

How To Be A Solid Competitor

At the 2010 South African Open in Johannesburg this past February, surprising on-the-rise Frenchmen Stephan Robert reached the final before bowing out to Spain's highly ranked Feliciano Lopez. The announcing team, impressed with Robert's break-out performance, succinctly described his game this way: "No real weapons, but he competes so well." Yes, you can be successful at any level by being extremely difficult to beat by *always* competing well.

In an emotionally charged individual game like tennis, you must overcome your opponent(s), but yourself as well, which is often the most difficult task. Losing the inner mental-emotional match will always result in a sub-par performance, and typically a loss in a close but winnable contest.

When you're humming along, firing on all eight cylinders with your tail up, it's all good. Yet, when things go wrong, and they usually do at some point during a match, it often has little to do with your ball-striking skills. One of the very best competitors of all time, Rafael Nadal, lost all three of his matches at the 2009 Barclays ATP World Tour Finals without winning a single set. Afterwards, he summed up his poor play: "I was unable to stay calm in the important moments."

Some players – certainly not Nadal – in the face of adversity, put the flippers on and go in the tank. They fail to give 100 percent, not only physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. They've

always got numerous post match excuses aimed squarely at saving face and insulating themselves from assuming responsibility for their poor effort: "All they did was lob." "It was so windy I couldn't play my game." "I don't like playing at 8 a.m." "The court was slippery." "I had a bad partner."

Accept the conditions. Adapt.

Caving in to adverse circumstances is the worst possible scenario for any competitor. It's an embarrassment to yourself and disrespectful to both your opponent(s) and the game itself.

Anger management is another obstacle to overcome. It's well established that it's very difficult to transform negative emotions and outbursts into a positive result. Most know that, so why do we do it? More often than not, it's an appeal to one's partner, and opponent(s), and anyone who happens to be watching, that this is just not the real you and you're not happy about it. Not exactly a good fix.

Jimmy Connors, widely recognized as one of tennis' all-time bad boys, never directed any expressed anger inward. His venom was directed at the umpire, the linesmen or even a boisterous fan giving him a hard time. Despite his sometimes over the line behavior, Connors was always all about finding solutions regarding any match play difficulties. Tanking was never an option. Playing in the present, and always going forward, was.

Okay, good competitors never tank, and rarely ever allow anger



to be directed inward, but they do choke. Yes, everybody chokes on occasion. No one is choke proof. Even the world's best, in any sport, experience choking. In tennis, I challenge you to watch any tight match on television and then tell me that player X did not choke one single time. No way! Just recall Andy Roddick's botched routine backhand volley that would have given him a most likely insurmountable two sets to none lead over Roger Federer in the 2009 Wimbledon final.

Since it's a given that even occasional tanking and the habitual expression of anger are not acceptable if you're going to play your best, how can you minimize choking in the big moments?

The intrusion of negative thoughts, conscious thoughts occurring in your analytical left brain, is anything but conducive to producing your best brand of play. When your judgmental self overcomes your just-do-it player self at the ball-striking moment of truth, you're pretty much toast and well on your way into a downward spiral.

Whenever negativity, in the form of defeatist thought or naysayer self talk, rears its ugly head, immediately say to yourself, "Stop it." Get rid of the whining and replace it with positive self talk: "C'mon, you can do it!" Then embrace both in-point and out-of-point visualizations of successful shot "flight plans." These occur in the brain's more friendly right hemisphere, where your hard-earned shot-making skills are readily available. Simply put, thinking

in pictures is a far more effective way to play versus reciting to yourself some ill-fated, by the numbers, how-to-play checklist right when you're striking the ball. Paralysis through analysis.

You have to love the report that Cornell University's men's basketball team, upon arriving early to the arena for their NCAA March Madness game against the favored Temple University, was not allowed to use basketballs for warm-ups until exactly :57 prior to tip-off. So, being a motivated group with a good coach, they still started early and first performed all of their drills *without* basketballs! Visualization at its best. And, yes, they won the game.

The other technique that serves as an excellent choking counter measure is always breathing audibly through the moment of ball-on-string impact, and even a bit louder in the big or nervous moments. The sheer physicality of the act not only prevents the obvious — going into oxygen debt — but considerably reduces emotional stress by effectively negating conscious over-thinking.

Back in the day, I can remember playing a match at my very best from start to finish. Afterwards I heard the opposing player's coach, in a consoling effort, telling his player that I was "unconscious" and that I "played out of my mind." Exactly, although that would have been my left-mind.

You can too. Start today! 