

Putting a Face on Your Game

Nearly everyone is familiar with the term “body language” as it relates to everyday life. Many people, especially those who play sports, also recognize its significance as it relates to athletic performance. Many of these sporting individuals are, to varying degrees, in touch with their own body language, but are particularly aware of it in others. Typically, body language manifests itself in one of three categories: positive, negative and neutral.

Tennis players spend much of their match time playing in between points, and the more experienced and successful players are very aware of exhibiting positive body language during these non-playing moments, whether they’re winning or losing.

Sure, players can become demonstrative in brief celebrations after winning a key or hard fought point – the fist pump, thigh slap and “c’mon” outbursts are common. But then it’s right back to the same ritualistic, emotionally even-keeled routine leading up to the start of the next point. This type of positive behavior is paramount in maintaining one’s optimal body chemistry in a mano-a-mano, finite sport like tennis.

But another manifestation – though rarely, if ever, mentioned by even the best television analysts – exists in facial expression, traditionally referred to as one’s “game face.” Rafael Nadal’s snarl as he begins his service toss immediately comes to mind as does the classic Boris Becker penchant for extending his tongue out of the side of his mouth.

In our post-9/11 world, intelligence experts have developed a technique of studying facial expressions to identify potential

terrorists. Vic Braden, a long-time tennis coach, author and psychologist, attended a seminar on facial analysis by leading computer science professor Dr. Gerard Medioni. Braden then applied what he learned to the study of facial expressions of tour players, particularly those of Roger Federer.

He discovered that Federer played with a straight-ahead visual focus along with a slightly upward-turned mouth against all opponents but one: Nadal. When facing his nemesis, and only his nemesis, he tended to look downward and wear a slight frown. So, yes, one’s external façade – face and body – can absolutely be a window into one’s mental and emotional state.

Taken further, the fleeting moment of ball on string contact is especially telling. Go ahead and observe the facial expressions, right at shot impact, of the players on your own tour. You’ll be amazed, and occasionally amused. Facial expressions can even vary from stroke to stroke depending on one’s expertise or lack thereof. They can also be heavily influenced depending upon the match moment at hand.

On the wrong side of what might be called “the game face ledger” are three unfortunate, albeit common, responses during impact. First, there’s the “deer in the headlights” expression, which suggests they player doesn’t know what to do *and* indicates they’re completely overcome by the task at hand. Then there’s the “fraidy cat” look: the fear of failure is clearly present and accounted for, psych 101 conflict avoidance at its best. Finally, the “clenched jaw breaker” is quite another story: standing fast, which is a step in



the right direction, but taking on the ball like an enemy in battle, totally over-amped with excessive muscle tension, eliminating any chance of playing consistently.

For the better side, there are two modes. The “gunfighter” look is steely eyed, exuding confidence, unafraid, clearly in charge of the proceedings in the present and going forward into the fray. The other desirable look that can pay dividends over the long haul is the classic “poker player” face: deadpan, slack jawed, emotionless, revealing nothing at all, yet totally comfortable and fully engaged. Tim Adams, in his book *On Being John McEnroe*, described the often over-the-top demeanor and psychodrama of McEnroe in his heyday.

“Others, like Borg and Sampras,” he wrote, “managed to make their faces a mask that revealed little of what was going on inside – only to be criticized [mistakenly] as ‘dull’...”

I’m looking forward to viewing a good image of Andy Roddick’s facial expression right as he was blowing an easy backhand volley on set point versus Federer in their most recent Wimbledon final. Had he made it – no doubt keenly aware of what was at stake – it would have given him a two-sets-to-none lead, one that even Federer, the eventual winner, would most likely not be able to overcome considering Roddick’s stellar level of play.

At this juncture in my own tennis life, although no longer competing, I still occasionally find myself in high-pressure situations where pride is definitely on the line. The odd Pro-Am or friendly exhibition are ripe with possibilities of a moment of uncertainty

creeping in on my second serve, just when it counts the most – the club pro’s least-hit shot and most embarrassing if butchered.

As a young, junior player coach, well before Braden’s sophisticated research was published, I stumbled upon the benefit of trying to maintain the “right” facial expression at the split-second, shot-making moment by observing tour players. I learned then that the “right” look definitely equated to better results. Much like the technique of visualizing shot success on every ball – a skill valued in all sports – the “right” facial expression greatly enhance one’s prospects of fending off negative mind sets and real or perceived vulnerability.

For me, the “gunfighter” look usually keeps me afloat during the bad patches, but otherwise it’s the “poker player” persona that is instrumental in keeping me on an even keel, thus maximizing my game.

So, it’s a pretty good idea to begin identifying your best peak performing persona – both below *and* above the neck – and then employing it point-in and point-out no matter the circumstance.

In the end, if all is going wrong, you’re unable to dial it in and you’re feeling conflicted and emotionally at odds with yourself, at least *fake it*. Chances are you’ll be pleasantly surprised! 