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Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis (Part 1)

By [Paula Vergara](#)

Updated: April 28, 2010

Call it a lack of confidence, or just plain nerves. No matter how good a player is physically, the mind is often a player's toughest opponent.

I set out to find answers from experts who know exactly how the mind of a tennis player works. Dr. Allen Fox, Ph.D, a sports psychologist and former Wimbledon quarterfinalist has worked with his fair share of WTA players over the years, including Dinara Safina and Ashley Harkleroad.

OTB: What percentage of tennis is mental?

Dr. Fox: The answer is somewhat unknowable. Someone can get by with a medium head and a great body, or a great head and a medium body. They'll end up the same. The great mind is much more rare than the physical.

OTB: How common is it for pro tennis players to seek out the help from a sports psychologist?

Dr. Fox: Maybe 15-20%, but lower down, usually. Those that are higher ranked are less likely to seek help. They don't need it as much. That's why they're higher ranked.

OTB: What are some of the myths/misconceptions about sports psychology?

Dr. Fox: A sports psychologist does not do things like get you on a couch and shrink you. It's more practical stuff. Sports psychologists don't tell someone something they don't already know, in general. The sports psychologist is more of a motivator than an information supplier.

OTB: What are some of the mental issues that can cause a player to tighten up physically during a match?

Dr. Fox: The essential cause of it is uncertainty of outcome and a powerful motivation to win. Some people will want to win so much and the fact that it's uncertain whether they're going to or not causes them to tighten up. They're trying to control a situation that isn't controllable.

OTB: How can fluctuations in self confidence impact a player physically?

Dr. Fox: Confidence is probably the biggest factor in making results go way up or way down. Confidence swings can affect results by 20-25 percent. It's a large percentage of your ability to perform. Which is one of the confusing things for players. For instance, what players will do is practice, work on shots, and work on their game for months, and then they play worse. It's confusing to them, because they then don't think that all the work was doing them any good. What happens is several months of work may only move your game up a small percentage. So the confidence overpowers small improvements in technical stuff.

OTB: Why do some players seem more confident than others?

Dr. Fox: Some people are genetically born that way. Their nervous system is made like that. So they have an edge. But no matter how your nervous system is made, it comes from winning. No matter how confident you are by nature, you go out and lose enough matches, and you will lose confidence. It's an expectation. You expect to win, or you expect to lose, which is determined, in part, by past history. You lose enough three set matches, and you get to that third set, and you remember.

OTB: What are some of the mental challenges players face when they are up 5-2 in a set vs. down 2-5?



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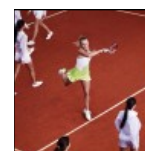
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Dr. Fox: I questioned a bunch of pros many years ago, and it turns out that most players get the most tight when they're ahead and about to win. It's almost counter intuitive. You should be more fearful when you are down and about to lose. You lose the next point or two or next game or two, and you lose. It doesn't make any particular sense that you would be more nervous when you're ahead. The closer you get to finishing off an opponent, the stress tends to grow.

OTB: How can a fear of re-injury actually cause another injury?

Dr. Fox: You can have a small injury that hinders you but doesn't debilitate you. You have to play around the injury. So you compensate with other muscles, or other part of the body to make the move, so you're putting extra stress on something else, trying to play around the injury. It's not uncommon to get re-injured somewhere else.

OTB: Can dwelling on past mistakes in a match cause more of the same?

Dr. Fox: It is somewhat of a fear response. When you double fault, or lose big points, that's a very unpleasant, painful experience. It's very natural to stiffen up when you feel this pain coming. What you do is multiply the problem. The trick when you are double-faulting is to forget it as quickly as possible. Your conscious mind has to tell you that the game is probabilistic. You accept and move on quickly. If you dwell, you will make it more indelible in your memory.

OTB: We've seen players who win their first set 6-0 or 6-1, only to lose the second set. What is going on there?

Dr. Fox: When someone wins the first set, they're not quite ready to get down to business. They want to take a little breather. They're actually trying to avoid the stress of finishing someone off. They don't think that consciously, but they do have a little leeway. They lose a slight amount of intensity. Meanwhile, the opponent who has lost the first set, if they don't quit, they are strong and they're in there 120 percent. One person goes down 10 percent, and the other person goes up 10 percent. That's a bad mixture.

OTB: Do players become more mentally stable as they age?

Dr. Fox: You've got two factors working against each other as they age. A player's nervous system tends to get even more reactive as they get older, but they get smarter about controlling it. They understand more and they know how to handle it. *[Dr. Fox admitted as a player, he choked more in his 20's than he did in his teens.]*

OTB: When it comes to Dinara Safina, would you say she has pushed herself too hard, physically?

Dr. Fox: All of them do that to a certain extent. Not just Dinara. What I can say about Dinara is that she's very smart. Motivation is a double-edged sword, and she's got plenty of it. She's not terribly different from a number of top players. You can't be an ordinary person and reach the level that these people reach.

OTB: In your opinion, who are some of the most mentally tough players on the WTA Tour?

Dr. Fox: I would put Kim Clijsters and Justine Henin at the top of the list. The Williams sisters choke more than most people, but they're able to push through it because they're so motivated. They don't get down when they choke. They're oddly driven. Dinara Safina is the most motivated and the least likely to quit.

OTB: What are some strategies you have used to help players gain a mental edge?

Dr. Fox: Players need to overpower emotional issues with a conscious plan. You try to change the player's outlook on it. You try to get the player to focus more narrowly on what they're doing. You try to get rid of the focus on winning itself, which, of course, is uncontrollable. You try to get them to accept reality, in that they'll probably lose half of the points against a good player. So you try to get past the idea that every point you lose is painful. You try to give the player perspective on what's going on. You try to focus on what you're going to do in the next few seconds and set up a positive emotional state, and then your aim, hopefully, will follow.

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Allen Fox, Ph.D. is the author of *The Winner's Mind: A Competitor's Guide to Sports and Business Success*. For more information, visit www.allenfoxtennis.net.

Paula Vergara is a freelance tennis journalist, covering the WTA and ATP tours. Paula's publishing credits include *On the Baseline Tennis News*, *Tennis.com*, *USTA New England Magazine*, and *Bob Larson's Tennis News*. Paula is also a member of the *United States Tennis Writers' Association*. To view her work, visit www.paula-vergara.blogspot.com.

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9 LEGACY COMMENTS

**Andrew Broad**

April 28, 2010 at 8:24 pm

I've been fascinated by the mental side of tennis ever since I watched Jana Novotná blow a *4-1 (40/30) third-set lead in the Wimbledon 1993 final with the wildest unforced errors I have ever seen.

I believe that the outcome of a tennis-match is 80% mental, and that two players' head-to-head determines – to a larger extent than current ranking or recent form – who will beat whom.

**TennisAce**

April 29, 2010 at 6:04 am

I was interested in this article because I thought it would offer some wonderful insights from someone who is an expert in his field but when I read that he thought that Clijsters and Henin were two of the most mentally tough players on tour and that the Williams Sisters are chokers, I basically realised that the man is an idiot. No offence. The Williams Sisters are the standard bearers for mental toughness on the Tour, especially Serena. Who else comes up with the type of games that she does down match points or on the verge of defeat in a match. Clearly he has never watched Clijsters losing matches she should win or panicking in front of millions.

**Sunny**

April 29, 2010 at 9:08 am

Tennis Ace:

I think if you look at the quote below, you will see that he does say the Williams push through when they are down.

“The Williams sisters choke more than most people, but they're able to push threw it because they're so motivated. They don't get down when they choke. They're oddly driven.”

I think what he says takes care of your point about coming back on the verge of defeat.

As far as Clijsters-I agree with you. I can't see that she has been mentally tough in the past and has had a few mentally weak games since her return.

**Paula Vergara**

April 29, 2010 at 9:53 am

TennisAce – I tend to agree that Serena is not a choker, but Venus has had her moments, such as the quarterfinals of this year's AO, when she was up 5-3 in the third set, and ended up losing the match to Na Li. Overall, I believe that Kim Clijsters has been one of the most mentally strong players on a consistent basis, with a few bad matches under her belt–this year in particular.

All players choke on occasion, but not all are able to push through it.

**iccir**

May 3, 2010 at 9:19 pm

The key to a strong mental mind is to embrace the moment... Serena loves it when being down, Justine loves it when it's deuce... They had been choker before but once they've come to accept the part where you just have to play brilliantly within "this moment" they never look back.

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the fan child

May 4, 2010 at 9:37 am

Absolutely great stuff! Well done Paula – thanks for bringing us an interesting slice of the tennis world.

Pingback: [Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis \(Part 2\) - On the Baseline Tennis News](#)



Ebony

September 13, 2010 at 11:36 am

I think it is a mistake to always pair Venus and Serena. Serena is so solid; it is rare that she chokes, and, if she does, she finds her way through. Serena can be 2-5 down and still take a set. Venus, it appears, is often undone by her nerves, especially, in the past few years.

Venus, probably my favorite player, will choke away a match. That match against Kim was her's to have; she blew it. The 2008 match when she tried ten times to serve out against Serena blew me away; Serena won the match. The match against Pironkova at Wimbledon2010 was a mess; she was so choked she could not get on track. When she and Serena play doubles at that tournament, she was still a bundle of nerves; they loss the match.

So, the sisters are different. That should be recognized.



raul

March 17, 2011 at 9:54 pm

What an idiot for someone who should be an expert "the Williams sisters are chokers" so what that says about the rest of the field?

I see the Williams sisters taking home more hardware than any other player.