

First You RELAX, Then You Do NOTHING



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I wish that was an original line. It's not. A former frequent student, one Mickey Suarez, rattled that off to me in Spanish with a huge smile of satisfaction a number of years ago after a game epiphany session.

Mickey was a fit, physical player, a former eights collegiate rower, who loved to spar from the back of the court, an eager dirt baller. A bad shoulder had put his serving on the backburner. But he was a solid ball striker off both wings – a 4.0 with occasional 4.5 flash – sporting a two-handed backhand that he learned and honed at one of the many Spanish academies he had previously attended long before Rafael Nadal came to prominence.

He was also a self-destructer once he got deep into a back court rally, typically at the fifth or sixth ball. He could hold his own and create extended stalemate exchanges, but then he would blink first and go for too much without an inviting opportunity. Too close to the lines, or not enough safe margin over the net, or both. Suddenly, for no good reason, trying to force square pegs into round holes.

He would huff and puff and ultimately blow his own house down.

I wouldn't give up trying to convince him that he was his own worst enemy, and that he should chill a bit, just go with the flow. That stalemating out of the gate was winning, not losing, as it is perceived by so many clubbers playing with their hair on fire, in singles or doubles. And that he should forget about trying to hit winners and glory shots, the source of almost all of his impatient, unforced errors.

He could dance, but he was unwilling to tango.

One day, after his usual stellar and nearly error free warm-up – when he was always okay with the back-and-forth cooperative rhythms of a proper warm-up – I suggested that during our rally points he should focus on still being aggressive but with very safe margins to the lines along with optimal margins above the net to keep his shots deep, or low to the net to place the ball at my feet when I came in. And to also stop pressing early on for something special,

to make me play more balls to draw some errors, and to play within himself regarding average pace of shot and accompanying racket speed through the ball.

That's when Mickey exclaimed, "Primero se relaja, y despues hace nada," after finally committing to playing the points with the same willing-to-engage mind set he always warmed-up with. Fearlessly engaging me in racket-to-racket combat, he then played his A-game consistently throughout the session with unforced errors dramatically reduced.

He got it.

When you're all about performing well versus being outcome oriented – anxious about winning/losing – you'll begin to be with the game instead of being against it. Winning then becomes a by-product of your ability to execute your shots without the self-induced pressure from an overly judgmental self.

Playing at the very edge of your ball-striking skills, just because you made a couple of truly outstanding shots in the match's second game, is asking for a bad day at the office. Understand that your truly best stuff, your \$100 shots if you will, are typically a spontaneously occurring perfect storm of high-level ball tracking, clear shot visualization, energized footwork and perfectly timed racket-on-ball contact with accompanying breathing. Buying into your own headline, and then attempting to replicate those personal best results on a consistent basis, is a recipe for handing the match over.

The classic example of "first you relax, then you do nothing" occurs all the time on returns of serves, the ones when you're anticipating that the serve is going to be in, but then realizing it just missed. At the last moment, already committed and in motion, you completely relax physically and emotionally, the point suddenly no longer at stake, and hit an effortless return with both big pace and spot-on placement.

Eureka.

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Although the sport of boxing doesn't appeal to most – although Andy Murray is both a huge fan and student of it – the mano-a-mano similarity to tennis is undeniable. Bernard Hopkins, who until recently held two of the world light-heavyweight titles at age 49 in a young man's game far more punishing than tennis (Roger Federer has been declared by pundits "old" at 33), would have been an excellent tennis player.

In a recent in-depth magazine profile, Carl Rotella nailed the Hopkins essence this way: "Opponents don't worry about facing his speed or power anymore. They fear what's going on in his head."

Now in the latter part of his career, Hopkins never throws more punches than he needs to win and never goes for the knockout. Think constant placements versus winners, which decrease his chances of being hit – think reducing errors. He makes nuanced adjustments in spacing and timing – think changing pace and spin – that neutralizes an opponent's rhythm.

"Figuring out what the other guy wants to do and not letting him do it is a matter of policy for Hopkins," Rotella reports. Just like using the drop shot, or even a short chip, to bring in those maddening, incessant lobbers to take away, typically, their only strength.

A disciple of Sun Tzu's Art of War, he is also the "wise general" who wins by attacking an opponent's strategy versus a go-for-broke all-out slug fest. Or, in tennis, that could be succumbing to playing a slow motion lobbing contest.

Speaking of Federer, who has had a resurgence this year that has answered his critics following an injury-plagued 2013 campaign, Tennis Channel commentator Darin Cahill commented on his denial of Father Time: "In general, I think Roger has done a wonderful job of holding on to his youth. He's a young 33-year-old, and he still moves beautifully, but he doesn't move as well as he did 10 years ago."

Cahill also noted that with all of the Federer shot wizardry still intact, tactically he has reduced his myriad options in order to be more efficient and effective in his current older state.

Simplify.

When one of the all-time best now pays far more attention to playing more within himself, it's time to listen.

Back in clubland, my regular lesson clients soon learn the correct response to my repeated query regarding exactly what was it that they did so well after a great point or practice exchange – "nothing

special." Yet, doing nothing special is special in club tennis when you are not in possession of Federer's shot-making genius. It's important to know your limitations and that all club level matches are lost in on-paper even match-ups, such as 3.5s versus 3.5s. They are not won with consistently spectacular shot making. They are given away by far too many completely unforced, unnecessary errors.

The late Vic Braden, a Tennis Hall of Famer and respected coach with a comedic bent who gained notoriety during the 1970s tennis boom, would always say a couple of things for on-court success that caught on: "Keep hitting the same old boring shots over and over," and "Keep giving them another chance to screw-up."

Victory belongs to those who believe in that the longest. 



*Jak Beardsworth, USPTA Elite Pro, is the Tennis Director at the Twin Isles Country Club in Punta Gorda. He is the author of *More Than Just The Strokes*, has presented seminars to tennis pros worldwide, and has worked with Grand Slam champions and Davis Cup captains. Non-member coaching available. www.JakBeardsworthTennis.com,*