

ON BEING A COOL OPERATOR



Joey is not someone you cross paths with very often. Still relatively new to tennis, but not consumed by its allure despite his preternatural skill for the combative *mano-a-mano* dynamic of the game, he is undoubtedly off the everyday tennis player scale and operates at a level very few experience. He is emotionally gifted.

Tennis is indeed extremely emotional, which is the biggest difference maker among its four encompassing components, the other three being technical, physical and mental. Managing one's emotions in a productive manner is not always easy. Just observe some of the world's best dealing negatively, and unsuccessfully, with their adverse circumstances.

Young Joey is an anomaly. He is cool-wired. Without any previous exposure to sports psychology and with only periodic tennis coaching, he is, at 13, amazingly predisposed to be a cool, calm and completely collected operator no matter his still-developing playing skills.

When then-11-year-old Magnus Carlsen, the Norwegian chess prodigy, played the reigning world champion, Gary Kasparov, to a draw in a 2004 exhibition, it was interesting to observe the 41-year-old Kasparov exhibiting all sorts of emotional stress and duress while the youngster Carlsen deadpanned a walk in the park.

Albeit not destined to be a tennis world champion, Joey has the same attitude and mind-set. He just goes about playing the game on a completely even emotional keel. There's no anger over a missed shot. There's no mounting frustration if things are not going his way, as can commonly happen with still-developing youngsters. And, refreshingly, there's no overly demonstrative fist pumping at every possible opportunity or looking over at his supportive dad for confirmation, now a commonplace occurrence on tour with players constantly

looking to their coaches and support team after every point.

Ideally, although there are variations on the theme, it's best when there's nothing, which is a very, very big something. And that's exactly the way Joey rolls.

I recall his dad, a run through a brick wall, make it happen over-achiever, enthusiastically urging Joey, with a hint of frustration, "C'mon, let's go," based upon his misperception of Joey's passive, seemingly cavalier, neutral on-court demeanor, which indicated, to him, a lack of fire and commitment. Not so. Different circuits for sure, but still competitive to the Nth degree. It was hard wiring unlike his own.

In an elite junior development pilot program I once co-directed with Dr. Jim Loehr, the highly respected innovator in sports psychology's tactics and strategies for peak performance as we know them today, we would periodically videotape players in the facility's stadium court, a very big deal to the kids since most had previously been a ball kid for their heroes in tour events on the same court.

Unknown to them, we were only recording in between points while feigning shooting during points. Later, gathering in the academy playback room, we asked the mates of the two players involved to decide who won each point based upon their post-point body language, facial language, self-talk, if any, and behavior in general.

The kids were on to it quickly and were able to repeatedly and accurately determine the point winners and losers. Seamlessly, they recognized how inept and ridiculous they appeared when carrying on negatively or when being way over the top celebrating as well. Then came the epiphany that habitual, histrionic engagement could not only fuel an opponent's fire and resolve but also undermine any necessary solution-oriented tweaking of their own game when needed.



Ivan Lendl, the world Number 1 at that time and currently coach of the hot-wired Andy Murray, provided them with a model of an above-it-all deportment. They had seen him dominate Jimmy Connors, who was the facility's touring pro, two years running in an ATP event finals. He was the new age, stone faced model, a polar opposite to Connors and especially John McEnroe, who preceded his ascent to the top of the game.

Then along came Pete Sampras who, strangely, was criticized because of his emotionless, laid back, quiet demeanor. Today, the Swiss neutral example of Roger Federer is accepted and admired. After his win over Murray in this year's Wimbledon final, he confided, "I know we put on the poker face out there when we play, but we are trying hard. We do care so deeply about winning and losing."

There have been several career studies, way ahead of their time, of the sport warrior's ideal performance state, including Loehr who, in his 1980's *Mental Toughness Training for Sports: Achieving Athletic Excellence*, was the very first to mainstream the key mental and emotional markers. But Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game*, although far less clinical and somewhat mystical, was the forerunner in the performance psychology field back in 1974.

Others were impactful and remain so today, such as martial arts expert Bruce Lee, whose Eastern take is laid out in *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*, and Dan Millman, who gave us *The Warrior Athlete: Body, Mind & Spirit*, and *Body Mind Mastery: Training for Sport and Life*.

Loehr's enduring mantra was and is: "The ball, and only the ball!" Losing the ball for even an instant, or worse, only seeing it in your periphery to begin with, equals playing somewhat blind. Tension and emotional stress is then suddenly triggered in the crucial ball-

striking split second, a very bad timing. He also was the first to openly advocate breathing — exhaling through the racket-on-ball moment — as a very effective countermeasure to uptightness and was the first to preach pre-shot visualization as an emotionally calming tool as well.

Gallwey's originally coined, now fairly well known, "self-one and self-two" depictions teach that we need to be cognizant of which persona we're channeling under pressure: the accepting, unencumbered, this is my game, just do it, pure player self-one ideal, or the judgemental self-two that cannot, will not completely let go and trust the process.

For the peaceful warrior, Dan Millman explains, "Your fears are not walls, but hurdles. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the conquering of it." And also that, "Self-awareness leads to change; harsh self-criticism only holds the pattern in place."

Bruce Lee's personal letters are filled with enlightening passages: "Remember my friend that it is not what happens that counts; it is how you react to it." Another that's wonderfully relevant to doubles: "One who is possessed by worry not only lacks the poise to solve his own problems, but by his nervousness and irritability creates additional problems for those around him."

In the end, we consistently achieve the best outcome when we resolve to treat every point played the same, best exemplified by the storied Rudyard Kipling quote on a sign at the player's entrance to Wimbledon's fabled centre court: "If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same." ■■■