

ON THE BASELINE

WOMEN'S TENNIS NEWS

HOME TOURNAMENTS PLAYERS TENNIS GEAR TENNIS TRAVEL LESSONS ADVERTISE WATCH TENNIS LIVE ABOUT

Home / Latest News / Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis (Part 2)

Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis (Part 2)

By [Paula Vergara](#)

Updated: May 6, 2010

Relationships are never easy. Especially the one you have with yourself. In tennis, a player's inner voice doesn't always provide support during the crucial points of a match, which can take its toll mentally and physically.

I had the opportunity to talk with Dr. Jim Loehr, Ed.D., CEO of the Human Performance Institute, to get his input about the various dysfunctions that can occur within a tennis player's mindset. Dr. Loehr has worked with some of the greatest legends in tennis, including Monica Seles, Martina Navratilova, Mary Pierce, and Jana Novotná. He continues to work with many of today's top players.

OTB: How would you describe mental toughness?

Dr. Loehr: The ability to access one's talent and skills across a wide variety of competitive situations, regardless of the brutality of the environment. In other words, you can do it on demand. It is an ability to withstand the forces that are generated in competition and to be able to do that on a consistent basis. You can bring your best out when it matters most, regardless of the circumstance. The idea of mental toughness is a bit of a misnomer, because it's mental, physical and emotional.



OTB: What types of things can hinder a player's performance during a match?

Dr. Loehr: People can perform very badly for any number of reasons. One of them could be simply physical, but you don't really recognize it. We know that if a person hasn't eaten sufficiently, and glucose levels drop below a certain point, the brain just doesn't fire as well. When people get really tired because they don't have the fitness, their whole system starts to break down. If a person starts to overheat, has a lack of sleep, or has been traveling, that can affect them too.

OTB: Can nerves actually slow a player down?

Dr. Loehr: When you're nervous, fearful, or anxious, that chemistry is not designed to get you to move at lightning speed, and to bring out all those remarkable motor-neuro connections that are critical to success.

OTB: Can you talk about how stress can impact a player physically?

Dr. Loehr: What happens when you perceive something as threatening, a very powerful hormone called cortisol begins to rise. Your muscles become tense. They [players] get a very inflexible view of things. Their view of what's happening begins to change. They get very uncomfortable inside themselves, and they start feeling nervous. And with cortisol rising, this gets worse and worse. When you're in a match, cortisol levels don't necessarily go down simply because you're moving a lot. You can see an athlete at ad-in—they're tight and nervous, and it actually changes at deuce. They're more comfortable and relaxed. In just a few seconds, the levels of tension, the ability to execute and access all that talent can literally change in seconds.

OTB: Some players succumb to the pressure of perfection, and end up pushing themselves too hard. What are some ways to avoid this?

Dr. Loehr: We do a lot of work trying to understand the importance of an athlete's inner voice. We refer to it as an "Internal Terrorist." What we've learned is that at a very young age, athletes often begin to adopt the voice of a parent or a very powerful authority figure in their life. That parent may have been a very demanding taskmaster. You are never quite meeting the standards, and you set a

BREAKING NEWS

[WTA Stars Shine In Shenzhen](#)
[Courting Jamaica](#)
[Bartoli on comeback talk: 'Never say never'](#)
[2013 U.S. Open -- Serena, Roger Federer due at Kids' Day](#)
[Maria Sharapova pulls out of Rogers Cup for hip](#)



FACEBOOK

On the Baseline Tennis News

Like

7,594 people like On the Baseline Tennis News.

Facebook social plugin

[Dish Network - Watch tennis in HD with satellite TV sports programming.](#)

[Grand Slam Tennis Tours - Buy tickets and travel packages for the Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon, US Open, and other premier tennis tournaments!](#)

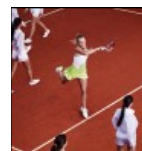
[Tickets to Top Tennis Matches Around The World including 2012 US Open Tennis Tickets, 2012 Wimbledon Tournament Tickets, the Australian Open Tennis Tournament Tickets and tickets to sold out sports events everywhere](#)

TENNIS GEAR



Fila Debuts New Wimbledon Collection

Drawing inspiration from elegant sporting attire from the 1920s, Fila introduced...



adidas Launches Stella McCartney Barricade Line in Melbourne

adidas' new Stella McCartney Barricade clothing line...

very high bar. Early in your adult life, you kind of take on that voice, because you want to be responsible, you want to be an adult. So that voice becomes more and more embedded in your head. If that voice is not a constructive voice—if it's over the edge in terms of being punitive, sarcastic, demeaning, and very critical, it really takes a toll. So we spend a lot of time helping athletes to unearth that to see what that voice is, and to think about changing the content and tone of that voice. When that's all flushed out, it's quite an awakening for players.

OTB: It seems as though players are often battling two opponents during a match. Is this true?

Dr. Loehr: Players are attacking themselves all the time for being idiots, and waging war with their opponent on the other side. The war that they have to win to ultimately be a great competitor is the inner war—the one where they are on the same side and have developed a relationship with themselves that they're proud of, rather than using themselves as a whipping post every time something doesn't happen the way they'd like.

OTB: Can players gain control over performance anxiety?

Dr. Loehr: It is possible to control it, but that's where mental training is so crucial—visualization, rehearsal, having rituals, having routines of eating and sleeping, and managing mistakes.

OTB: Many players seem to have trouble shaking off a loss. Are they placing too much importance on a match?

Dr. Loehr: If you've somehow gotten to the point where your value as a person is strictly defined in terms of the score, your winning and losing, there are going to be some serious issues that emerge. We try to help people understand this: you are not your scores. You are so much more than a tennis player. You have to find balance. It's a very big thing for players to strike that balance. It isn't very easy because they live, sleep, and eat tennis. Their definition of who they are is completely defined by their ability to perform in a match. When that happens, trouble is not far behind. Now you're fighting for psychological survival—your self-esteem is on the line every time you play. So a mistake is magnified. A loss is like the end of the world, because there is so much of YOU at stake.

OTB: Can a losing streak perpetuate itself?

Dr. Loehr: The brain is very interesting. Every night it has to decide what to purge and what to keep. If you get terribly upset about losing and you punish yourself for days, the brain actually starts fearing losing, and retains all these images of you losing. When you get to those situations again, the thing that keeps popping up is this catastrophic loss, and sure enough it happens again. You begin to get this sense that you're destined to lose. What has to happen is an understanding of how the brain works. You have to see the progress you're making inside the envelope of losing.

OTB: Is there a difference between playing to win vs. playing not to lose?

Dr. Loehr: Players who are playing not to lose are trying to stay away from something—they are defensive in their play. They are trying to avoid the pain of losing. That is a very different psychological place to be than when you are out there charging forward. It even happens with players in the lead and they are trying to not lose the lead. That's when reversals come very quickly. It's a very dangerous place to be when you are trying to prevent something from happening by just holding the ground you have, as opposed to continuing to do what you have been doing, and still thinking assertively that this is something that I'm going to continue with intensity. Without the forward thinking, the whole physiology changes, and before you know it, you are in a defensive posture.

OTB: Can you give an example of a player who demonstrates mental toughness?

Dr. Loehr: I really admire players who are able to go through a lot of adversity, and show great class and model to the world and to young juniors a great sense of perspective. Maria Sharapova — you look at the kind of things that she has been through and the remarkable poise she shows through good times and bad times. I think she deserves a lot of credit. She's had so many disappointments, so many injuries that it's been mind-boggling. For me, she's just a great ambassador for the sport. She models toughness.

For more information about the Human Performance Institute, visit <http://hpinstitute.com> or email Dr. Jim Loehr at jloehr@hpinstitute.com.

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.

To read the first installment of *Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis*, click [here](#).

0 COMMENTS

You must login to facebook in order to comment.



Court of the Rising Sun. Play it Skin-Safe.

Heaven on earth to a tennis player? Quite possibly a beautiful...



Support Breast Cancer Research Year-Round. Make a Difference While You Play Tennis.

Don't let the end of October and Breast Cancer Awareness...

#2 Tennis Serve Killer

servekillers.fuzzyyellowballs.com

Take 29 Seconds & See How to Serve The Ball 10-15 mph faster (Free)...



Add a comment...

 Also post on FacebookPosting as Paula Vergara ([Change](#))[Comment](#)

Facebook social plugin

8 LEGACY COMMENTS

**TennisAce**

May 6, 2010 at 9:48 am

I have been looking forward to reading Part 2 of this article and while this one does go into more detail about the mentality of players and how it affects their game, I have to say that using Sharapova as the poster girl for mental toughness is a fallacy perpetrated by the media and for which psychologists now seem to agree. Sharapova has had one injury since her career began and it is this injury that has kept her out of competition for the last few years. We however should use as the poster child for mental toughness is the world's current No. 1 players, Serena and Federer. Both of these players have gone through enormous difficulties on Tour, especially Serena, and yet they are still out there day in day out playing their games. I just dont get it.

**The Fan Child**

May 6, 2010 at 11:43 am

I like this: "You have to see the progress you're making inside the envelope of losing." and this: "You are not your scores."

I think that all tennis players have to be extremely mentally tough – you can single out the more successful ones, or single out the failures, but really this information can apply to all players, both professional and recreational.

We are all trying to overcome our fears out on the court – tennis is a lovely analogy for every day life in that way. When you watch a player like Roger Federer get tight in a certain situation – you know it is no easy task to play this sport. But when you see the perfection of an athlete who is truly dialed in, you know it is possible.

You have to be able to visualize yourself hitting the shots you are capable of, and you have to be able to eliminate (or at least subjugate) that horrible fear of losing that manifests itself at tense moments of a match.

Reading these interviews reminds me of the reasons that I love tennis so much. It is pure psychological warfare – and you really get to know the players when you watch them play. You actually get a window into the players minds when you watch a match, and that is very compelling stuff indeed.

Nice work Paula!

**Andrew Broad**

May 6, 2010 at 7:50 pm

Fascinating article. I didn't expect to find such a physically-detailed explanation (e.g. cortisol).

I believe it's quite right to use Maria Sharapova as the poster-girl for mental toughness. Maria plays without fear, and has a sixth sense for competition. She's not the type of person to choke when things start going wrong – she has shown amazing mental toughness and self-belief so far in her career.

Maria takes her time between points, walking towards the back fence, clearing her mind of any negative thoughts before she plays the next point. She is so good at putting bad points behind her, and still trusting shots that have just let her down. As Tracy Austin said when Maria was about to serve for her Wimbledon 2004 title, she's tough enough to melt nails!

Maria plays the key points so well, and fights for every game, so her opponent can never be comfortable in a game – even when serving at 40/0. She is mistress of the decisive moments.

Maria has a champion's response when threatened: something seems to kick in very quickly with her, as though she has access to an instant shot of adrenaline – I call this the Sharapova-overdrive. She has an amazing ability to "step it up", particularly when taken to a third set.

Serena Williams is also very tough mentally, but with her, there's a far greater emphasis on physical strength to push her through tough situations. Maria doesn't have huge muscles like Serena to get her out of trouble, but I greatly admire Maria's ability to summon her talent at the decisive moments.



Paula Vergara

May 7, 2010 at 6:25 pm

Thanks for your comments! I enjoy reading the responses, and am always up for a good debate.

I disagree about Serena on one point – she's not out there playing day in/day out, but she does show great mental fortitude in Grand Slams, which is where others tend to struggle mentally and/or emotionally.

I do agree that Maria Sharapova is a model of mental toughness, but there are certainly others who have overcome adversity.

Chris – thanks for your perspective and your kind words.



TennisAce

May 8, 2010 at 8:11 am

I am sorry but one match does not in my view determine mental toughness. If that were the case then we should all just go the bye bye with players who have overcome serious career threatening injuries and have come back to soar to new heights.

Tracy Austin should not be used in any medium as an authority figure when discussing the mental toughness of Sharapova as she is not an objective person. No one can deny that in that final Sharapova displayed mental toughness to take down Serena, but since then, how have the 2 differed in terms of dealing with adversities in their careers. Serena has had various injuries, fallen outside the top 100 and yet today she is at the top of the sport, still reigning supreme. That to me is the definition of mental toughness, the ability to come from the depths of your career and soar to new heights. How many times have we seen Sharapova give up mentally on the court when dealing with this particular injury. She may show some sort of c'est la vie moments in her career but there is no doubt that she is unable 2 years after being diagnosed to shake off this particular injury and play without fear.

When a player suffers a serious injury to a part of their game on which they rely it is very hard to come back and not worry about that particular injury. We have seen that Federer (back), Nadal (knees), Venus (wrists) and Serena (knee). As stated previously, the mentality is not about falling but rising again, and I am yet to see Sharapova rise, 2 years since her shoulder troubles began.



Paula Vergara

May 8, 2010 at 6:48 pm

Tennis Ace,

Maria Sharapova dropped out of the top 100 (No. 126) after her shoulder surgery, and has climbed back to No. 13. I'd say Serena and Maria have both made significant comebacks in their careers.



Andrew Broad

May 8, 2010 at 8:06 pm

You can't compare mental toughness based on recovery from injuries, which are very individual. Maria

5/5/2014

Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis (Part 2) - On the Baseline Tennis News

and Serena have very different bodies, have suffered very different injuries, and while I /have/ seen Maria put up some very bad (by her standards) performances in the last two years, I could NEVER accuse her of giving up mentally.

Pingback: [Head Games: A Look at the Mental Side of Tennis \(Part 1\) - On the Baseline Tennis News](#)

Copyright © 2013 On the Baseline Tennis News. Developed by DuoParadigms.
