

5 Strategies for Effective Match Preparation

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SPEAKERS

Larry Lauer, Johnny Parks

- J** Johnny Parks 00:05
Welcome to Compete like a Champion, you're here with Dr. Larry Lauer, mental skill specialist with USTA player development, and coach Johnny parks with IMG Academy. Today, we got another great episode for you, we're going to be talking about five strategies for effective match preparation. So this is gonna be a great episode diving into five really practical things that you can start working on today, that may help you in your your match preparation. So Larry, you put this one together for us, I really like what we're going to be discussing today. And, again, I mean, another real practical episode that if we're if players or coaches are not teaching their players, some of this stuff already, they're gonna have some great tools to walk away with.
- L** Larry Lauer 00:48
Yeah, and just in the interest of being totally upfront, these are more on the psychological side, or at least, the psychological side of some movements. I think there's a another podcast that we could be doing soon on five, maybe athletic development movements, or dynamic warmup strategies, it doesn't have to be five, but things that you would emphasize Johnny in terms of movements, so but this is going to be more around sort of getting the brain warmed up. So that's, that's just being upfront with the listeners and with you, JP. But when we talk about preparation, I think we pretty much all believe that much

of the match, or we say much of the battle has been won before it's begun, right? Like a lot of lot of what happens is what you see from the preparation, and I believe that, I do believe that. And I think even if that wasn't the case, the preparation is what we have the most control over, right, we can prepare and then you go out and you perform. And then you know, the lights come on, and stuff happens and you deal with it. But that's why coaches really emphasize the preparation to a great deal. Because this is where we have the most control. And I think when it comes to preparation, kind of this disclaimer, right now, it's important to be consistent. And it's important to look for new and effective ways to prepare, because I think we run this battle of well find what works for you, and then do it, which is true. But it may not be the best thing for you. Because you might be changing, you might, there might be better ways to go about what you're doing. So again, for those who are listening, we want you to kind of have an open mind, and consider that there may be different or better ways to do doing them. Now, maybe you're already doing some of these things maybe wouldn't fit for you. But at least if we're sharing these ideas, getting people to think about them, it will work for a lot of people. And I think we should give it the old college try on a number of these things and see what's going to help. So definitely whatever you choose, you need to be consistent with but you need to be open to new ideas or different ways of potentially doing things. So, so that's kind of the prelude JP.



Johnny Parks 02:59

Yeah, that's great. I mean, I think, as we talk through some of these, we're also going to talk about where somebody might, you know, place these in their, in their preparation, you know, we talk sometimes some players like to go through, let's say, like the match strategy versus a certain player the night before, and then they, then they leave it to rare sunlight to do it right before you know, there's also before they go on and practice on the court. You know, some people I do, but we're definitely going to talk about the placement of where to use these strategies. But the one big thing I think is really important from effective preparation is a good warm up or good preparation isn't just physical, it's mental as well. I'd even argue that the mental preparation side is more important than the physical. You can go through a physical warm up easy, you do some shuffles some some quick change directions, some stretches, that's amazing, easy part, the tough part is snapping your mind into a space where it's like you said, When consistency creates clarity, that clarity brings a level of comfort that before they step on the court, they are ready to go. That's where people need to get to before they step on a court that they have clarity, that brings us certain comfort level. And off they go. So And that, to me is really the sort of good definition I would think of effective match preparation is not just preparing the body physically, but really preparing it mentally as well.



Larry Lauer 04:31

Yeah, we definitely want to warm up the brain and understanding that the brain is the starter of behaviors. So the brain is telling your body what to do, even if it's in a quick reaction kind of thing. So having the brain warmed up is critical. extremely important. And so, you know, again, these are things that are going to, obviously JP you and I believe that it's mind and body together. So the more that we're doing these things together, they have a greater impact. So it's not just that you warm up your mind, and then you know, that's gonna prepare your body. And when you prepare your body that's helping to warm up your mind. But on this podcast, we're going to find ways to better warm up the mind. And at the same time, that's going to help the physical body also get ready.



Johnny Parks 05:22

Absolutely. Well, let's just dive straight into it. Lazur.Talk us through the first one here.



Larry Lauer 05:29

Well, you know, we talked about time a lot in tennis, you had time between points, you had time in the changeover, you know, you have time everywhere. And most of what happens at a tournament is a lot of time, just there waiting to play. And, and so, a lot of times, because time is there, and you have a lot of it, you tend not to use it very well. And what we try to tell our young players is we take them on the road, and we go to tournaments with them and watch how they get ready and give them advice. And I know you've done that a lot, you're still doing it, I do it some make sure you get some time alone to focus. So that's really the first thing is that we see players hanging around watching matches, talking to other players. And then they get called to the court and then they go out and they play to me if you're serious. So that's the caveat. Now, if you're, you're praying recreationally, I don't expect you to go off and do a joke of which type of routine or even 30 minutes of being to yourself, but if you're being serious in your preparation, then you want to limit the distractions that you're faced with in a time before your match. Now, there's no Golden Rule of how much time it should be, it should just be the time that it helps you to get ready. Some people it's 10 minutes, some people it's an hour, you know, what do you need to play? Well, so you're gonna have to experiment. But this would seem like common sense JP, when I go to the tournament's players are still hanging around, watches match, watching matches, and oh, I got to jump on there talking to people and understand that you're allowing into your brain, any kind of old information that it sees or picks up on? So does it matter if you're watching a match? And both of them are playing like garbage? And you're watching that? Does that affect your mentality? I don't know. Doesn't have to, but I don't think I'd necessarily want to be watching bad tennis and then be prepared to play my match. Right? Again, a lot of players I doesn't matter. But to me,

I'm trying to control the things I can control. And part of that is what I put in front of my eyeballs before I play man.



Johnny Parks 07:52

Yeah, no, that's so so important. The the time to be having finding time to be alone, I always found was, the minute I went to a different environment, it was actually establishing where I was going to get that. Because depending on the environment you're in, if you're in a small club, might be might be hard to go off and find somebody might go into the park in Largo, there's a park across the roads go into the park or whatever it may be. I always tried to make sure that as soon as I got into the environment, you want to establish your preparation routine as soon as possible. So finding where I'm going to go do my maybe my physical warm up, find where I'm going to go to get away from everyone else where the quiet spaces are, I think that was a really important aspect of my preparation was, you know, when moving to a new environment, you're trying to quickly establish where you're going to go to get that.



Larry Lauer 08:49

Brilliant because that creates certainty that creates comfort, ease, lower stress, you know what to expect. And you have a plan about how you're going to go about your business. So find those spaces. You know, and you talk about examples of that. You know, I think that look, when people will take time, we're going to talk more about how to use that time and when it shows up. But, you know, again, how much time you need is going to be individual dependent, I would say at least 15 minutes but again, if you're a 10 year old playing some of your first tournaments, I honestly think you need to go across the way into a parking lot and and do visualization for 15 minutes, if you want to you can. But maybe it's five minutes just to sit quietly and you know, maybe it's just grip your rackets and get your head on straight right? Here's what I'm doing today. Here's the goal. I think that that can be can start in a very simple way. And then your advice for parents time alone doesn't mean time with the parent giving information that is not what I'm talking about. That's not time alone to focus. That's actually distraction in many cases. So when I say Time Alone, I mean, literally, you're to yourself to your own thoughts. Because guess what, when you're on your court, you're to yourself into your own thoughts, because you can't be coached by anyone in the juniors except for in specific events. So you better get comfortable with your own thoughts. And it begins early, by giving them that space to go off. And I'm not saying you know, send them off into another place where you're not monitoring them, of course, you can keep an eye on them, but let them be to themselves and start to mentally get ready for what's to come. And as players mature, they're probably going to want more time to mentally prepare, first of all, all the different things

they do physically to warm up takes more time, because their bodies are more mature and, and stronger and faster and bigger. So as you know, better than I do JP, they need that time to get everything ready, physically, but also mentally, they're, you know, they can be dealing with more, the game becomes more complex as you get older. So to get your mind focused, and in a good place, you're probably gonna need a little more time as you get up and competitive levels, you know, so I think that, you know, taking that time alone, and of course, is probably going to be in that alone time, some kind of dynamic warmup, some kind of movements, along with some kind of mental warm up, or maybe you're visualizing how you're going to play your reading over your goals in your journal, there'll be some form of locking the brain into what's about to happen.

J

Johnny Parks 11:30

Yeah, I like you've just tied in that physical piece as part of that, because, you know, we say having time alone, some may talk about, you know, just before you go on, spending some time just to reflect the game plan. But honestly, if we're talking about how, how the brain and the body work, and they're connected, I mean, which one would be more beneficial players, you know, let's say you and I are going through a warm up with each other, and we're just chatting about this person's match or what score that is, or other things, or you know, what's going on at the French Open, or the person that's over in the corner, going through their warm up with a bit of a deeper focus, it's focusing on what it is they're about to do, trying to get at one if they're dealing with some nerves, that they're focusing on getting him into a mode of comfort to deal with those nerves. I mean, for me, I was always the one that would go to that second one, I don't always want that quiet space. Now, there's going to be players, and maybe some coaches out there that feel well what's the difference? Why's it matter? I go, Well, one, they're both going to be warming up physically. So that's not a problem. But one is going to put you into a deeper level of focus that's ready, maybe from the first point, whereas another one, maybe the other one is going to, you know, might need three games to warm up because the mind hasn't really snapped into competitive mode yet, because you know, that they haven't put them in that zone. So people are gonna say it's all individual. And yes, it is. But I know from from a focus and engagement, a preparation standpoint, if you don't have that quiet time alone, to focus on how you're going to, like I said, just to maybe deal with the butterflies, you need time alone, just to figure out how you're going to deal with those nerves. You accept that that? Okay, part of it is accept that it's normal, you know, the mastery those butterfly feelings tells me that I'm ready to go, this is what I'm going to focus on when I go out there and then the butterflies goes away. So it's it's, it's how you go about doing it, I definitely was one that would lean towards having to find my quiet space and, and that's where I was going to do both at the same time was going to go my physical warm up and snap myself into a mental mode that was ready, was engaged, was focused, and was pretty set

on how I was going to come out of the blocks.



Larry Lauer 13:47

That's good insights, JP, and it made me think of two things. One, my general belief around preparation is that you funnel your focus over time. So you might think about the day before you play, you're gonna be focused on a number of different things. And you tighten that focus, you funnel in as you get closer to competition. And when you get down to the last 15, 30, 45, 60 minutes, you really want to get all the way down to where you funneled to all your focus being on the match on again, it's gonna depend on person and stage and all that stuff. But so there's a funneling effect that that comes with your focus. And so you want to prepare in the same way where you're drawing it all in and if you're out watching matches, talking to other people, there's a good chance you haven't funneled yourself to a singular focus around your match. The second thing I'll say is that a lot of players Okay, not a lot. Some players will do things to distract themselves from what's to come. Meaning the stress the nerves the match the uncertain what's about to happen, they'll distract themselves. And think that that's a beneficial strategy. The only issue with that is if you haven't really focused yourself, then like you're saying, JP, it might take three games really, just to get yourself into it. And meanwhile, all the evidence you're getting in those three games, you're not playing well. So you kind of put yourself in a little bit of a hole from the start. And again, players say, well, I've just kind of tried to keep my mind off of it, that's fine. But you need to put your mind somewhere, dial into your plan for the match don't have to do extra. Now, if so if I have a player who's pre anxious, and they're concerned about overthinking things, I'm not going to give them a preparation routine that takes two hours, right. But maybe make it a little bit closer to the match. But you still need to get that time alone to dial yourself in and really come to accept the feelings that are there, that's totally normal, totally fine, because you can't avoid it at some point, eventually, you're gonna have to step on that court and be out there and get the job done. And a lot of times what players experiences when they distract themselves, and really not focus on what's coming. It's like this freight train of anxiety and stress that hits them all at once, once the match starts. And when they start to warm up, the match warm up, you don't want that. You don't want your anxiety to go from two to 10. That's a lot harder to manage. And going from five to seven, if you know what I mean. Like I can manage five to seven, I can get it back down. But managing two to 10 is a really, really hard, it's just a big bump up and it's like a shock. It's like a surprise. And then you're really under fire. So, you know, hopefully people understand that. Like you said, JP, like I said, it's a very individual thing preparation. But there are some principles that cut across everyone. And one of those is that you need to focus in and really get your mind and your body ready to go. Whether that's 15 minutes, whether that's an hour, you got to figure that out. But you need to funnel into focus, and you got to get the body ready, do what the

brain is telling it to do.

J Johnny Parks 17:12
Perfect, perfect. I mean, absolutely.

L Larry Lauer 17:15
That dead horse.

J Johnny Parks 17:17
Yeah, I think I think we've I think we've nailed it.

L Larry Lauer 17:20
All right. All right. Well, we'll let the audience decide if we nailed it, but we hope we did.

J Johnny Parks 17:24
Yeah, well, then that kind of that moves us into this second piece, because this is where this could be part of the first piece, right? Absolutely. So talk us through that.

L Larry Lauer 17:34
Yeah, well, you know, and this is something JP, you and I have done a lot with the players over the years. And that is engaging them and imagery or visualization. Prior to a match. If you ask professional athletes, Olympic athletes, the best of the best, what they'll tell you is in terms of mental skills, this is one of the most powerful strategies or skills that we have for preparing for matches or for competition. So what are we what are we saying here, imagery is a re creation of something that isn't existing in the moment or a creation of something that isn't existing in the moment. In this case, mental rehearsal would be me in my mind going through, I'm stepping on the court, I can feel myself out there, I feel my racket my hand, I can feel my feet on the ground, I feel myself moving, hitting my shots, I feel my body really doing what it needs to do, making the shots and I'm focused on maybe certain patterns, but you're essentially locking into with imagery or visualization to the game plan in the how you're going to play and how you're going to compete when you go out there. So this has a rehearsal effect. It's a practice effect. So now you walk through it. When you step out there, you've created some certainty in an uncertain environment. This has the benefit of reducing anxiety and stress because you know what

you're going to do when you go out there. And it makes you more ready and confident when you do this. So now the thing of it is like most people have heard of imagery or visualization, especially if they're listening to this podcast, I know that they know about it. So it's not a question about do you know about it? But are you doing it consistently and effectively? Because a lot of people think they're doing imagery or visualization quite well, when maybe they can be doing it a lot better. Some people think, well, if I just kind of go into my brain cap and think about a couple of strokes, I did imagery, did you really because imagery is engaging in this sort of vivid, lifelike experience in your mind. Think about like going to IMAX, but then you could also feel what was happening, right? And what we're trying to do there is we're trying to live out what's going to happen in a few minutes. So you create a readiness, preparation. And so you can have low quality imagery in visualization. You can have high quality visual visualization and imagery. So, you know, some of the mistakes, I'll start with the mistakes people make, it's too short, they just kind of go through a couple things and not really focus and I'm done. Now that doesn't cut it, you need to make it like a slice. Like, I'm not saying everybody needs to do 20 minutes of visualization, maybe you can do it in three minutes. But those three minutes need to be really engaged, focus on your movements, how you want to play, seeing yourself, make your shots, really be engaged with it. Another mistake people make JP is they focus only on hitting winners. They go out and they see some aces, some forehand winners making some volleys, everything's perfect. And they get an unreal version of what's going to happen on the court. And then they get out there and they don't play anything like that. And they don't get the benefit of the preparation. Now they start thinking like, What's wrong with me? Why am I not playing? Well, when in reality, the match was always going to be messy, it was always going to be a battle, you're always going to have to play some points on the defense and some on the offense. So the more that your imagery or visualization is a is accurate to what's really going on, to what's going to go on and to match. So this is where especially like we work with the pros, and you know, this JP, we get real specific, like what do you expect your opponent's going to do? Right? What are their favorite serves? What patterns are they going to play, and we start to visualize, you know, when you know, your matchup, how you're going to counteract that certain things you're going to do. So the younger the players are, it tends to be just focused on their game, some simple things that they're trying to do and execute when they go out there. So we really have to make sure that when we do the visualization, the imagery, we're consistent with it, and we're doing it with effectively with high quality, which means it's got to be realistic. Take the time to do it well and really engage your senses. See it, feel it clearly. Focus on it, make it like you're there and you're living out, because that's going to give you more confidence. And that's going to give you more readiness to perform.



Johnny Parks 21:59

Yeah, could you imagine if so one of the most common mistakes you probably see in in juniors is is like short balls, right? You got a short ball and we miss. Could you imagine if everyone put a bit of time into, you know, I think everyone could sit and visualize themselves grinding out a point because a lot of junior tennis is built around the back of the baseline. But imagine if you put a little bit of time into visualizing a point where you had a short ball well came forward and finished off at the net, I think that would make everyone feel a little bit more of a comfort level into doing those common mistakes, common Junior mistakes, just through putting their their mind in that position or situation. So I mean, I just use the short ball as an example. But from an individual level, it could be something that you struggle with, that you know, you're going to have to face in that match, your opponent in defense always puts in those high loopy balls. Well, one way to counter that is to come forward in his swing volley, but you're not confident hitting a swing volley. So why not visualize yourself actually hitting that swing volley, how you want to hit it, where you want to hit it, imagine if you put a little bit of time into focusing on some of the areas that you you know, you know, you're going to have to do but maybe you don't feel 100% comfortable doing it because of maybe you know what you're working on. So, you know, it could be so I just felt like it'd be such a massive help. And once you once you get past, I mean, I know we've talked about this before, but once you get past that barrier of this feels weird. With visualization, once you get past that barrier. It is it is a very calming tool. It's something that places you in a realm of, Well, again, I use this word again, but makes you feel clearer. You know, I just I just spoke with a player that, you know, as I know, just had a bit of a tough result. And person came off court was like, My head's just really cloudy. I was like, Well, what was the game plan going in? And he told me the game plan, but it was probably three, four or five things. So that tells me as I'm No wonder your mind cloudy, you had a picture in your brain of doing many, many different things within the within the match. So starting out, you know, you've got, you know, you've got five different choices of things that you think you should be doing or could be doing. And then that all that's going to do is create a little bit of confusion of when you think you should be doing them. But if you're visualizing maybe some very clear, tangible things that you know, you're going to have to do in the match, and maybe sends it around things that you don't feel like you do that. Well, I mean, I just think how much how much more comfort level there would be around that to to then the next potential execution over time.



Larry Lauer 24:43

Creates that been there done that feeling when you step on the court? Yeah, my mind. I've seen myself moving forward and hitting that short ball in. Yeah, I've seen myself grind out a defensive point and then get on the offense, you know, transition to offense.



Johnny Parks 24:59

Yeah. I've seen obviously with my time there and what we're doing here, but seen tremendous amounts of value in that. But again, I think, for those of you that, you know, we talk about imagery and visualization, and you try it, and you think it's weird as like it, it's a bit of a barrier that you have to get over. Definitely, you know, that's why I think you got to be consistent with it. Like you said, finding that quiet time to focus alone takes you away from everyone, which takes out potential judgment or peer judgment or something like that, like, I'm not gonna go and sit in the corner and close my eyes or whatever, because people think I'm weird. And that's what a lot of juniors feel, especially teenagers who are in that social realm as well of figuring out who they are and not wanting to be judged and anxiety around that, inside. Well, that's why it's important to go find a quiet spot when no one's around. So you can go and do these things that are going to help you. So yeah, you got a push Pass, pass through that barrier. And, like you said, prime those thoughts into focusing on what to do during the match.



Larry Lauer 26:01

Yeah, and I'll relate back to a previous podcast where we interview Margie Zesinger from IMG and talked about separators between those that reach your goals and those that don't. And, and one of the things, I believe that the ones that reach your goals and achieve great things really get beyond caring what other people think, you know, they're willing to do the things that they think are important to be successful, and people don't do them doesn't matter to them, if they think it's a little weird, doesn't matter to them, because it's important to them. And it's important that they're ready to perform. So and and that's a really tough stumbling block for teenagers, for sure, because of the social comparisons. But what I would say JP, you know, again, as we round out this sort of second strategy for effective preparation, that the the visualization imagery is a great way to really prime, the thoughts you want to focus on during the match the goals, the keys to your match. If you know you're a bit overwhelmed by things, being able to get it down to two, three things that are most important, right, and dialing that focus in, obviously, in a match, you got to do a lot of different things. But what we're trying to do is emphasize certain things that either a if you don't, are not going to be there or be there the things that are going to make the biggest difference. And the rest of the other things happen. Because you're doing these things, they're kind of like the turn key, right that if I move my feet, if I look to move forward, and I'm using my forehand, things happen, a lot of other stuff comes because of that. And if you can figure that out, that's really liberating for players, because then they don't have to focus on 50 things to perform, they can focus on two or three, and they can still get a great performance out of it.



Johnny Parks 27:53

Yeah, absolutely. Well, that leads us into the third one, right? Because the third one is then actually putting some of that visualization to some physical work as well.



Larry Lauer 28:04

Yes, we talked about, you know, bringing mind and body together earlier, one of the ways we can do that with imagery and visualization is to do shadow strokes. And what you're doing there is you're imagining a ball coming to you and imagine hitting it, but you're actually doing the movement. So you have a racket in your hand, you're swinging the racket, you're moving your feet, if you think about Justine Henin, you know, at Wimbledon, waiting in that little area before she steps on court, and she's doing a little this movement stuff, it can be done in a real subtle way, or just kind of like moving it or in like where you're sitting down, or it can be done in a real vigorous way, you know, with movements that are going to happen in the match. And this is where our strength and conditioning coach would be really helpful. The different movements that are going to have to do on different shots. So and then getting in the visualize what ball they're receiving, and what ball they're sending as they're moving would be as tremendous. So you're visualizing, visualizing playing out points as you swing your racket, and you're adding that movement. And this again, as a way of taking you from Wow, I've got a match to play and it hasn't started yet to feel like hey, it's already been gone. Like I'm under way like I feel match ready. I feel like I'm almost started to play points. And I've experienced because I've done this. And I've when I do it, I really feel like the match has already begun for me, in my mind and in my body. So not many people take advantage of this strategy. But it's a great way to take your imagery, and also your warm up stuff that you're doing and really make it real and powerful. I believe now not everybody's gonna do it, but I think it was certainly helped a lot of players.



Johnny Parks 29:50

Yeah. 100% and we often put this into our warm ups with some shadow swinging. I'd also say when people are on the road, right and they don't have a coach there. They're just going through a covering movement and shadow swings together, just put them in a, in a mode of readiness, a state of readiness that, you know, like if if you, if I know, I'm going to play like you, Larry, and you hit the ball really hard and flat, the balls coming in deep, you know, I might be practicing that one drop step, that one step where I just push back load on my back leg and hit my shot from there. If I know I'm playing somebody that is going to be playing a heavier ball that's going to push me back, I might be practicing that drop, step, crossover and load, and then swing and shadow swinging. So you can also adapt these shadow swings, depending on who you know, you're going to play, you know, if you

know you're going to play somebody that really likes to take the ball wide, you might start practicing some of that lateral lateral diagonal forwards movement to cut off the corner, that's going to be a little bit more explosive movement, cuz you've got more distance to cover, you may want to perform a few of those on your forehand and backhand side just to prep that body, the whole central nervous system to be ready to go on those. So shadow strokes, yes, a great, you know, something that you can feel, you know, players 10 in tennis is very much about feel plays. Tennis plays out to be so intuitive with their bodies, which I believe why so many players emphasize wanting to feel good and feeling like that their shots are good, and how they move are good. But you can adapt the way you do it based off who you're about to play. So the principle of shadow swings, yes, Shadow strokes, yes. But you can also change it, depending on who you're about to play. So I love that one, because that then ties into bleeding into that mental and physical realm of how those two interact. And that also can be done in a quiet space with types of focus that also that builds on the visualization of what you're trying to do and how you're trying to do I think the shadow strokes bring in the how, right, the visualization brings the clarity of why you're going to do what you're going to do, and then you look at shadow strokes is really going this is how I'm going to do it, then putting a thought to behavior is key there.



Larry Lauer 32:10

Yeah, what we're doing, it's like, we're just making it more and more real, you start adding the movements to it becomes more and more real in your mind that I'm actually doing this. And I will do it when I step out onto that match court. And I think that that's extremely valuable when you're preparing, you know, for a match. So, but I think, you know, obviously, shadows, strokes, things like that, you know, not everybody's going to do it. But we're about finding an edge, right, and finding a difference maker. And if that's something that can make the difference. For example, you're playing on a fast indoor court. And you're really preparing yourself mentally and physically, for how that ball is going to get to you quickly and how you need to react quickly. And versus maybe playing on a very heavy, slow clay court, different game of tennis. And so the way you prepare, you know, if you want to optimally perform needs to be appropriate.



Johnny Parks 33:09

Well, I think if you want to succeed in anything you do, or if you want to reach goals, or if you want to be different in your garage, if you were just average you do what every average person does. If you want to be great, then you got to step outside of the realm of what the average person does in order to fulfill what you want to do. I was never, I was never a you know, obviously, on the world stage, I was never a world class player. But I felt I was a great college player maximized my talents and potential and I did things. I did

things differently to others. I did a lot of things where I went off by myself I was my preparation was pretty lengthy, I was doing things that a lot of others weren't doing because what everyone else was doing was what everyone else does, right, which is I'm not saying their average, but I'm just saying everyone that falls in doing the same thing. People sometimes need to figure out what their routines are that are going to maximize the best in themselves. And that means not giving really not caring what anybody else thinks it means. I'm going to do this because I know it's going to help me so I don't care what anyone else thinks that you just mentioned. Like save that judgment. I think great players at the top I don't think when Rafa's doing a sprint and and all that in the locker room and doing his frog jumps and hitting his head on the wall above him like he that the US Open that one here. I don't think he's particularly like them looking around like oh, who saw that? He's doing what he's doing like he's that's him That's him you know Novak does his meditation. Everyone knows he does or maybe everyone doesn't see it as visual as Rafa doing his quick sprints like he's about to go into a you know, into a fight but everyone has has their own thing. And, again, if you want to be average, do what every average person does. If you want to be great, you got to figure out what works for you and be great at



Larry Lauer 34:59

Such good points, JP. So then as we move along, I think this next one will be a little bit more sort of common and accepted. And that is breathing your way into the match. Because we know that as stress and anxiety, which are normal qualities factors in any kind of pre match situation, they're going to exist, on some degree, some level, you want to learn how to manage that. And that's to your breath in a big way. So, having diaphragmatic breaths are where you're using your diaphragm, to expand that diaphragm when you inhale. And then let everything relax as you exhale, you're going to be managing that fight or flight response that can happen, keeping your stress and anxiety on manageable levels. And then when you go into the match, it's not like that freight train hitting you, because you're avoiding things you're like, No, I'm aware of how I feel. But I'm also aware that I can manage that I'm nervous, that's normal, I'm going to use my breathing, and I'm going to feel good. So these things can coexist, I can be nervous and excited and feeling good about the match. And that's where players who really get deep into this, they get to a point where they're worried if they don't feel some stress and nerves. Now anxiety is not necessarily as helpful anxiety is when you take this high energy with, and you combine it with doubts, and that's where problems begin. So that's where breathing your way through the match. As a way to manage and keep a present focus helps you to move away from the what ifs of the future, like what if I lose? What if I don't play? Well? What if I get broken coming out in the first game? what if what if, what if what if and your anxiety is one bump, bump, bump, bump and Up, up and up? bumping

up? Your breathing is your biggest support. Use it a lot. And sometimes players say well, I went to my breathing and then they treat it like it's I'll do it if I have to. No, no, no, no, no. You want to use it a lot. Because that's your way of connecting with your body. Your mind saying look, I'm good. I'm ready. Yeah, I'm nervous. Yeah, I'm excited. This is high energy. How cool is this? It wasn't meant to be overly comfortable. It's exciting. It's a match.

J

Johnny Parks 37:23

That's taking the stress response and rationalizing, rationalizing it. Because I think as you said, Are you talking about as stress levels go up and up and up either looking rather what are the worst? Well, then your heart rates going to elevate because of that, that means blood is pumping through the system a lot that means, okay, oxygen just pumping through the system. But is that blood rushing to the limbic system, which is where that emotional center is? Right, which is only going to elevate that stress and the what if and anxiety and then it's going to lead to that, you know, just distracting, catastrophic thinking of, you know, thinking, thinking too far ahead? Or are you able to rationalize it? So you you're aware that stress is normal? The anxiety is normal, the butterfly feelings normal, your heart rate salivating, but that's normal, that's fine. And are you able to rationalize it? And think with this with this frontal and pointing on my forehead.

L

Larry Lauer 38:15

You're pointing at a coconut at the front.

J

Johnny Parks 38:18

My coconut head with no, right? Yeah, the are you thinking with the rational part of the brain, that frontal frontal system where you're able to basically say, Ah, I know, stress levels are gonna rise a little bit, but that's normal, that's good. But you know what, I'm ready to do this, I'm ready to go. You're rationalizing that co allowing that bloods to flow through to that part of the brain that that thinks more rationally, and you're not allowing that blood to just go through to that mall towards that limbic system area, which is going to just keep elevating. So we're providing rational thoughts to, to the way and again and then So coming back to the breathing, that's where the breathing is important. Breathing controls, the heart rate, breathing can help slow it down. Breathing can then bring clarity to what it is that we're trying to do. And when we do that, we're able to bring more rational thought process, right before we go into the match.

L

Larry Lauer 39:17

That is why inevitably, a good breath followed by a present focus is brilliant, because your breathing allows you to all this stuff he talks about mitigate manage that fight or flight or freeze response and just allow you to become present again. And in the present is where we feel excited where we feel ready where we're at ease to some level and and composed and so we want to keep getting back to that place. So my conversations with players have been Look, just use it as much as you want as much as you feel. You need it because it's a good thing. It's not a bad thing. That you are using your deep breathing. use it a lot, breathe your way into the match, breathe your way through situations, because it's your best friend, you know, you have it with you. And you want to take advantage of it. Lots of breathing and an intentional, you know, not just like, I took a breath. And we've talked about breathing in other podcasts here other episodes but, but really breathing with a belly breath or diaphragmatic breath. And then if you want to lower your heart rate, if you want more of a relaxation response, you can extend that exhale, right, because when you inhale, you're actually your heart rate increases, blood pressure goes up, what you're trying to do is relax a little bit. So you breathe in, everything kind of elevates when you breathe out, it's like dropping even farther with that longer exhale. So we want to, you know, exhale, longer than we inhale. So if you, you inhale a four, you can exhale out the six or eight and really create that relaxation response. So breathe your way into matches, that will help you manage the stress and anxiety and nerves and pressure and whatever you want to call it. That is inherent to competitive sport. And it's part of the deal. And, you know, it's it's always going to be part of the deal. Anytime you want to win, you want to avoid losing and you want to perform well.

J

Johnny Parks 41:26

Would you say this would probably be most commonly used right before a player goes on to court. Right. So they may have gone through the, the sound, they're quiet space, they've gone through their warm ups, maybe some visualization, some shadow strokes, and now, there's always that little like, awkward time where you go, right, I'm ready to go. But then the match might be you know, somebody might have just broke back in the match. Now you're kind of having to hang around for a little bit longer. Would you say that this is where the potential for that stress and anxiety to elevate a little bit more. And then this would be where you place more importance on, you know, controlling that breathing your way is your biggest support.

L

Larry Lauer 42:08

Yes, I think that that time whenever you need it. But certainly, it's probably going to be more apparent as you're, you're waiting to go on court, those final moments. So those are great times to take those big, deep belly breaths, those four, eight breaths, if you're doing

a breath hold, you know, like a 478. Or even if you want to do them even like a 444. But whatever you're doing, you're going to want to be using that and those moments right before the match because that's, that's when everything's picking up. You know, and you're now it's, everything's right in front of you. And it's you know that it's just about go time, so everything's getting elevated to the next level. And so your breathing is going to help you to come out, have a good warm up, get yourself focused and not allow your your anxiety and your emotion to dictate what you do, you're going to still be able to access that prefrontal cortex and know what your game plan is, and stick with it.



Johnny Parks 43:07

Well, then the next one may be from a timing perspective. You know, as I say, these five things that we're going through, we're not exactly in chronological order. But this next one may then take us back to part of the hitting part of the warm up. Take us through that ladder.



Larry Lauer 43:21

Yeah, so the fifth of the five things was to play a few points in the warm up. And I expect this one to be the most controversial, not last, like a big controversy. But the one that may be more people disagree with. That's been my experience. But I feel that again, the more you can simulate what's going to happen when you step on the tennis court, the better the preparation is. So if I play a few points in the warm up, I go out, play some of the patterns, I'm going to be engaged in some of the plays that I want to run, then I feel like okay, I have all those things warmed up. I've done them, I've executed them. I think sometimes many people feel like, well, what if I lose those points in the, you know, the pre match warm up? Well, first, does it really matter much if you lose them, what you're trying to do is just really create patterns and get the shots to certain places and feel like you're hitting them. Secondly, then you hit with someone who isn't trying to beat you. Now again, you don't always have a choice as a junior because you might be playing with, you're probably going to be hitting with another Junior that's at the tournament, but you're really working through your patterns, you're hitting your shots. You know, it's kind of like a walkthrough, which you'd see in football or, you know, other sports. So to me, playing a few points in the warm up. You don't have to do a lot, but it's a great way to make you feel like the match has already started.



Johnny Parks 44:44

Yeah, that's a good one. And I'll never, I always like to play for you. I mean, for me again, personally, I always used to like to play a few points before we start but I would go to the

scenario or a couple little comments here but the scenario in which maybe sometimes you have to share a court with your sharing a court, then why not trade off playing two points on two points off. But then some players don't like to do that because then they feel like they're getting less hitting time. So it's a case of can you play competitive cross courts, ultimately just snapping that mindset into competing and figuring out you know how to win points. The second one is just thinking about this one is I'll never never forget this but Indian Wells one year, Rafa, I believe, was first on the night session. And in the morning or early afternoon, he's doing his warm up, and he was out there for about an hour and a half, as Rafa usually is for his warm ups. And he was out there playing a set with Verdasco. And it was a set there when I think like seven five or something was an epic set great tennis, but his was like he was out there for maybe 45 minutes, you know, really getting warmed up getting everything loose, and then Burton played a set. And after the set might have actually been a two hour session, after the set, Uncle Tony's there feeding in balls that he that he's just doing run around four hands with. So he's hitting a ball run around forehand here recover, Uncle Tony feeds another one, he just do that for like sets of 20. Just just amazing. So that might be a little bit on the extreme side. And obviously, that's something that works for Rafa. But play again, what you're saying replicate what you're about to go and do. Again, I mean, doesn't that make you a little bit more should in theory make you a little bit more comfortable with about to go out there to compete, especially if you're in a new environment, or what way that to get a climatized to a new environment, then to try and play points in that environment before you actually starts the match. Otherwise, you're going potentially going out there for the first time in a new environment, playing points for the very first time, and maybe an important, you know, in a match that has some importance. So again, replicating the competitive environment, through your practice environment should be the main goal when you get into a new environment.



Larry Lauer 47:01

Yeah, I would think so. And that's why we do a lot of these things is just to simulate and make it as lifelike as possible. So when you step on the court, it has that sense that I've been here, I've done that I know what to expect, that creates a level of comfort of composure, you're still gonna be nervous, you're still gonna be excited. But it gives you a little bit more of that belief behind what you're doing in that situation. So but yeah, I think that those are the five things. I'm sure there are others. There's things that we haven't talked about. But these are at least five things I've seen from my work that I feel are extremely valuable. And what any player do all five, maybe not too many, but you should be doing, I think quite a few of these.



Johnny Parks 47:49

Absolutely. I mean, as I said a lot of these working with each other, you can be doing your physical warm up, when you're in a time alone, space alone. During that warm up, that's where you could be going through some visualization. Shadow strokes are part of that warm up, breathing your way into the into the match will be depending on when you're feeling that that stress and anxiety. And then obviously part of the warmers, but there's no reason all this comp can't be done. But again, it's it's creating that that habit, which takes time takes consistency. And I think that's the most important part of this whole messaging that you told us lazur is for it to be effective, it's got to be consistent.



Larry Lauer 48:31

I think, you know, player with his or her coach needs to go through what that pre-match looks like. And obviously it's age and stage dependent, and how complex it gets. Don't need an adult's routine for a 12 year old. But they can be doing a couple things that helps them to feel ready and clear on their game plan. And it's really then also a conversation about, like, what it what it means to really be professional, not in terms of taking money for performance, but in terms of knowing what would be expected of someone who's about to go into a competition, right? Like if you're, if you're playing against other good players, the expectation is that you're getting yourself ready. And you're doing it in a way that you can bring your best self. And in doing so, you not only bring the best sell the best out of yourself, you bring the best out of your opponent potentially, which often leads to the best matches, you know, if one person doesn't prepare and the other one does, and that that match has a potential not be a very good match and not that enjoyable. So I think there's a piece of this professionalism, about instead of just you know, kind of getting by and doing, you know, whatever you're used to or whatever is really comfortable. Do the things that are going to help you best prepare, there'll be some experimentation, err, some trying some stuff out, but once you find it Be consistent with it, stay with it, until you find the next thing that's going to make it even better. Anything else we need to get into this topic? I think we wanted to maybe take two minutes to talk about timing. Is there anything else on timing of these things we can talk about?



Johnny Parks 50:13

Yeah, no, I think I think we've covered it, but we hit it again, going through going through all of this, it's, it's, everyone's gonna have their own routine. And when they might use all these, it's always going to be maybe different times. When you do visualization, when you do your shadow strokes, when you do your, you know, real focus breathing, I mean, again, they may be when one person might be using the breathing might be a different time than another because somebody might feel that stress and anxiety at different moments

in time. So the timing of it can be can be varied can be, you know, and it's also sometimes it's out of your hands from a timing perspective, depending on the environment you're in and what you've got access to sometimes you go to tournaments, you just don't have access to a tennis court for practice, you know, so then, you know, really shut sorting out the importance of how you warm up. You've got a big constraint there. So sometimes it's taken out of your hands, but there's still things you can control in how you prepare. Absolutely. So no, that's, that's really it. But no, Larry, I mean, this has been great. I mean, those five things. I mean, let's just recap them. So one, have time alone to focus to use imagery and visualization, three shadows, strokes, for breathe your way into the match, and five, play a few points in the warm up.



Larry Lauer 51:35

There it is. Hopefully, that audience finds it helpful. parents and coaches are listening to this, share it with your tennis, playing and playing kids getting to try some things because experimentation you want it to happen when they're younger, so that when they get a little bit older, 16-17, they've worked a lot of stuff out already, they know how to get themselves ready. Now, because they've engaged with it, they develop their own customized routine that's best for them. But they're relying on the principles of high performance, that you need time to get yourself ready. There are certain ways to mentally turn the brain on that you want to engage in like imagery, like then attaching it to your movement with shadow strokes. So doing these things, you can create your own customized preparation that still relies on the scientific principles.



Johnny Parks 52:30

Well, Lazur, I mean, this has been great talking through some of these practical applications. I mean, coaches, if you're working on these with your players, absolutely brilliant. If you picked up a few things here in gray, I mean, these are things you can start doing today. I mean, we right getting into the summer season here, there's going to be probably a lot more tournament's that your players are going to be having access to or competing in, you know, give them some preparation time to work maybe through some of these games, some practice at it, so that they got that comfort level and then, you know, see how they do with it at that tournament's. Well, Larry, I mean, wraps it up for this week's episode of Compete like a Champion. If you want to let us know how you're the effective match preparation is going for you. Or if you're a coach, parent, your players, you can reach out to Dr. Larry and I directly via Twitter, at Larry Lauer or at Johnny Parks One. For more information on any tons of resources out there or more on some of these topics, you can visit the player development website, playerdevelopment@usta.com. We'd really appreciate it as well. If you're enjoying listen to the podcast, share it with a friend, a

fellow coach or fellow player, fellow parents share it along because the whole point about these podcasts is to be able to share these messages to help us all move along in the right direction together, elevate each other help each other perform to new levels. So keep sharing along with people that you might think will find these topics useful. So well that's it. So until next week, we'll be coming back at you with another episode. But until then Dr. Larry and I are checking out