

## CONCENTRATION DURING TENNIS MATCH

### *Abstrac*

*A player becomes aware that there are more ways of concentration and finds out which ones are the most effective in a specific situation. He learns how to concentrate and this enables him to play at his best for an extended period of time. Most tennis players actually start a match highly focused, but then they get distracted or mentally tired and this results in lack of concentration. Can we stay focused through the whole match?. To completely prevent concentration loss is impossible. We are humans and not robots. Our minds keep producing thoughts, even when we don't want them to. To judge the ability to concentrate in competition, it is, therefore, important to know the conditions on which the concentration processes before and during the athletic action depend. The ability to be attentive in particular, to be able to concentrate is closely related to other cognitive and emotional/motivational processes. Therefore, strong emotional excitement (anger, range, anxiety) interferes with the concentration process. The ability to concentrate is thus a gauge of psychological stability. The ability to concentrate in competition, therefore, is related to internal (mental) relaxation. Finally, it should still be mentioned that the ability to concentrate depends, to a significant degree, on physical fitness. Therefore, among other factor, conditioning is vitally important for success in tennis.*

### **DEFINITION**

A simple definition is that concentration is the ability to stay mentally in the present tense! Concentration is the ability to focus te relevant cues of te match/practice and to maintain that focus for the duration of the match/practice. Concentration is one of the first sports psychology terms that athletes hear about when they start practicing their chosen sport. They often hear the coaches: «Come on, concentrate. « OR »Focus now. « BUT so many players don't know the practical ways of doing that. Or maybe they try and concentrate on things that are out of their control – like winning a game – which makes them even more anxious.

Concentration is probably the most important mental skill required for success in competitive tennis. When playing, the player has an attention field that is anything in his internal or external environment that he can focus on. Good concentration is focusing on aspects of the attention field relevant to performance, while bad concentration is focusing on irrelevant aspects of performance. The player therefore needs to know which are the relevant performance cues situation of the match. Concentration is the key to controlling the player's emotions. It also helps the player to focus his thoughts on some helpful fundamentals (e.g. 'Watch the ball!') and it keeps him away from negative thoughts (e.g. 'Don't miss the return'). If what the player is thinking is different from what he is doing, the performance will deteriorates.

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Based on this, it becomes clear that thinking can disturb the concentration process. Consider, particularly, self-reflection directed toward the past, on athletic action that have just gone wrong, such as, for example, on a ball that has just gone wrong (often connected with anger, therefore with emotional excitement) or the if-then consideration directed to the future ("if I misplay this ball, I'll lose the whole set") impedes optimal concentration on the "here and now".

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TENNIS COMPETITION**

Top player and coaches believe that the mental side of tennis is extremely important, especially when physical abilities are equal. Besides, during the hours leading up to a match, and the time during the match, there is little that can be done to improve the technical and physical areas, but mentally it is possible to do a lot of work. In a study conducted by Moran (1996) on coaches' opinions about psychological techniques in tennis, some of the conclusions included the following: a) 90% of coaches interviewed believed strongly that mental skills were very important in determining success in competitive tennis. b) 90% of coaches interviewed reported that they devoted a period of time each week to "analysis and discussion" of mental skills. c) Coaches found difficulties in translating theoretical knowledge of sport psychology into practical drill. d) Coaches reported that motivation, concentration, self-confidence, mental preparation, control of anxiety, control of anger and visualization were the most important mental skill in tennis. The important thing for coaches to accept is that psychological skills can be learned and improved if practised regularly. These skills aren't inherited and coaches can help their players with the mental side of tennis both on and off the court.

Competitive tennis involves a mental challenge against the opponent and, sometimes, against the player themselves. The player's mental state can often have an enormous impact on his physical state. The Psychological characteristics of tennis include the following: (1) It is individual sport. These type of sports generate more stress than team sports, (2) It is difficult sport than requires a high degree of co-ordination and as such can be very frustrating, (3) The player has to take thousands of decisions in very short periods of time, (4) No long time-outs and no substitutes are allowed, (5) At certain levels, There are no umpires officiating the matches.

## TYPES

There are 4 different ways of concentration which were introduced by R.M. Nideffer: 1) **External wide** – when after hitting the ball the player perceives his opponent, where his ball will land, court position and so on. 2) **External narrow** – when the player is about to hit the ball and his complete focus is only on the ball. 3) **Internal wide** – when the player is thinking about the strategy of play before the match – tactical patterns (serve & volley, wrong footing tactics, how to play in the wind ...). 4) **Internal narrow** – when the player is visualizing the serve just before the actual action. In the following chart there are four of concentration according to Nideffer, 1994.

		Direction of attention	
		External	Internal
Width of attention	Broad	<b>Broad external</b>  Used to rapidly assess a situation, weather, playing surface, etc.(e.g. doubles exchange at net, to see where the apponent is)	<b>Broad internal</b>  Useds to analyse what happened in a game and to plan tactics (e.g. developing a game plan against an opponent, anlysing why the previous game was lost).
	Narrow	<b>Narrow external</b>  Used to focus exclusively on one or two external cues (e.g. watching the ball, picking up cues from the opponent: ball toss, backswing)	<b>Narrow internal</b>  Used to mentally rehearse an upcoming performance or control an emotion state (e.g. mentally rehearse the serve, monitor the self-talk and feeling of stress, etc).

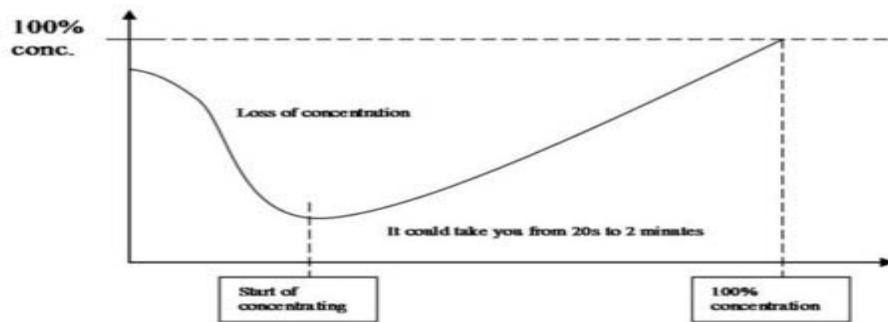
In tennis, most situation required the shifting to another. Thus, control over concentration means control over both the width and direction of attention. When a player has problem, it happens because he is using the incorrect type of concentration for that situation. Effective concentration is using the correct type of

concentration at the correct time. In tennis, the player loses his concentration when he is paying attention to an inappropriate target. For basic tennis psychology these different ways of concentration are not crucial. It's good to know that there are 4 main ways of concentration and that the effectiveness of the player's game is dependent on how fluidly and effectively he moves from one type to another.

The simplest and most effective ways of improving concentration are these two types: (1) **Emptying the Mind**; For emptying the mind – clearing it from negative or unnecessary thoughts – a player needs to use Inner Game ways of quieting the mind. More experienced players can just stop thinking when they become aware that they are thinking too much. When a player's mind is empty it means that he has no thoughts or words in his awareness, but that doesn't mean that he is not focused. Here is a simple demonstration: pick a small object – a pen or even a tennis ball. Throw it up in the air and catch it. It's very probable that you were not thinking while you were watching the ball and catching it and yet you were concentrated. This is the state of having an empty mind,

(2) **focusing on something – usually on the solution**; Focusing on something is more useful when things don't go your way or you are having some problems. For example when you are playing in the wind your focus is on playing more away from the lines which means that you are focusing on something – your mind is not completely empty - you have a certain plan running silently in the background. Or you play with someone with a weaker backhand and your goal is to play to that side a lot. So you are partly focusing on this task – which means that your game is not totally instinctive and yet just when you are about to hit the ball you can have a completely empty mind because you have already decided for the direction of your shot and now you just need to hit the ball cleanly. It's important that the player looks for solutions which are automatic ways of concentrating. Staying in the problem (my backhand sucks, I'm not confident, my forehand down the line shots hit the net ...) only deepens the problem because these thoughts now make you more nervous, doubtful or angry.

Another very important point regarding concentration is that it can drop very quickly but it takes much more time to get it back up. This diagram explains this graphically.



**Why is this important?** When a player becomes aware that his concentration has dropped and starts building it up, it will take some time to get there. During this time he will still not be completely focused and that can cause him to make errors. These errors can again make the player get upset and lose concentration again. So it's important that the player realizes that he is not able to play his best tennis when he is not totally focused and that there is more chance of making a mistake. He needs to accept these mistakes as a part of his effort of getting back to the maximum concentration. When he gets back to 100% of concentration, the number of mistakes will drop significantly.

### **How to practice**

Write down after practice: (1) Rate the awareness of your level of concentration from 1-10. 10 means that you know when your concentration drops and 1 means that you are totally unaware of your level, (2) What events or thoughts usually cause you to lose concentration? And how does that affect your play afterwards? (3) Rate yourself from 1-10 on how good you are at concentrating – either focusing on a solution OR emptying the mind.

## **PROBLEM OF CONCENTRATION**

- Lack of interest in the match
- A lot of start (dead time): difficulty of maintaining concentration between points and throughout the match. Tennis is an un-time game. The momentum of a match can change at any stage.
- Thinking of past events (e.g. a mistake the player has made, the fact the player has just lost a point, a bad call, an argument with the chair umpire).
- Focusing on future events (the player thinks that he will win the match if he wins the next two point).
- Paralysis by analysis: The player starts to analyse his game and he becomes paralysed because of that).
- Choking: The player distract themselves through anxiety (e.g. telling themselves: 'I mustn't double fault on this point').
- The player loses his focus due to opponent's gamesmanship (e.g. when the opponent is having an argument with the chair umpire)

## **TRAINING FOR CONCENTRATION**

Based on these general consideration on concentration, here are some tips for practical training: (a) Before the volley, one should be sure to get into a state of relaxed concentration. Concentrate on the task without conscious effort and to ignore what does not belong to task. In training, each player must explore for herself how much time she needs for this, how much time she needs for this, how much her basic breathing rhythm help her, Which personal techniques help her succeed in getting rid of wandering thoughts and external disruptive stimuli (for example, ritualized actions before serving). To stabilize these techniques, it is advisable to use disruptive stimuli in a positive way (for example, on audio tape) now and then in order to stimulate the stresses of competition. (b). During the volley, the incoming ball should be followed as long as possible, even if this is possible only up to 1-2 m before contact with the racket face. This attempt, which appears banal, must be repeatedly made and controlled because many palyers

observe the trajectory only briefly and, therefore, turn the head too soon in the direction of the opponent. However, this impedes control of the hitting movement when meeting the ball. Practicing keeping an eye on the ball may be easier with colored ball, which may more clearly reveal the ball's trajectory and spin. (c) During breaks, It is helpful to systematically practice the shift from concentration while playing to relaxation and back to concentration on the game, in order to prolong the ability to concentrate.

Because the ability to concentrate is especially impeded by psychological and physical stresses, corresponding stimuli should be incorporated into the concentration exercise; for example, concentration exercise should also include situations encountered in high training stresses, so that in a competitive situation, the player is still in the position to be able to concentrate at the end of the match.

## **HOW TO MAINTAIN OF CONCENTRATION DURING A TENNIS MATCH**

You've probably noticed that maintaining concentration through a whole tennis match is not easy. Most tennis players actually start a match highly focused, but then they get distracted or mentally tired and this results in lack of concentration. Can we stay focused through the whole match? To completely prevent concentration loss is impossible. We are humans and not robots. Our minds keep producing thoughts, even when we don't want them to. Our emotions arise when a situation in the external world partially matches a past situation in which we experienced pain. So instead of feeling discouraged about losing your concentration, work on bringing it back to a high level. Here are 3 ways of doing that when playing tennis:

(1) Set a Goal; Concentration is, by definition, being focused on only one thought or object or action. And you lose concentration when you start focusing on more things. To prevent distraction, you need to set a goal which is more important than other distractions. In tennis this would generally be: a) Your main strategy - playing to the backhand, moving your opponent, playing low, sliced



balls ..., b) Tracking the ball - I prefer the term tracking to watching. Watching doesn't have to be really focused, while tracking is. Track the ball from your opponent's racket to yours, and back. This occupies the mind so much that you don't get distracted by other things.

(2) Control the Ups and Downs of Concentration; If you try to sprint at full speed, you can do that probably for 10 seconds, and then you'll slow down a lot. If you don't take a break and try to keep running you'll run more and more slowly. But if you take a brief break, get some air and rest a little bit, you'll be able to sprint at almost full speed again. It's the same with concentration. You must control the breaks when your mind can rest from the mental effort that concentration requires. These breaks include: a) Breaks between the points - As soon as the point ends, analyze for a few seconds what happened (if needed) and then let go for 10 seconds. By letting go, I mean let go of thinking about the next point or what you did wrong or anything similar. Just walk around, breathe, fix your strings and try to keep an empty mind. Then start preparing for the next point (either serve or return), and either remind yourself of your main strategy or decide on a new one. b) Breaks between games - do the same, except now you have more time for everything. You can spend a little more time analyzing what happened in the last two games, but then take a break from thinking and let your mind rest. If thoughts keep coming and you cannot empty your mind for half a minute, then keep yourself occupied with various tasks like: fixing the strings, drinking in small sips, drying yourself with a towel, and so on. Eventually, it's better to learn to just empty your mind for the break. That's how you'll mentally rest and be able to raise your concentration again when the points begin.

(3) Monitor Your Concentration and Bring It Up, If Needed; Try to check your level of concentration from 1 to 10 every now and then. At first, you'll probably forget to do that, since it's not often that we observe ourselves and our thinking. When I did mental training with players on court, I would ask them once per game where they were regarding the concentration.

Most had no problems identifying their level, saying it was at 6 or 8. Once you know that your concentration is not high enough, you can refocus by reminding yourself of the goal or just by fixing your eyes on the ball, even if your opponent is just tapping it to the ground. Eventually, you become more aware of your concentration level and you know how to keep it up for a longer time. Poor concentration is actually an often overlooked cause of mistakes. Most people only see a missed forehand, but what they don't see is that the player's concentration dropped and he was unable to track the ball well or make a quick and correct decision. You also hear commentators and players mention that to win against a good player, you need to exploit that little lapse of concentration that they might have once per set. If you can master the art of concentration and keep it up longer during the point and during the whole match, you'll be the likely winner.

## **Conclusion**

To judge the ability to concentrate in competition, it is, therefore, important to know the conditions on which the concentration processes before and during the athletic action depend. The ability to be attentive in particular, to be able to concentrate is closely related to other cognitive and emotional/motivational processes. Therefore, strong emotional excitement (anger, rage, anxiety) interferes with the concentration process. The ability to concentrate is thus a gauge of psychological stability. The ability to concentrate in competition, therefore, is related to internal (mental) relaxation. Because the ability to concentrate is especially impeded by psychological and physical stresses, corresponding stimuli should be incorporated into the concentration exercise; for example, concentration exercise should also include situations encountered in high training stresses, so that in a competitive situation, the player is still in the position to be able to concentrate at the end of the match. Finally, it should still be mentioned that the ability to concentrate depends, to a significant degree, on physical fitness. Therefore, among other factors, conditioning is vitally important for success in tennis.

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