evident in player breakdowns. Just as poor fitness can lead to mental and emotional problems, excessive anger, frustration or nerves can undermine both mental focus and biomechanical efficiency. Due to these many factors, coaches should take great care when identifying and evaluating a player’s mental capacities and be aware of the integrated nature of performance.

Implementation of a Mental Training Program

The 18-and-under high-performance competitor should have tactical understanding of his or her key patterns of play and game style. In addition, at this age, players should be technically sound and possess a wide array of strokes and shots. However, what is often lacking in their program at this stage of development is a well-developed daily practice and competitive mental skills training program.

Coaches need to be aware of the importance of creating an environment where there is purpose to daily practice. Players need to understand the link between quality training and peak performance— that is, not just to train, but to train with intentionality and purpose. A culture of excellence must be communicated to the athlete where quality training is rewarded.

Conclusion

In coaching young players, coaches need to apply science-based content knowledge as well as practical experiential knowledge to address the many factors that are at work. This is in essence both the art and science of coaching.

The process of implementing a Mental Training Program requires a personal understanding of both who you are as a coach and who your players are as young people. This provides a starting point for both coach and athlete in the quest to learn, develop and strive for excellence. Acquiring positive mental skills is important for all players, regardless of level or age of development. However, for younger players, it is of utmost importance in order to establish a base of fundamentals related to daily practice and competitive skills that will serve as a springboard for continued growth as healthy competitors.

Paul Lubbers, Ph.D. is the Administrator for USA Tennis Coaching Education.

References


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