

The Tennis

The beginning of a new year always symbolically represents an opportunity to set new goals in life, work, play and tennis!

One's tennis game, always a work in progress, can reap immediate rewards without even stepping on the court. Sure, you'd like to develop that one-handed backhand slice that skids suddenly into unsuspecting opponents. But focusing instead on becoming a better game manager of your existing skills has an even greater upside. Who better than Yogi Berra to explain the crucial role the mind plays in sport: "Baseball is 90 percent mental, and the other half is physical."

In *More Than Just The Strokes*, I convey that a common thread exists in all of sport — one that is simultaneously universal — particularly in tennis, with its mano a mano dynamic that has always made it both inviting and frustrating to its more than 60-million worldwide participants.

This thread is thoroughly represented in mind-sets put forth by tennis greats past and present as well as some of the very best in other individual sports and disciplines, but also, far more intriguingly, by some of history's greatest thinkers. Whenever I come across one of their gems, not tennis specific but strikingly not out of context either, I always surmise that these individuals would have been, in spirit, accomplished tennis players even without skidding backhands.

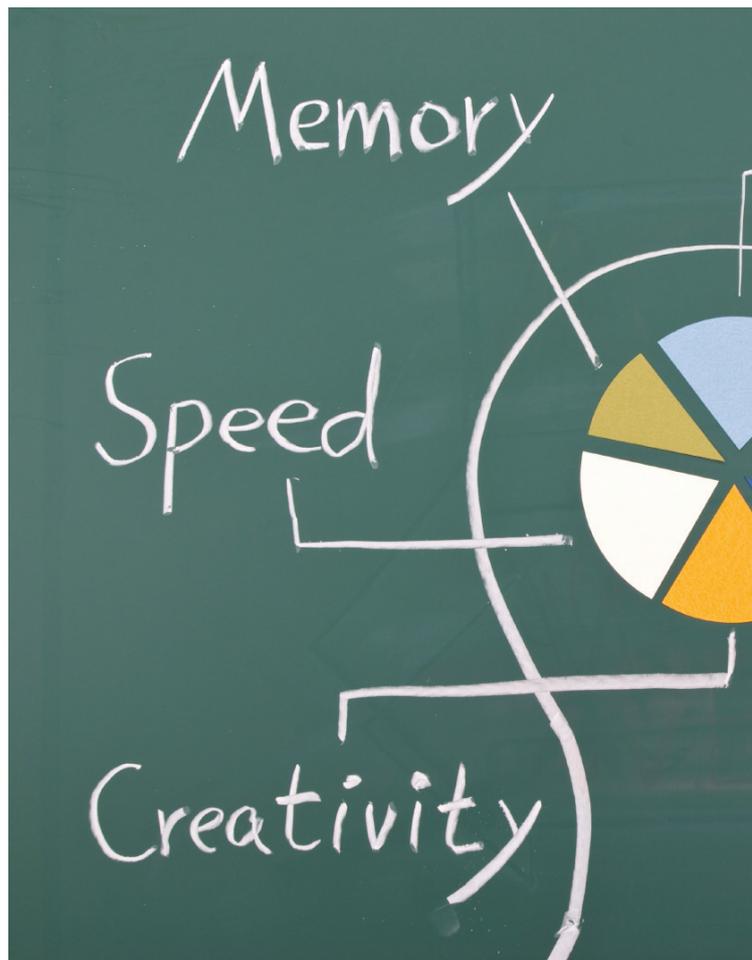
We observe in collective awe the wizardry tennis' best are, and were, able to produce. Seeing it on the Tennis Channel is extraordinary enough. At a live venue, it's jaw dropping. How they are able to synergistically run, jump, twist and turn to connect perfectly with a fast moving small yellow sphere that's approaching with myriad spins and trajectories, and then redirect it back in-kind, is truly amazing. Not exactly "death-defying" as an earlier generation of circus performers were promoted, but defying for mere mortal clubbers nonetheless.

Yet, when these incredibly athletic and fit superstars are asked how they elevated their games to experience even greater successes than achieved earlier in their careers — none better represented than by Novak Djokovic's 2011 campaign — they consistently credit not better ball striking but mostly improved mental and emotional control as the difference maker in their play.

The ideal mind-set that facilitates this optimal state of body performance goes deep into the human psyche. When I experienced my 15 minutes of fame eons ago, sports psychologists didn't even exist. Now these mind coaches populate any and every sport you can think of.

Sports psychologists' training programs have capitalized on the sports metaphor that has successfully lent itself to now popular corporate training programs, especially those involving high stress occupations. One in particular, spawned by Dr. Jim Loehr — the father of mental toughness training, whom Arthur Ashe once referred to as "the most important person in tennis today" — is a by-product of Loehr's earlier work with tennis pros who, back then, were viewed as "head cases."

In tennis, their role is to simplify, clarify and quiet the conscious mind to "settle to the task," as retired ESPN announcer Fred Stolle liked to say. His contemporary, the incomparable Rod



Laver, still regarded by many as the best player of all-time, once quipped, "Tennis is a simple game. It's just not easy."

None other than Leonardo daVinci would have been one of those in-spirit players referred to earlier. He proclaimed, "The greatest sophistication is found in simplicity." Clearly one of the world's greatest minds was on to something.

But our minds can play cruel tricks at the most inopportune times, and simple is not so simple. Frustrated with the dismal performance of an Olympic medal contender at the 2002 winter games, U.S. coach Marjan Cernigoj classically observed, "The fear of failure overcame the desire for success."

Mind-Set Universality



Likewise, the fire breathing Rafael Nadal admitted a few months ago, "I do not fear losing. I fear the fear of losing." Such is the delicate mental-emotional balance that one's performance in any endeavor is vulnerable to.

Jean Butler, the spectacular lead dancer in the original stage production of *Riverdance*, explained her performances this way, "On a good night nothing goes through my mind."

And the Swedish philosopher Kierkegaard would have had that Sampras ice water running through his veins had he been a player with this pearl, "Be with what is, so that what is to be, may become." Easier said than done.

Four centuries after Leonardo thought light years out of his box, Albert Einstein, who actually did play tennis, distilled problem solving into his Three Rules of Work: 1) Out of clutter, find simplicity; 2) From discord, find harmony; 3) In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity. Now there's a mind-set for aspiring players.

This clutter, discord and difficulty inhabit the minds of too many club tennis players like some incurable contagion. A rudderless stagnation occurs with predictable results: an exercise in frustration. Zen master Shunryu Suzuki's take on this paralysis evokes the simplicity theme once more, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

Before there was a Michael Phelps, Ian Thorpe was the world's dominant swimmer. In addressing the expectations of others regarding winning Olympic medals, he said, "I don't swim for medals; I swim for performances. You have control over your performance. You don't have control over where you finish in a race. I think that's the right way, the best way to approach it." Success is empty if there's no possibility of failure, but the primary focus must remain on performing well, not the winning and losing.

Open water swimmer Lynne Cox openly acknowledged the tricky mind-body relationship manifested in her constant inner battles with fear and self-doubt, particularly in her Antarctic Ocean swim in life threatening 32 degree water. How you manage these normal human emotions is the key to unlocking your game.

Daniel Kahneman's experiences in the Israeli army's psychology corps included conducting tests designed to identify individuals most innately predisposed to poise under fire. "We saw who seemed to be stubborn, submissive, arrogant, patient, hot-tempered, persistent or a quitter," he said, all strengths and liabilities applicable to the tennis quest. He believed the initial evaluations were a slam

dunk. But individual results reported months later at officer training schools were often completely contradictory to the initial data. So yes, more positive, productive mental and emotional skills can indeed be developed.

"Taming the beast," my reference to eliminating the useless cacophony of noise in one's head that typically occurs when the task is seemingly moving too fast, involves never underestimating the importance of monitoring and orchestrating one's mind state. Creating the right climate by calmly thinking the right thoughts when it's time to think, and then pulling off the ultimate tennis mind trick of thinking no thoughts at all when it's time to physically execute what you've practiced — Just Do It — is indeed an acquired ability.

For starters, this takes a day in and day out commitment to conviction, courage and trust in what you know is already doable by playing within your existing game, nothing more. It's being with it, not against it. And it's making the time to practice regularly to maintain and sharpen your skills. It's not match play, match play and more match play, the self-defeating dead end street of far too many. ■■