

Controlling Your Emotions

by Ian Westermann



I recently answered a great question about keeping your cool on the tennis court. Basically the question asked: "How can we keep from going crazy after stupid errors out on the court?". I'd like to share my answer with the rest of you because I know many of you reading this can fall into the trap of getting negative while playing tennis!

This is a really good topic. So many of us tennis enthusiasts take our game very seriously, so seriously that any kind of failure or mistake becomes inexcusable. I battled with this while I was in college and wish that I had learned how to deal with it then, I had so many practices and matches that made me just miserable on the court, it was really a shame. Here are a few of my thoughts on the subject:

Keep Tennis in Perspective

This is kind of an obvious thing, but something that I think many of us lose sight of since we take the sport and our improvement so seriously. None of us play professionally, whether or not we win is not going to have any bearing on our income, livelihood, success in life, or if our friends and family love us any more or less at the end of the day. It's awesome that people love tennis so much that they take it seriously and really try their best to reach their full potential, but at the end of the day it's just a game, something that we should all be doing for enjoyment! It sucks being so hard on yourself, it's really not fun at all. Be realistic about the implications of your performance that day and lighten up a little bit. I wish I had started practicing this earlier in life.

Emotional Habits

Next I'd like to make the statement that emotional and physical reactions to both good and poor shots on the tennis court are habits, they're practiced and learned whether you're conscious of it or not. Somebody that I teach with recently had a great quote during a clinic: "If you practice being negative, you'll get good at being negative. If you practice getting angry, you'll get good at being angry. If you practice being positive, you'll get good at being positive. What do you want to be good at on the court?". Many of us fall into the trap of thinking that when we hit a crappy shot we have to be disgusted with ourselves. Well, it's your choice. You can make the choice between focusing on the negative emotions and feelings, and projecting those on the court, or to let those feelings pass and move on to the next point you have to play with a level head. I've recently started to make a habit out of smiling and making light of my errors, especially the really bad ones. Have a sense of humor about it. It's not that I'm actually "ok" with screwing up, I'd obviously rather not, but heading out onto the court I know that errors will occur, and I want their occurrence to affect my game play as little as possible that day. Make a conscious effort to practice being positive on the court. It will improve your game.

Break the Cycle

Why will it improve your game? Because nobody plays well when they're angry. Almost always getting angry and frustrating becomes a terrible cycle on the court. An error is made, your emotions go south, the next point is played with a poor attitude and another error is made furthering that crappy outlook on your game and the match. I've only ever known ONE player who honestly played better with a chip on his shoulder and angry at himself or his opponent, it's an extremely, extremely rare trait. Break the cycle by forming new habits and having more positive emotions on the court.

Making Errors

Lastly, I'd like to reiterate something that I mentioned before: you're going to make errors. It doesn't matter how good you become, you will never leave a tennis court without making unforced errors. I'm not pointing this out to be negative or a pessimist, but rather to make sure that you all have a healthy expectation on yourselves out on the court. So many tennis players make those inevitable errors and immediately focus on how stupid they were to make a mistake, as if they're above it and too good for such things. This kind of attitude will only set you up for frustration and a constant feeling of failure which is simply unrealistic. When errors happen immediately give yourself positive feedback, tell yourself specifically what you're going to do better next time you get that same shot or are in that same situation on the court. It's not the end of the world, errors are all just part of the game of tennis, nobody plays without them.