

Five Mental Toughness Tips

By Jeff Cooper, About.com Guide



Most tennis players are all too familiar with the difficulty of the mental half of tennis competition. The power of the mind is evident at every level, from Goran Ivanisevic or Jana Novotna at Wimbledon to an eight-year-old afraid to use any of her full strokes in her first tournament. Tennis is a gold mine for sports psychologists, and some players spend several hours each week just doing mental toughness exercises.

Here are five simple techniques you can try right away:

1. The best all-around mental repair tool is the simple phrase, "only the ball." It cures, at least temporarily, most of the big pitfalls. Whether you're upset, angry, nervous, or just distracted, repeat this phrase to block out negative thoughts and return your focus to where it belongs, the ball.

2. Probably the hardest time to concentrate is when you're getting ready to return serve. Your opponent has the ball, so your mind seems to sense that this is an opportunity for a little time off. The next thing you know, your musings about which movie to watch tonight are rudely interrupted by a chunk of rubber and fuzz coming in at 90 m.p.h. A combination of three devices can help keep your mind on the job:

- While your opponent is preparing, try to focus on something undistracting, like your strings. (Strings get readjusted a lot more than needed because of this little trick.)
- As she tosses the ball, try to watch it come out of her hand and say to yourself a long, drawn-out, "baaalll."
- As she hits the serve, say "hit," followed by "bounce," then on your return swing, "hit."

The "baaalll" device seems to work well for most players without much of a downside. The "hit, bounce, hit" phrase is also popular, but for some players it distracts more than it helps.



3. It's possible to become too analytical in the middle of a match, which will keep you from letting your strokes take their natural flow, but you don't want to shut down your analytical abilities, either. If you miss a shot you shouldn't have, you'll dwell on it less if you take a moment to figure out what you did wrong, then say to yourself, "Okay, I won't do that again." It's usually a good idea to repeat the stroke right away with the correct motion. You might very well make the same error the next time the stroke comes up, but just go ahead and apply the same process. Eventually you will get it right, and in the meantime, a little extra optimism won't hurt.

4. Learn versatility. If you have only one playing style, and it's not working, your lack of strategic options also creates a shortage of mental safety valves. A key factor in psychological health in general is feeling empowered to choose different courses of action. If you have a Plan B, C, and D on the tennis court, the failure of Plan A is unlikely to cause despair. Tennis players often lose because at least a part of them secretly gives up. You won't give up while you have something else to try. Learn to play every part of the court and hit every kind of shot with every kind of spin. You'll likely uncover a weakness in a seemingly invincible opponent. Variety makes the game more creative and interesting, too.

5. Look alert, energetic, confident, and happy. Looking so will actually help you be so to a significant extent, and it will keep you from giving encouragement to your opponent. If your opponent is at all prone to choking, your look of ready confidence on the verge of seeming defeat might keep just enough doubt in her mind to make her cave under the pressure of closing out the match.