Strategies to prevent negative anxiety in tennis players

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The most common mental strategies used by professional tennis players to enhance their performance are self-talk, a pre-service or pre-service return preparatory routine and relaxation to cope with anxiety (Defrancesco & Burke, 1997). This research is in line with coaches most prominent and frequent psychological strategies which were encouraging positive self-talk to build confidence and ways to reduce anxiety (Weinberg et al. 1992). Anxiety is generally considered as an important factor influencing sport performance and research has continually highlighted the multi-faceted nature of psychological skills and how they have a significant impact and influence to the coaching domain. While most research has focused primarily on the psychological skills in tennis (e.g. imagery, concentration, goal setting…), there is little empirical data or precise detail or evidence on what specific strategies are actually implemented. Given the nature of psychological skills and the integration with each other (e.g. anxiety affects confidence, goal setting affects motivation, imagery affects confidence), one is left in psychology with an abundance of information but little application to the sport, the context or the individual.

Pre competitive anxiety is derived from the Latin word angere, meaning ‘to choke’ (Onions 1996, cited in Moran 2012, p.85). Anxiety is not just nervousness but is comprised of cognitive (thought), somatic (physical) and behavioural or self-confidence components (Hanton et al., 2013) which have different effects with different players in different contexts and environments. This then requires individual strategies and interventions rather than a one size fits all approach to dealing with anxiety in tennis. This general approach has seen its sell by date as coaches learn from coaching, working with other coaches and players, accessing specific information when and where they require it and by challenging themselves to do better. Learning about tennis psychology in a workshop or by power point presentations provides content but unfortunately not little context or application. How tennis players’ and coaches’ interpret anxiety and how each individual’s cope within different situations and environments are what is required to facilitate how we as coaches can learn better to help our players.

Billy Jean King (a winner of 39 Grand Slam titles, including a record 20 championships at Wimbledon) believes that ‘pressure is a privilege’. This interpretation which has been transferred to business rests on the premise that pressure makes us better. That is true if we have learned how to prepare properly, through training, practice, and an ongoing earnest effort, and that we can rely on that training in challenging situations to help us be our most agile and creative in those moments (King 2008). However despite this gallant approach it is generally accepted however that competitive anxiety can have negative impacts on performance.

You don’t have to control your thoughts. You just have to stop letting them control you.

Mistakes cause doubt and make us feel anxious. These can be manifested by negative thoughts or self-talk about our technique, a specific shot or our ability to play the game. Normally if this cycle has occurred we become tight, tension in our thoughts leads onto the muscles, footwork, reaction time, co-ordination and these results in deterioration in technique and subsequently performance. But this should be just temporary as there are many anecdotal strategies that can help one overcome this negative run of events.
There are many causes of anxiety before games and between and during points such as expectation of self and others, over analysis, perceived importance a fear of failure and doubts in confidence to list but a few (Moran, 2012). The strategies, like the definitions of anxiety are physical (somatic), cognitive (thought) and behavioural and the components also overlap like all psychological skills.

**Strategies to overcome pre-competitive anxiety**

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Individual Context

The Physical Grunt is a common technique in professional tennis where the exhalation may be facilitative in stabilising a player’s core and generate more power in serving and groundstrokes. Psychologically it may enhance motivation and effort.

Slow breathing is like an anchor in the midst of an emotional storm: the anchor won't make the storm go away, but it will hold you steady until it passes. Changeovers may a good time to moderate your breathing pattern by taking slow deep breaths (4-6 seconds) followed by even slower exhalations (6-8 seconds).

PMR is an exercise to help reduce anxiety by tightening up a muscle group and then relaxing it. Squeezing a fist before return or shrugging shoulders before serving help isolating muscles groups to relieve tension.

Centreing requires you to focus your attention on the centre of your body, the area just behind your naval button. The technique is said to produce a calming and controlling effect, providing an effective way to manage anxiety.

Countering is a technique where the performer replaces the negative thoughts with positive ones. Self-talk is often skewed towards the negative and this CBT technique is consciously chosen to think about the situation in a more realistic and helpful way.

Self-talk has been widely endorsed by athletes and coaches as a performance enhancement strategy where the performer consciously chooses to think about the situation in a more realistic and helpful way has had widespread support in many disciplines. However for some individuals negative self-talk helps them cope and perform. Motivational and technical self-talk has also
gained widespread interest in the sports literature which is reported to enhance confidence and effort.

Awareness of anxiety and interpreting it constructively is another strategy to deal with the negative effects it can have in performance. It tends also to provide self-appraisal of the situation and solutions are realistically thought out. As Boris Becker stated ‘I love the winning, I can take the losing, but most of all I Love to play’.

An instruction to focus on a single technique is a concentration strategy so that the negative anxiety cycle does not continue. ‘One point at a time’ so that the performer’s attention does not dwell on the past point or the future outcomes is an example of this cognitive technique. A cue phrase such as ‘hit through’ is said to facilitate this technique.

Pre shot routines range from the very simple ball bouncing of Roger Federer to the complex almost compulsive sock, hair and pants adjusting routine of Rafa Nadal. Just as no two players have the same forehands and backhands or indeed service actions, there are also differences between all the players in regard to their physical pre-serve routines (http://www.tennisxpert.com/preserve-tennis-routine.aspx)

Pre performance routines can help athletes focus attention, enhance confidence, eliminate distractions, and reduce anxiety. They require consistency and like pre-shot routines are idiosyncratic but follow familiar patterns which eliminate doubt as the player has control of the warm-up, visualisation time and environment awareness.

Shouting has been used to provide a release mechanism for the anxiety that the performer feels (s)he is under. But one you have to be careful about where and how you scream on the tennis court.

Simulation training is a great way to prepare mentally for the challenges of competition, and this can include mental as well as physical stressors. For example, a tennis player could increase the mental pressures in a practice match by starting each service game 0-15 down, and thus getting used to ‘rebonding’ after losing the first point. Alternatively a player with an over-reliance on his first serve could be restricted to one serve only and be forced to become extremely focused and accurate with what is, in effect, a second serve. An important component of effective simulation is the appreciation of all of the senses that the athlete would expect to engage at the time of the actual event being simulated.

When one is anxious, ones thoughts generally turn inward to focus on oneself, which may result in inappropriate attention. The techniques describes above can be successful depending upon the individual nature of player, the precise context and the performance environment that the player surrounds themselves in. There is no one solution but many and by trying each out and experimenting with them, players and coaches can put each technique in the appropriate framework. Successful performance enhancement involves more than knowledge of techniques and technical skills. ‘It requires understanding the context in which one operates—knowing what works with which persons in which situations. It is more than knowing what to do; it is knowing how to get it done’ (Brown et al. 2005).


King, B-J. (2008) Pressure is a Privilege: Lessons I've Learned from Life and the Battle of the Sexes Life time Media, NY

