

# The Power of **YOU**



On a daily basis it always comes back to repeating Rod Laver's take on the game's inherent conundrum – it's a simple game, but it's not an easy one – when trying to ease the re-occurring frustrations of aspiring higher club players. Sure, everyone gets to taste the absolute wonder of a perfect-shot-making storm every now and then, often subconsciously conning yourself, albeit well intentioned, that it can and should be your norm.

Multi-tasking is the name of the game. It's physical: getting around the court and to the ball in timely fashion. It's technical: being able to wield the racket effectively on all the shots. It's mental: sorting out the strategic and tactical necessities for success. It's emotional: being able to keep your nerve, fighting right, particularly when you have the lead, or it's up for grabs with the finish line in sight and closing out the match becomes the biggest challenge of all.

Thinking back to the early 1980s, the now world-renowned performance psychologist Jim Loehr was just coming into prominence when he coined the term "mental toughness," now a common byword in every day sports' parlance. Would "emotional toughness" have had the same impact and staying power?

Doubtful.

But that's what the power of you is really about. Simply staying true to, and believing in, the game you've arrived with versus emotionally falling victim to escalating to a level of play that's beyond you once the warm-up is over – typically a good one since before the first point you're willing, and not fearful, of engaging an opponent in extended, stalemated exchanges. The match is on.

When you're "stalemating" you're winning, not losing as so many perceive it to be at the third or fourth ball. It's often just "rally ball," and

that's okay since the last player or team to hit the ball successfully into the court wins the point every time.

Developing and then maintaining reliable, solid core fundamentals – that means practicing regularly, not just playing match after match after match – combined with effective practice habits result in non-thinking muscle memory, a no-brainer but a viable mind body connection. Panicky left brain over-analysis then shuts down and the ideal, default, "just-do-it" mechanism is trusted, positioning you inside the game instead of being on the outside looking in.

Zen man Shunryu Suzuki could have been a complementary doubles partner for the great Laver: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."

Trying to multi-task a 10-point check-list in the middle of play is a guaranteed performance killer. Once a point begins there are two, and only two, components that one should be focusing on: 1) tracking the ball to the nth degree, both incoming and outgoing (once you've made contact and are coming out of your shot), and 2) visualizing the flight plan of every single shot before actually striking it, both directionally and marginally to the net.

At a point's end you can certainly coach yourself up, when needed, with simple, silent – forget the third person self-talk – core reminders, such as move your feet, prepare early, relax your grip, breathe. However, once you're preparing to play the next point, it's fully back to tracking and visualizing (thinking in pictures), nothing more. If you don't trust that, or can't seem to trust that despite trying, then you'd better get on the ball machine and become a better, more consistent shot maker.

So then how do you, in the midst of a point, think about the myriad physical and mechanical challenges? You don't! You monitor these

physical necessities kinesthetically – that's sensing, feeling, perceiving body movement and action through one's muscles, tendons and joints from the inside.

Despite Roger Federer's still dazzling array of shot-making wizardry, he previously acknowledged that he thinks his greatest skill is his ability to see (in his mind's eye) his shot faster than anyone else. That translates into him visualizing his shot-making response at light speed just as an opponent has struck his. Check lists are non-existent in his world.

Everyone wants to win. But if focusing mostly on winning or not losing (tentativitis) is at the heart of your game plan, you've got an inner conflict that's difficult to overcome. What is important is focusing on performing your very best on every single ball and every single point.

It's all about the performance. The wins and losses are a by-product of how well you've performed relative to the playing levels involved. Sometimes you play well but don't get the win. Nonetheless, you go home feeling good about your game. Conversely, you could get the win but feel disappointed in the way you played. Right?

The match you absolutely have to win is the one with your Self. Did I give my best physical effort on every point? Did I give my best emotional effort on every point? Was I patient with myself? Did I play within myself and avoid going for too much, too soon, over cooking my shots unnecessarily? Did I play freely without fear of losing?

If, at the end of the day, you can honestly answer "yes" to these questions then you have won, regardless of the match's score line, and you're on the path to dialing in a better game every time.

Timothy Galloway, in his ground breaking book, *The Inner Game*, a work that still comes up in conversation among those who are still dealing with playing with their hair on fire, brilliantly identified the momentous inner struggle as Self 1 vs Self 2. Judge You vs Player You.

Your trusted inner pure player, despite any existing mechanical challenges, is still, day in and day out, both a smarter and a better performer than the outer judgmental you. Take that to the bank.

I can recall Jimmy Connors, one of the very best, consistent competitors of all time, and the model for Loehr's award-winning video, *Mental Toughness Training*, apologizing to a large clinic audience at a Sanibel Island event for being unable to explain the nuts and bolts of his game in his first few, visibly uncomfortable minutes on the court. He openly explained, "I just do it." (Did Nike steal the phrase from Jimmy?). "I don't think about it. These pros here [referring to those of us assisting him] can explain that to you, but I don't really know how to do that. I just play."

Avoid forcing square pegs into round holes. Let your game happen. Trust the process. That's the true power of you. 🏸



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