

FROM “FLOW” TO GO: A supplemental Chapter to Ron Waite’s Perfect Tennis

I must begin by stating that this wonderful game of tennis has proved to be a daunting and frustrating task for the neophyte and for the seasoned player.

Last summer, I wrote Perfect Tennis which is only available as an e-book. The success that this book has enjoyed in the last three months has been, to say the least, gratifying.

For those of you who have already purchased my book, you will already know that this book delineates a *process* that can help you play better, and more important, enjoy this game at all times.

For years, I have had the great pleasure of knowing and communicating with David Ranney. His work, Tennis: Play the Mental Game is the single most effective book on the mental side of the game that I have ever encountered. David has put forth absolutely key elements that every player of every level needs to put in place if she/he is to play at her/his best.

Recently, David and I had a conversation where we realized that Perfect Tennis and Tennis: Play the Mental Game were absolutely complimentary works. What we realized may be missing is a “bridge” that ties these two works together into a useful whole.

This supplementary chapter is that bridge.

If you have purchased David’s work, you will have received this supplemental chapter as an added bonus. Hopefully, it will pique your interest in Perfect Tennis. Even without the purchase of my book, you have made a wise decision in securing David’s work. Why? Well, David’s insights and methods work!!! It is just that simple.

We all spend lots of time practicing strokes, perfecting our court strategies and attempting to move one step closer to a better game. But, how many of us truly spend time working on our games “off the court?” I am not speaking about cross training, running or strength training. Rather, I am speaking to the absolutely essential need to understand how we learn and to practice our games even in our imaginations. This is what The Perfect Tennis Process is all about.

But, what can a player do to improve his/her mental fortitude and effectiveness when on the court? Well, David offers viable and tested answers to this question in Tennis: Play the Mental Game.

So, how can one tie the Perfect Tennis Process with the benefits of David’s insights? Well, that is what this supplemental chapter will help the reader accomplish.

Both David and I realize that there are really two people playing the game of tennis at any given time...the conscious self and the non-conscious self. The key to success is utilizing each of these "minds" effectively and to each "mind's" maximum potential. Equally important, every great player has learned to be able to keep the conscious mind from interfering with the non-conscious mind's motor controls.

Has any of these things happened to you?

You are getting ready for a second serve. For some unknown reason, your conscious mind entertains the very negative thought: "I don't want to double fault." Sure enough, you do, in fact, double fault.

You have just won the first set in a match. You are playing well. You feel confident about the level of your play. Unfortunately, you make the fatal mistake of consciously thinking about winning. Almost without fail, you find yourself beginning to miss the shots that were easy in the previous set. Your opponent isn't playing any better, but you are struggling to hold onto serve. Now, the negative cycle really begins and you begin to think about losing the second set. In all probability you do.

You are up a set and up a break. You need only hold serve and you will win the match. All of a sudden, you make an error on a shot that you "own." You begin to wonder if you will "choke" once again. The struggle to hang on and win becomes an exercise in stress and fear.

If you are a competitive player, you have probably experienced one or all of the above scenarios in your game...at one time or another. If the cycle of "negativity" continues, you probably find yourself dreading playing this game that, at one time, was a joy. What happened? How do you "fix" it? Without a process in place and some insights on what needs to be done on the mental side, you may find yourself berating yourself during matches, breaking racquets or even abandoning the game entirely.

Let's face it. If we aren't having fun playing tennis, there are few reasons to play. Money!

One reason can be money. But, most of us are not going to derive incomes from the game of tennis.

Another can be seeking a scholarship for college. Still, no one is getting this kind of financial assistance if she/he cannot perform well and consistently.

The truth of the matter is that we excel at that which we enjoy. Finding enjoyment in the game of tennis is really a frame of mind. Somehow, we often times lose that fascination with simply hitting a fuzzy ball that we had when we first approached this wonderful game. Getting this mindset back can take some time and effort. But if you are reading this, you haven't given up the ghost. Therein lies the seed of your "redemption."

So, a comprehensive plan of "attack" is really the only viable and lasting solution. That's what Perfect Tennis and Tennis: Playing the Mental Game will provide. I have seen the results in my own game, and in the games of the many players that I have taught and coached. Yes, you can, once again, enjoy playing tennis!!!

Having said this, I want to provide some very practical advice to the reader.

As you will learn reading David's book, Tim Gallwey was truly the first person to write effectively about the mental and emotional aspects of Tennis in his seminal work, The Inner Game of Tennis. A basic tenet of Inner Tennis is that the conscious mind needs to be distracted while playing the game of tennis. In truth, the conscious mind should only be an observer...not a problem solver. Both David and I feel strongly about the validity of this premise.

The logical question that follows from this is: "Okay, how do I distract my conscious mind?" Both David and I discuss the answers to this question in our respective books. But there are some immediate ways in which any player can improve his/her game while quieting the conscious mind.

First, every tennis player will benefit by truly "seeing" the ball. In writing my instructional column, *Turbo Tennis*, for The Tennis Server (www.tennisserver.com) my very first article addressed this essential fundamental.

Most of us do not truly see the ball when we are playing tennis!!! When we are truly seeing the ball, it seems to be moving at a much slower pace. We move to the ball with greater anticipation. We hit our shots more "sweetly." We recover to the most desirable court position more easily and without conscious thought.

Perhaps, the single best way to "distract" the conscious mind from interfering with our tennis game is by focusing on the ball.

So, how does one truly see the ball? Well, here are some portions from *See the Ball!!!*

1. **See the ball hit the strings of your opponent's racquet.** Don't try to figure anything out by doing this. Simply see the contact. If you do, your non-conscious mind will quickly, and without any interference by you, begin to record things in its memory bank. Soon, you will begin to notice that you can *anticipate* without having to concentrate.

2. **As your opponent's shot crosses the net make a note of its spin...flat, top or slice.** Again, don't try to figure anything out. Just notice the spin at this point of its flight. Eventually, your non-conscious mind will begin to give you cues on what to do.
3. **See the ball bounce on your side.** If you saw nothing else but this bounce your game will greatly improve. Why? First, you'll really know if the ball bounced in or out (How many times are you really uncertain?...too many!). Second, your body will *automatically* begin to move and position itself properly for your own stroke. Finally, it reduces the "surprise" response that funny bounces, etc. can create.
4. **See the blur of your arm(s) and racquet after you strike the ball.** No one can actually see the moment of impact as she/he strikes the ball...especially on groundstrokes. But, you can try!!! *I pay extremely close attention to the ball when it is 2 or 3 feet before I make contact. Then I look to see the blur of my racquet after contact.* This action forces me to *keep my head still through the shot*, and equally important, *to freeze my head for a fraction of a second after the hit.* Whether its a baseball hitter, a basketball shooter, a golfer or a tennis player...*you must quiet the head!!!* To illustrate my point, try this:

Using some wadded-up paper balls and a waste basket, shoot some free throws. When you have found a distance, etc. that allows you to make at least 8 out of 10 shots in the basket, try some while nodding your head "yes" and then, while shaking your head "no." You probably have more misses out of every 10 throws especially, while shaking your head "no." Why? The more head movement (no usually involves more than yes) the more likely the error.

Finally, *freezing* your head through the impact enables you to make a more *consistent finish*...another important "tennis universal."

5. **See your shot bounce in the opponent's court.** This completes the vision cycle. Just be careful about being too eager to see this. If you missed seeing this component it would not be critical. The danger in trying too hard is that you lift your head too soon and negate the goal of step 4 above. How many times have you missed a shot...groundstroke, volley or approach, because you were too eager to see where it was going?

If you are like most human's, you will find that "focus" is a fleeting thing. Our attention spans are just not as long lasting as we think. Consequently, it is easy to become "bored" with the above. Well, when this happens to me, I simply shift to a different type of ball-related focus. I simply listen to the ball. That's right, I listen to the ball as I follow its path with my eyes.

Again, I excerpt from one of my columns entitled, *Listen to Your Game.*

HEARING is extremely important in the game of tennis, as well!

Rarely, if ever, are we encouraged to develop this sense with respect to the game of tennis. Yet, our hearing can tell us much and help us distract our interfering conscious mind.

Frequently when I practice, I will simply focus, somewhat consciously, on what I hear. I listen to the sound the ball makes when it strikes my strings. I listen to the way it bounces on the court. I try to listen to my opponent's strokes as carefully as I can.

Recently, I have been doing this during practice sessions with my team. I literally could not tell you the score in our practice sets...nor do I care! They will say to me: "Coach, you need to get your head in the game and keep track of the score." I respond with, "Not when I am trying to train my mind to shut down."

Invariably, this leads to a discussion of my philosophy on thinking **during points**. As Yogi Berra once put it: "You can't think and play baseball at the same time."

By paying attention to the sounds of the game, I learn much. I can tell what kind of spin I or my opponent is imparting. I can also evaluate how severe the spin is. If I am hitting a flat shot, I listen to hear the "pop" that this stroke will produce when executed properly.

When serving, I know how much spin or pace my serve will have simply by listening to the point of contact. I know before the ball passes the net how well I have executed my serve. This gives me an edge with respect to what reply to expect and whether I should or should not follow my serve to the net.

While listening, *I never take my eye off the ball*. I don't follow the ball with my head. Rather, I follow the ball with a motionless head and let my eyes do the moving. In this way, I can allow myself to pay attention to the sounds of tennis. I don't consciously analyze these sounds, but I do give them my conscious attention. There is a difference!

I can tell when I am hitting well without looking at where my ball goes or by keeping track of the score (I do recommend you do keep track when competing).

Frequently, the sounds I hear will give me clues to what is going wrong. I don't have to analyze anything. *The years of hearing myself play have given me the insights I need to make the determination of cause without much real thought on my part.*

There are other advantages to focusing your mind on listening. For example, if you are listening to the ball bounce and strings making contact with the ball, you won't be so distracted by extraneous sounds. How many times have you played a point, only to be distracted midpoint by some sound outside your court? What is the result? You guessed it. You invariably lose the point!!!

I believe that every shot in this wonderful game requires a "quiet head." Listening to the ball come off my strings helps me keep a motionless head...at least for that fraction of a second that is the moment of contact.

Listening to your opponent's footwork (and your own) can be very informative. Stephen Edberg played with the quietest feet I know. He literally could come to the net and you would never hear a footstep. Michael Stich was blessed with quiet feet, as well. In fact, Michael had the most beautiful strokes I have ever seen in the game. Fluid is a word that applies to both of these players.

Players with quiet feet are players who move well, and are generally not tired or fatigued. Once the feet become noticeably louder, it is a sure sign of fatigue. When I hear my own feet becoming louder, I do several things.

First, I try to relax every muscle in my body in between points. Relaxation of all my muscles helps my body recover from whatever strain I have experienced. As a result, I move better and I move more quietly.

Second, when starting a point, I will attempt to be on my toes. If I start on my toes, I am more likely to stay on my toes. If you are moving on your toes, you are moving gracefully and quietly.

Lastly, I try to slow down the pace and momentum of the match. I hit more lobs and try to force cross court rallies. Cross court rallies do not force me to run. Both of these make me expend less energy and allow my legs/body to recover.

Conversely, when I hear my opponent's feet becoming louder, I am excited. It shows me that he is fatiguing or beginning to breakdown. So, I will usually try to kick the game up a notch. I will go for more aggressive points that force the opponent to run coast to coast. I start hitting shots with severe angles and I will try to really angle my volleys, if I can get to the net. I may lose some points, but I know that I am wearing my opponent down.

A tired opponent who is being pressed frequently will make more errors, sometimes he will execute foolish shots, and if I am lucky, he may even lose his spirit to fight. As you might expect, hearing a change for the louder in my opponent's footwork inspires me with confidence. Who among us couldn't benefit from more confidence?

Opponents can hide fatigue in many ways. However, keeping their feet quiet will never be one of these. The louder the footwork is, the less effective the movement.

So, learning to hear and listen on the court during practice and during matches can be very, very helpful to your game!

A final essential skill to possess is being able to teach your mind to relax your body! Living in the Northeast of the United States, I am used to driving my car in snow. Years ago, my driver's education instructor conveyed to me and my fellow students an invaluable insight on driving in snow...don't drive tense! As soon as you tense up when driving a car, your body is no longer able to fluidly control the vehicle. Many people are afraid to drive in the snow (I am not attempting to minimize the potential hazards and dangers). But driving in snow requires your best driving reactions and skills. Both of these are substantially reduced when you drive tensed!

Learn to relax while driving in the snow. How?...by using your mind to deliberately relax the muscles of your body. The same holds true in tennis. When our body is calm and relaxed, we are likely to play our best. When we are afraid, we tend to hit less fluidly and frequently -- we commit errors. These errors cause more anxiety and we find ourselves becoming even more tense...a horrible cycle!

How do you break this cycle?...through two specific techniques: controlled breathing and mind induced muscle relaxation. Throughout a match, I monitor my breathing. I want slow, regular, relaxed breathing. Whenever I find myself taking short, shallow breaths, I stop and force my breathing to slow down. I inhale deeply through my nose and exhale slowly through my mouth. I force my breathing rate to slow down. The byproduct of this controlled breathing is relaxation. You greatly reduce tension, anxiety and stress when you breathe slowly and deeply. It really works!

Between games and points, I use my mind to relax those muscles that are particularly tense (for me, the shoulders and neck get tight first). You can relax any muscle group with your mind's "commands." This is especially true if you send these "signals" while breathing deeply. Try this experiment:

Sit in a chair comfortably. Take in a deep breath through your nose. Fill your lungs with air to their capacity. Hold this breath for three seconds. Then, exhale slowly through your mouth. As you exhale, say the word: R...E...L...A...X, and send relaxing "signals" from your mind to every part of your body. Repeat this entire procedure three times. Now, monitor how relaxed you body and mind are. I am certain that you feel more comfortable and stress free than at the beginning.

You can do this little relaxation ritual between points...right before beginning the serve ritual...in between games, etc. Watch Mary Pierce. Here is a player who experiences stress and anxiety on the court! To her credit, she has learned to use breathing rituals to calm her mind and body...resulting in improved performance. If you did nothing more than learn how to relax your body 10% during a match, your performance would soar!

There is only one mindset that will enable you to play at your best. You must play to play...not to win! To arrive at this mindset, some attention must be given to why you play tennis. Let's face it... we all have too much ego invested in our games. The vast majority of us are not going to make it into the top 100 players. Even if your goals include professional competition and/or scholastic competition, you've got to keep the game in perspective. First, 50% of all people playing a tennis match lose. Second, no one wins every match. Third, no one is perfect...why should we expect to play perfect tennis? Fourth, if you play to win, you are in for a rollercoaster ride of emotional victories and defeats. The best reason to play tennis?...simply to play it.

Once tennis becomes a job, a statement of personal worth or a means of recognition...it becomes a burden. Once tennis is a burden, it begins to lose its appeal. Goals that include winning or achieving a ranking, etc. aren't bad. But, they shouldn't be the reason(s) you play the game. The joy of playing this wonderful sport...the places it takes you...the people you meet...the insights about yourself you learn...the benefits to your health and body...the satisfaction derived from training and working hard...the improvement in your play...these are some of the best reasons to play tennis.

So in concluding this supplemental chapter to Perfect Tennis, I hope that I have inspired and informed the reader.

Tennis truly can be a "game for a lifetime." I hope to be out there on the courts having fun when I am 95, should I live so long. Once you accept tennis as your lifetime joy, you will find that there is an immediate emotional benefit. The pressure to succeed rapidly disappears.

Tennis is a game of paradoxes. The "harder" we try, the less we benefit. The more we "need" to win, the more likely it is that we will lose. In losing, we can discover the keys to winning.

We should all "want" to win when we play competitively. But, we need to realize that the best way to assure a victory is to be willing to accept defeat.

Each of you have plenty of time to realize your tennis potential. In fact, if we reached a ceiling with respect to our potential to improve, why would we continue to play?

As you read Tennis: Play the Mental Game, you can begin a journey that will never end. This can be journey that will put a smile on your face every time you pick up your racquet. Hopefully, some of you will want to explore more of my ideas by buying Perfect Tennis and by reading my monthly columns at www.tennisserver.com/turbo/turbo.html.

I know that David and I will continue to help, nurture and foster tennisphiles. For us, this is not simply a game for a lifetime, it is a passion for a lifetime.

Good luck in your game!!!

Ron Waite