

LTA psychologist **Roberto Forzoni** says you can take your tennis to another level by using his 15 easy steps to change your thinking

Positive mental attitude

How can psychology help to develop tougher, better tennis players? It is a question I am often asked. It is not an easy process but it can be done. Used effectively, psychology can help players view things in a more productive way, enabling them to learn quicker and progress faster. Here are 15 simple psychological strategies to boost your tennis performance:

1 You won't always play your best

Learn to accept that you are not always going to be playing your 100 per cent best. Out of 20 matches played, two may be deemed 100 per cent and great, two might be deemed not very good or even 'rubbish', but it is how you perform in the other 16 that's likely to determine your level of success – so have that in mind for 80 per cent of the matches you play. It is worth noting too that playing at your 100 per cent best does not guarantee winning, just as playing your worst tennis ever does not mean you will lose. Accept that you can do well even when playing below your best.

2 Prepare excellently

There is absolutely no excuse not to be the best-prepared player. Confidence comes from preparation. A lack of confidence comes partly from a feeling of not being sure you're ready; an uncertainty in how you are going to play or specifically respond to adversity and problems. By being well prepared (technically, tactically, physically and mentally) you are giving yourself the best opportunity to succeed.

3 Never give up the fight

It may sound obvious but it's not always adhered to! Consider you might be playing the same opponent again soon and think about the last message you want to leave them with. Develop this mindset: "If I'm going to lose I'm going to lose trying to win," or "You might beat me today but you're never going to want to play me again!"



Chances taken: Against Justine Henin at last year's Wimbledon, Marion Bartoli turned things around in the middle of the match, paving the way to a stunning victory



Always believing: Janko Tipsarevic, the Serbian No.2, pushed Roger Federer all the way in the third round of this year's Australian Open

4 Have no outcome 'musts' or 'shoulds' – only in training

Having outcome 'musts' and 'shoulds' is a sure way to add pressure to your play (unless you are 100 per cent confident in achieving your targets). It makes sense to stop having 'must win' points when they are not. Likewise a 'must win' match could add unnecessary pressure. Putting a 'must' in adds potential pressure and at a guess the times you use 'must' are not must situations at all. The downside is that losing a MUST point leads to a bigger MUST point and thus even more pressure. When training, however, the situation is different. Make your training 'shoulds' into 'musts'! Most players know what they 'should' do, and how they 'should' train. They know what they 'should' eat and when they 'should' rest. But players don't always do what they should do!

5 Cut out the excuses

One thing that really stood out for me when I was working with the gold medal-winning Great Britain boxing team was their no-excuse attitude. Whenever they stepped into the ring they agreed that they were fit enough to fight and had prepared the best they could, so there would be no excuse if they lost. The message is clear: stop making excuses for defeats. Accept they are part of the journey. Plan for things that can go wrong and stick to your plan. Be realistic and honest. Accept personal responsibility for improving every day. If you lose, lose because on the day your opponent played better tennis and not that they were mentally stronger or physically fitter, for example.

6 Expect the best and plan for the worst

Many players and coaches do not discuss adverse scenarios because this can be deemed to chip away at a player's confidence. But discussing dealing with adversity can have a really positive effect. I've worked with players who are open enough to look at different match scenarios

and can calmly envisage what they would do in a certain (stressful) situation, only to find themselves in precisely that situation, where they feel a calmness and expectancy to cope well. The fact that the adversity may not occur is no reason not to talk about it as a possibility.

7 Mistakes happen

It is OK to make mistakes... they are part of the game. Remember also that the impact of one mistake on the result of the match is generally minimal – unless it is the last shot!

8 Mistake management - check the meaning

It is not a mistake that makes you angry or frustrated, it is the meaning you put on that mistake. Making a double fault doesn't cause any stress per se – but if you think this means you are playing badly and will lose, or it means your opponent will think you're no good, or it means your coach will think you are a poor player, and so on, then it is this meaning attached to the mistake that can cause anxiety and stress. Check what meaning you attach to mistakes and try to rationalise the truth behind your thinking.

9 Compartmentalise your shots

If you start a match at a confidence level of 8/10 and you play a few poor forehands, your entire game can, if you're not careful, deteriorate into a 5/10 game, or worse. To prevent this happening, grade all your shots, for example: forehand 8/10; backhand 7/10; serve 9/10. When one shot is not going great (which WILL HAPPEN), then you are less likely to transfer this to all your other shots. Your game may then go from an 8/10 to 7/10 for a period of time. This way of thinking (that poor form on one shot is temporary) is optimistic thinking and will help avoid dragging your whole game down.

10 There's no such thing as 'having a bad day'

Never speak in terms of 'having a bad day' as this gives you an excuse to continue... having a bad day. Think in a way that having played some poor shots, for example, is acceptable and does not mean the bad shots will continue (unless you allow them to). "I've had a poor few points" is acceptable as it means

things can change. An "I'm having a bad day" attitude means everything will continue to go wrong. It is a form of self-handicapping behaviour which does not allow you to change the situation, so by extension it becomes "I can't do anything about this because I am having a bad day!"

11 Become a calm reviewer

Train yourself to be able to calmly review what is happening in tough situations and come up with good solutions to problems. The ability to make good decisions depends partly on the ability to be able to remain calm, and review what has happened and what you need to do next... calmly.

12 Relish the opportunities

Tennis offers great opportunities to 'put things right' next time, as there are so many competitions available to show improvements. By having a focus on blocks of time or a number of tournaments in which to achieve specific objectives, you can reduce the 'pressure to achieve NOW' mindset that may be holding you back.

13 Control the controllables

Most of what players worry about are the non-controllable factors including opponents, losing, other peoples' opinions, coach reaction, mistakes. Instead, train yourself to affect the things you can affect and ignore (as best you can) the rest. Remember, it is not what happens but the ability to respond to what happens that makes a champion. Challenge yourself to be a great 'responder'.

14 Be comfortable being uncomfortable

I love this saying because it epitomises the journey in sport. Things and situations get uncomfortable... that's sport, so learn to be comfortable with it.

15 2nd Set Challenge

Why can players win the first set 6-3 then lose the second 6-0? In more cases than not, it is a player's psychology that changes rather than any technical, tactical or physical change. Set yourself a 'second set challenge'. While this is an uncontrollable goal in some respects, it is controllable when it focuses your attitude, effort and work rate to constantly improve in a match.



Never say die: Andre Agassi's will to win was tremendous, as he showed in such remarkable battles as the 1999 French Open final against Andrei Medvedev

YOUR PSYCHOLOGIST

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