Six Unforced ‘Mental Game’ Errors Tennis Players Make Between Points

What *every* player and coach must know to improve mental toughness in tennis tournaments

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Sports Psychology for Tennis
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Introduction

Tennis is a huge mental game. You must possess mental toughness to handle match adversity and play consistent high-level tennis.

The top players in the game – Federer, Roddick, Sharapova, and Safina – win matches with mental fortitude. When they struggle with their physical game, they are able to raise the level of their performance and win matches with a strong mental game.

Physical talent and hard work go a long way towards success in tennis. However, you must have a powerful mental game to match the power of your ground strokes.

Roger Federer discusses three important keys to his success in tennis. Federer’s three keys to success include: conditioning, mental toughness or mental strength, and tennis skill. He says you need an abundance of these three components to be successful at the highest level in tennis. All three components can be improved with practice and training. But your physical skills are limited by your god-given or inborn talent.
Improving your mental game of tennis can be the fastest way to improve performance and consistency in matches for many junior, collegiate, professional, and club players.

What are the top advantages of improving your tennis mind game? Most players with a strong mental game can perform as well in matches as they do in practice sets. Inability to play up to your potential in matches is the number one reason players contact me to improve their mental game and tennis performance.

Do you perform well against players who are at your level or below, but struggle to bring your best game against players who you think are better than you or who are ranker higher? Improving your consistency in your match performance – no matter who you play against – is another advantage of an improved mental game.

Some other benefits of improving your mental game include:

- The ability to stick to your tennis strategy and not change your strategy because of frustration or over-aggressive play.
• Improve your focus during points so you are able to concentrate on what’s important and fend off distractions quickly.
• Help you cope better with prematch nerves or anxiety during matches.
• Get the most out of your hard-earned practice by taking your practice game to matches.
• The ability to cope better with frustration with missed shots, unforced errors or dropped games.
• Improve your confidence in matches and manage doubts about your ability.
• Enhance your on-court trust in tournaments and not forcing or over-controlling your strokes.
• And any other performance problem caused by your inability to take your practice sets to tournaments.

“My aggression out there is my weapon, ... I think it's more letting them know that I'm not going to let them get away with something, and I'm not just going to kind of poke it back and be content to stay in rallies.”

~ Andy Roddick
Managing Your Mind Between Points

The most critical task during the match is to control your mind and thoughts between points and during a change over. Your attitude between points is very important to your success for two reasons: (1) You have to process each previous point that allows you to have the utmost confidence, composure, and focus, and (2) you have to clear your mind so you can mentally prepare for the next point.

Between points, you must give yourself the mental advantage to help you:

- Let go of the last point
- Manage any negative emotions such as frustration
- Relax your mind for a brief moment so you can focus your best on the next point
- Process the last point to help you improve your strategy
- Stay composed and in control so you can focus on the next point
- Mentally prepare for the next serve or return of serve
- Manage or adjust your energy level
Six Mental Game Mistakes Players Make Between Points

No tennis player is perfect with their strokes. Likewise, you can’t be perfect with your focus and mental game, but you can learn to minimize mental game errors. Be honest now…. How many times have you lost focus after you became frustrated with missing an easy shot on the last point and it cost you the entire game?

Consistent mental toughness and preparation between points leads to consistent performance, the hallmark of championship players. Your top mental game objective between points is to remain confident, focused, and in control of your emotions.

Over the last 20 plus years of helping athletes improve their mental game and performance, I’ve seen every mental game challenge you can imagine. Here, I’ll share with you the top six “unforced” mental game mistakes tennis players make between points. Unlike physical errors during a match, mental game errors can linger for an entire set or even a match.

(1) Letting Emotions Affect Your Performance

You don’t have to be a “racquet thrower” to lose control of your emotions. I’ve seen many players that appear calm on the
outside, but are churning on the inside because they missed an easy shot or made a mental error.

Frustration is your biggest enemy between points. When you’re frustrated, you dwell on the last point or mistake. When you’re stuck in the past, you can’t play the next point with focus. It’s like having a monkey on your back while playing the next point because you don’t give 100 percent focus to the current point.

You carry your missed shots or failed strategy to the next point. Your negative emotions can cause you to over-hit, change your strategy, play too aggressively, or give up during a point.

"I've always tried to show emotions as much as I could without really disturbing my concentration. I've always been a very relaxed guy so this is not really too drastic of a change."

~ Roger Federer

(2) Allowing Doubt to Thrash Confidence

You simply can’t play your best tennis when you have self-doubt about your ability to win points between points. Besides being frustrated after missed shots, many players begin to doubt their ability: “Can I win this set?” Or “Why is my backhand off today?”
When you have doubt, you can’t feel confident and you sap any confidence you had at the start of the match. With a lack of self-confidence, you can’t perform assertively and trust your shots. Players who lose confidence after a couple of missed shots will play tentatively and fear making more mistakes.

Players who doubt their ability may not take risks, such as change up their strategy when needed or go for an outright winner.

“I don’t have confidence so I’m not playing my best. I have a new coach now and he’s changing little things in my game. So all the shots feel so insecure at the moment.”

~ Jelena Jankovic

A big role of the mental game of tennis is to help you stay confident between points even when your performance is not up to your own expectations.

(3) Being Too Hard on Yourself

Many tennis players I know have some perfectionism. They try to play perfect tennis, have very high expectations for their performance and worry about letting others down. Because of their high expectations, they are very hard on themselves after missed shots, unforced errors, or generally not performing up to their expectations.
“When I finished the juniors I felt, perhaps for about a year and a half, that everything was going to be the same and that I would be able to go out there and win any match. But it wasn't the case. I struggled.”

~Amelie Mauresmo

You can’t play your best tennis when you are beating yourself over the head for minor mistakes and less than perfect tennis. You must learn to accept that you can’t be perfect and you will make mistakes. If you play human tennis, you are automatically prone to making errors.

(4) Not Controlling Your Energy Level

Your energy level and focus go hand in hand. When your energy is too low or too high, your focus suffers and this affects your performance. If you get down in a match and lose confidence that you can make a comeback, you’ll tank the match.

Tennis players should know their optimal energy level and have strategies to produce it on demand. A good starting place is to understand your intensity or energy levels when you have performed your best. If you are over-excited or lack intensity you’ll have trouble focusing on what’s important to execute a shot.
Rafael Nadal performs his best with high energy. He is always moving his feet in the warm-up, between points and on the changeovers. When Nadal’s energy level drops, he tries to pick it up by moving his feet. Roger Federer doesn’t need that same level of energy to play well. Federer is much more calm and subdued.

“I felt a step slow, a little bit sluggish, ... It was just a matter of trying to stay tough mentally and put myself on level terms.”

~ Lleyton Hewitt

(5) Lack of a Positive Image or Thought

How often do you “see” a poor serve or return of serve in your mind before the point starts? Mental images are more powerful than words when it comes to programming your body to play well. When your mental images (seeing a serve hit the net) or thoughts (“Don’t double fault again”) are negative or focus on playing bad shots, you program your mind and body for failure.

You must have complete control over what you see and feel in your mind before each point. What you think about is what you get in tennis. If you think about hitting a poor serve on the next point, you are programming your body to do what you thought about. You want to see or feel a good serve or return before every
service and have control over your images and thoughts between point and during a change over!

(6) Over Analysis or Trying Too Hard

After mistakes or unforced errors, many players think too much about how to “fix” their strokes. If you do this, you are guilty of a common mental error called “paralysis by over-analysis.” You should avoid over-thinking your strokes and trying to correct them in the middle of a match. It’s too late to change your technique at this point.

Analyzing or thinking too much about how to make a good stroke can cause you to be overly precise, try to be too perfect with shots, and over-analyze your game.

The worst thing you can do is think back to your last lesson and focus on six technical keys you should improve on the next point. Thinking too much about your method causes you to tighten up and over-control your shots.

Your mind can only process one thought or image at a time—called serial processing. You can clog your brain by thinking too much about how to make a solid swing, or have perfect strokes. When you steer, guide, or over-control your stroke, you interfere with a well-grooved motion.
Save the swing analysis and fixing your stroke for practice time. To keep your head into the game during the match, you have to get the job done and learn how to win points even when your strokes are not stellar.

**Conclusion**

Your mental game not only helps improve the consistency of your performance in matches, it can also help you deal with adversity in the middle of a close match.

No time is more important to using your mental game advantage than between points. You must learn to react to previous points to help you stay focused and confident. Likewise, you want to have a clear mind – free of distractions – when you approach each new point.

Serena Williams reviews important notes she wrote during the changeovers. She evaluates her strategy to help her improve focus and boost confidence. At Wimbledon in 2007, she revealed the contents of her notebook: “My good thoughts are powerful, my negative thoughts are weak.” She wrote positive thoughts to
remind herself including: “You are Number 1. You are the best. You will win Wimbledon.”

Top players use routines before each point, which includes having a mental routine to prepare for each serve. Your between-point routine is just as critical to peak performance. You’ll want to practice a routine that helps you let go of the last point, adjust your energy level, reinforce in a confident state of mind, and prepare for the next point. If you can accomplish these mental rituals between every point, you’ll have an improved mental game of tennis and avoid making unforced mental game errors!
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