



Brain Game
Sergiy Stakhovsky
had the belief when
he beat Roger
Federer at
Wimbledon

In confidence

Purposeful practice can help players build belief in their game

A player's mentality can have an enormous impact on their performance in all competitive sport. But perhaps no more so than in tennis, with the gladiatorial nature of the game – a one-on-one no-contact conflict with no coaching permitted – the need for mental resilience is even more profound.

Research has shown that coaches are gradually becoming more aware of the importance of mental resilience and are more interested in understanding and applying mental training techniques into a player's daily routine.

When a player experiences the ideal performance state (IPS) he or she feels totally immersed in the game with heightened mental perception where everything seems to just click. This state is often referred to as being 'in the zone'.

"I didn't feel anything," Lukas Rosol said after his famous upset against Rafael Nadal in 2012. "I was in a trance a little bit. That's the best."

Confidence is a belief in one's own abilities. Understandably, the top players display a strong belief in their own abilities and the performances they are capable of. Possessing self-confidence

does not guarantee peak performance but its absence can make it harder to achieve. If players lack self-confidence, they may expect to fail – and this expectation, in part, may cause them to fail.

Just think about that time Rosol beat Nadal at Wimbledon, or Sergiy Stakhovsky's unlikely win against defending champion Roger Federer the following year – the perfect example of how a player's level of belief and self-confidence can drastically alter the outcome of a match when no-one disputes who is the more gifted player.

Confidence arouses positive emotions, facilitates concentration and increases persistence. It can make a player choose more challenging goals and can even affect shot selection – with negative thoughts a player will often move their centre of mass backwards, placing more weight onto the back foot, creating a less stable base. When this happens it is harder for a player to generate power and regain an offensive strategy.

Lack of confidence could be in one particular area – such as lacking conviction in a certain stroke, such as the overhead or a second serve, or in pressure situations like a tiebreak or match point. A player may

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lack belief against a particular opponent or during certain match-play situations, such as a rain delay.

A lack of self-confidence triggers self-doubts, which negatively affect performances and cause a player to dwell on past results, and consequently focus on the outcome rather than the performance.

On the other hand, having too much confidence can also be problematic. Over-confidence can be seen in players who possess more confidence than their abilities warrant and can lead to poor match preparation, a blasé attitude, wavering concentration and a lack of intensity.

Psychological skills are incorrectly believed by many to be innate. If the player is mentally 'weak' many believe that it is impossible to change. Confidence is not an inherited trait and psychological skills can be developed through planned and purposeful practice using tools such as goal setting, visualisation and match-play situations.

IMPROVING SELF CONFIDENCE

A player must understand their current level and what may be holding them back. By training smartly; practising with intensity and focusing on solidifying strengths as well as improving areas of weakness and increasing technical and tactical preparation, self-confidence should improve. A plan requires maximum effort at all times, accepting their worth and avoiding comparisons.

BEFORE A MATCH

Being prepared and developing routines helps ensure minimal stress. Pre-match routines gradually become habits and every player will find a routine to suit them, whether listening to music or finding somewhere quiet to prepare. A good pre-match plan should keep a player focused and relaxed. Complaining about

external factors outside of their control such as court surface, balls, the conditions or even the opponent are signs that a player was not mentally prepared or confident beforehand.

DURING A MATCH

There are four emotional responses during a match: tanking (withdrawing effort), anger (aggressive behaviour) and choking (worrying and focusing on the outcome) all inhibit performance. Only by fighting – relishing the competition and giving 100% – can a player remain energised. Use routines or patterns to either relax or energise themselves. Positive body language and self-talk can reinforce concentration and confidence levels.

MAINTAIN MOMENTUM

In every tennis match there are turning points, and momentum plays a key role in the result. The most successful players are able to control momentum when it is against them and take advantage of it when the match flow is in their favour. Winning sequences of points helps build momentum and confidence. This can be developed in practice by implementing match point drills where three points in a row constitutes a game, six points makes a set and nine points wins a match. Improving confidence and mental consistency will help players control momentum during match play.

POST-MATCH

A mental evaluation after the match can help contribute to future positive performances. Acknowledge positive aspects of the performance – it is important to recognise good shots and phases of play. Committing those successful moments – whether a good shot or a hard-fought win – to memory will help players draw on positive memories to build confidence in the future. 

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