

Breathing equals Better

A few years back, Joe Obidegwa, an outstanding pro from Naples, joined me at Gilchrist Park in Punta Gorda for a USTA-sponsored grass roots program for young juniors. He offered a unique perspective on the indispensable nature of breathing and how it significantly can improve one's game.

Immediately after we demonstrated some forehands and backhands, one of the youngsters in the group, itching to play and eyeing the demo rackets waiting by the fence, wanted to know why we “made a noise” when we were hitting the ball. Obidegwa spontaneously took charge and proceeded to explain why.

First, he asked the curious kid how long he could survive without food. With “a long time” quickly established, he then asked another kid how long she could survive without water. An “even longer time,” she responded proudly, confident in her answer. Lastly, he asked the group how long they could go without breathing. After having one of them stand and hold his breath for as long as he could, quite a few simultaneously raised their hands and excitedly shouted out what amounted to, “Not very long!” Now, with their full attention, Obidegwa explained, “That’s why we breathe out and make a little noise too when we hit the ball, so we can keep playing all day and never run out of air.”

Virtually all club-level tennis players, both frequent and occasional participants, thoroughly enjoy, and always benefit from, watching the very best players on television and especially live at a tour venue. They instinctively assimilate what they’ve seen into their own games, which is readily noticed by their peers when they’re

back in action at their home club or park.

Yet, mostly, these same players are curiously reluctant, or self-conscious about, adopting what they’ve *heard*, that being the audible sound of players exhaling right as they’re striking their shots. They unfortunately remain “breath holders” at the all-important racket-on-ball moment, a practice that sharply elevates muscle tension, undermines performance and, far more importantly, is detrimental to one’s on-court health – including upper body injuries – and overall wellbeing.

There are a number of reasons why proper breathing is so beneficial – at any level of play – in the physically demanding game of tennis. The most obvious is to prevent the cumulative onset of oxygen debt, which invariably leads to unnecessarily elevated and potentially dangerous heart rates along with accelerated dehydration. If that’s not enough, oxygen deprivation also results in difficulty concentrating on the ball and the poor decision making that accompanies it. I make it a point to remind players, those who are able to sustain long physical rallies from the baseline, “If you’re going to play that well, you’re going to have to start breathing!”

Breathing can also help you become more powerful in your shot making – with less effort – and enjoy greater stamina over the course of a match, particularly as it relates to your overall muscle tension. Think of your breathing regimen when you’re in the gym weight training, or doing crunches and push-ups on your lanai. You inhale while doing the “negative” movement of the exercise and exhale during the “positive” movement. No personal trainer would



Game

ever allow you to hold your breath.

Something that's barely ever mentioned is the synergistic benefit of exhaling on impact. The very physicality of the act – you *do not have to be loud* for it to be effective – substantially diffuses any inadvertent, counter productive, over analytical, left-brain thinking that makes top-notch ball watching extremely difficult.

The strange case of Jay Lapidus always comes up when exploring this topic. As a former Princeton #1 and journeyman tour player, Lapidus, who now directs the men's and women's programs at Duke, was known to breathe audibly both for himself *and* his opponent! First, as the ball approached his point of impact, the inhalation occurred followed by the audible exhalation as he struck his own shot. Then, as his ball neared the opponent's strike zone, another inhalation, followed by another audible exhalation as they hit theirs. Now, this isn't recommended for match play, but as a breathing exercise in a practice situation, this certainly has merit for those interested in becoming more aware of their breathing patterns...or lack thereof.

Jimmy Connors was the first tour player to bring attention to, and ultimately popularize, audibly exhaling on every shot. Today's dean of television tennis commentators, Bud Collins, first characterized Connors' penchant for this as "sounding like a wounded seal."

Later on, Monica Seles, who clearly modeled her style of play after Jimbo, added her own innovation: the two-syllable exhalation, albeit considerably louder. The first queen of scream. As she approached the top of the women's game in '92, having become

so dependent on the synergy of this ball-striking timing technique, Martina Navratilova and a number of Seles' other opponents at that year's Wimbledon, repeatedly complained to the officials about not being able to hear the ball being struck. A conflicted Seles, trying earnestly to tone it down, struggled throughout the fortnight and, although managing to reach the final, lost badly to Steffi Graf, 6-1, 6-2, with her well over-the-top breathing habits completely disrupted.

Who knows what the exact origination of the athletic term "choking" is. Most likely it's a reference to being so uptight and fearful that one has difficulty breathing normally.

The reality is that *everyone* chokes on occasion, but, yes, breathing absolutely does equal a better game. 🏸