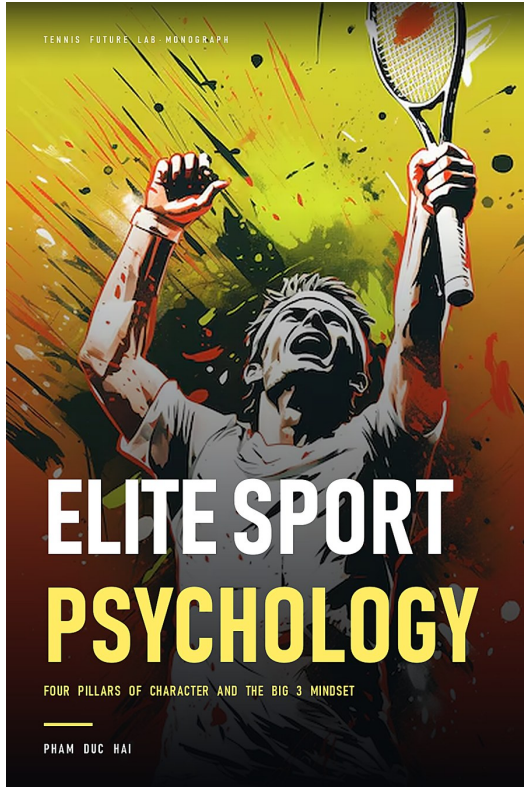


TENNIS FUTURE LAB · MONOGRAPH



Elite Sport Psychology — Four pillars of bravery and Big 3 thinking

Pham Duc Hai · Tennis Future Lab

Contents

Chapter 1 — Why tennis is difficult	2
Chapter 2 — The state you are trying to reach	8
Chapter 3 — Anxiety: four excuses and one truth	14
Chapter 4 — Inverted U-curve	19
Chapter 5 — Relaxation is a skill, not a command	24
Chapter 6 — Four boxes of attention	31
Chapter 7 — Eye and Head Holding Tools	37
Chapter 8 — The voice in your head	45
Chapter 9 — Stop, change the sentence, remove the root	53
Chapter 10 — The Battle Before the Battle	61
Chapter 11 — A ten-minute show	69
Chapter 12 — Faith in ability	81
Chapter 13 — Build with deeds, not words	91
Chapter 14 — The destination	99
Chapter 15 — Write your destination correctly	107
Chapter 16 — Competition day	115
Chapter 17 — Plan and ten minutes	122
Chapter 18 — The person on the other side of the net	129
Chapter 19 — Doubles is a communication skill	140
Chapter 20 — Doubles: what is left unsaid	148
Chapter 21 — Three answers to the same question	154
Chapter 22 — One page	162
Quick lookup table	166

CHAPTER 1

Chapter 1 — Why tennis is difficult

There's a question that almost every tennis player has asked, usually in the car on the way home, after a loss that they should have won: how did that person beat me? He had no shots at all.

That question is correct, and the answer doesn't lie in the shot.

Let's start by admitting something annoying: in tennis, the person with better technique doesn't necessarily win. That's not a philosophical comment. It's an observation repeated enough times that it's become characteristic of the sport. And if you can't explain why, you'll keep losing the exact same games.

Three reasons why this subject tortures the head

First: the number of decisions. In an average match, a player has to make about nine hundred to a thousand decisions. Not a thousand shots — a thousand decision: where to hit, how high, what spin, where to stand, whether there is net play, where to serve, whether to change tactics. And each decision must be completed in less than a second.

No other team sport requires such a density of decisions from an individual, and there is no one on the field to share them with you.

Second: margin of error. Your racket face tilts two more degrees. Two degrees is very small — you can't see it with your eyes, you can't feel it through the handle. But two degrees is enough for the ball to go from inside the court to outside the court, or from passing through the net to being inside the net. Tennis is a sport where mechanical errors smaller than the threshold of human perception determine the outcome. That means you'll always feel like you're hitting right when in reality you're hitting wrong — and that feeling, over and over again, ruins your head.

Third, and this is the biggest reason: downtime. In a typical match, only about a third of the time is spent actually hitting the ball. The remaining two-thirds are walking back to position, wiping your face, adjusting your strings, picking up the ball, and waiting. With sports like soccer or basketball, the action is continuous and your body is caught up in the flow. Tennis is not. Tennis puts you in a headspace, and in that headspace, the head begins to work.

It works in its very own way. From I don't want to get matched in this second serve to What should I wear to my birthday tonight? — they all squeeze into the same space, and they all have the same effect: drawing attention away from the incoming ball.

This is why golf is mentally difficult spirit in exactly the same way, and why basketball coaches call a time-out right before a crucial free throw by the opponent. They don't need a break. They want to give their opponents more time to think about the importance of the throw. The more you think, the easier it is to break.

In tennis, the two most difficult shots in terms of spirit are the serve and the smash. Not because they are technically difficult — although they are. But because you have time to think before doing. You throw the ball up and in that space, the head has enough room to break you.

Numbers that no one wants to believe

Jimmy Connors once said tennis at the professional level is 95% elite spirit. His reasoning is very simple: at that level, everyone has a shot, everyone is fast, everyone is strong. What separates winners from losers is no longer the limbs.

It sounds like an overstatement from a famous person. But when the author of the original book asked coaches and players directly in his seminars — in a three-year survey, covering all ages, genders and skill levels — the average answer was: success in tennis is at least 50% essential spirit, and many said 80 to 90%. That number is suspiciously stable. It does not depend on the level of the person in question.

And this is where the contradiction begins. The same people, when asked how much time they spend each week on exercise, answered: 10 to 20 hours for physical fitness. What about crystal spirit? None, or a few minutes before the match.

Let that number sink in a bit. They say 50 to 90% of results come from one factor, and 0% of time is spent on that factor. Then after losing, people say: I'm not strong enough for the match today, I can't concentrate, I'm too stressed, I'm not confident in the shot.

That's not an excuse. That was the correct diagnosis, given by someone who had never learned how to treat it.

Evert and Navratilova

There's a comparison in women's tennis that I think is the best example of this entire book.

Chris Evert is not the most physically fit athlete in the tournament. No one said she was the fastest, strongest, or had the most powerful blows. But she was number one in the world for many years and set a record of consistency that is almost unbreakable. What everyone in the world agrees on: no one is better than Evert in terms of crystallization spirit. Her concentration is unwavering in the face of noise, in the face of controversial decisions, in the face of provocations. She hits the key points the best, and her patience from baseline is unmatched. When she was pushed down to second place, she used that same strength to climb back up.

Martina Navratilova is the opposite physically: strength, speed, agility, the same overwhelming serve and net play. But for many years, she continuously stumbled in big matches and made mistakes at the right times when mistakes were not allowed. Observers at that time thought she would never win a major tournament until she learned how to control her thoughts and emotions. She did just that — according to her, she took the spirit part seriously — and the result was a number one spot and a winning streak that, when she lost, was national news.

The point of this story is not that "mental spirit is more important than

physical". The argument is: Navratilova had it all physically and still didn't win; she only wins when she raises the spirit mental part to the same level as the physical part. Those two things do not replace each other. They add up.

Why doesn't anyone practice?

If everyone knows its importance, why doesn't anyone practice? There are two reasons, and both can be fixed.

Reason number one: psychological skills are considered innate. People say "he has a competitive mind", "she is brave", as if it were a personality attribute, given at birth along with height. If you believe it, you don't practice — you just hope you have it. And if you don't have it, you accept that you don't have it.

But there's no evidence that concentration, anxiety regulation, or self-confidence are fixed things. They are skills. Skills can be practiced. We don't say a child is "born with a forehand" — we let him practice five thousand times. That same logic has never been applied to the crystal spirit, and it's a strange omission.

Reason two: coaches are not taught how to teach it. A tennis coach is trained in biomechanics, technical progression, and tactics. They know how to fix an open backhand. They are not trained on how to fix a player collapsing at 4-4. So they do the only thing they know: they say "try hard", "concentrate", "don't think too much". Those sentences are not wrong. They are just not instructions.

That's why this book exists. Not to convince you that the crystal spirit is important — you already know. But to come up with specific things you can do next Tuesday.

What this book doesn't promise

It needs to be made clear from the beginning, because many sports psychology books promise too much.

This book does not promise that you will win more. It doesn't promise that you'll stop worrying, or that you'll walk onto the field feeling invincible. Pre-match anxiety is a normal physiological reaction of the body preparing to face difficult situations. The goal is not to remove it. The goal is for it to not control your swing.

What this book promises is this: you will have a toolkit. You'll know where you're at, know why, and know what to do — in between, not in a three-month therapy session.

And there's another thing, which I think is the real reward: when you sabotage yourself less, the sport becomes more pleasant. It's not because you win more. Because you stop feeling like you're fighting yourself between each point.

The next chapter will describe exactly the state you're trying to reach — not with words like "focus" and "confidence," but with specific descriptions that players at their peak actually report.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2 — The state you are trying to reach

Two-time Grand Slam champion Rod Laver said something about his sport that I think is the bravest confession in tennis: he can't explain the difference.

He told of a match in Spain with Borg, when his mind was miles away from the field and he didn't really know what he was doing, other than getting beaten up really hard. The next day he played doubles and everything was back to normal. Laver said: I wish I could explain, but I can't. I can only say that tennis is a sport that you should never take for granted.

This is a man who is considered one of the greatest champions of all time, and he is saying that he has no control over that state. So why does this book say you can?

Because there is a difference between has that state and understand it. Laver has no shortage of status. He lacks words. And words matter, because you can only practice something that you recognize when it appears.

The ball feels as big as a soccer ball

When athletes in different sports are asked to describe their best performances — tennis, golf, swimming, basketball, baseball, archery, long-distance running — they use nearly the same set of words. This is notable because they are not reading the same book.

That set of words includes the following descriptions: relaxing yet energizing; not afraid of losing; a feeling of inner peace and tranquility; shots flow without thinking; the ball seems to slow down; the ball looks bigger; be aware of everything but not distracted by anything; know the

shot will be successful before it happens.

In sports psychology, this state has two names. An academic name is flow, or pinnacle experience. The name used by tennis players is play in the area — in the zone.

And this is where most players get it wrong. They think "in the zone" means gritting your teeth, focusing intensely, giving 110% effort. In fact, the opposite is true. In the zone, player Let things happen instead of trying to make them happen. Attention is directed outward — on the ball, on the opponent's movements — and precisely because it is directed outward, it eliminates the possibility of self-analysis. The body reacts according to what it has been trained to do, and the player just lets it do it.

The paradox of trying

There's a line in Tim Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis* that I've quoted many times to students, and every time someone reacts as if offended: The least effective way to do anything with your body is to consciously try to do it.

This verse is not saying don't practice consciously. It says that during execution, the interfering consciousness is an obstacle. If you've practiced your forehand ten thousand times, telling yourself to keep your elbows in, lock your head, bend your knees, swing back short, follow high will create information overload and ruin the shot itself.

This phenomenon is called: Paralysis by analysis. And it appears most often right when you need it most — the important points. Because the more important the point, the more you tend to want to control, and the more you control, the more it breaks.

There's a strange consequence that anyone who's ever played well knows: when you start realize you're in the zone, you lose it. Just when you think Great, I'm playing well, that "me" just steps in and takes over.

That's why the goal is not to maintain the state by will, but to create conditions for it to appear on its own.

The real goal is not the top

This is the most important thing in this chapter, and it goes against most players' instincts.

You don't need to play at the top. You need to play consistently at fair — every day, every day.

Look at the players who are considered models of stability: Borg, Evert, Wilander, Rosewall, Vilas. What they have in common is not special talent. That is the special ability to Always play to your ability. Anyone can make a big shock one day. The question is: can you maintain that level against your next opponent?

There's a rating error I see a lot: players judge themselves based on their best play. They beat the second seed once, and from then on they believed they were players at that level. Or conversely, they lost narrowly to a player who later became a professional, and they believed they were that close. Both are hallucinations. Smart players rate themselves by worst day, which is not the best day. Because to win a tournament, you have to be able to endure a bad day and still find a way to win.

A big win becomes hollow if it is followed by a devastating defeat spirit. That's why consistency is more important than peaking.

And consistency requires two things, not one. First: the basic technique is good enough. A lot of players are inconsistent simply because of an incomplete shot — no spirit fine technique can save a mechanically incorrect forehand. Second: psychological and emotional skills. Your level of stability depends on how well you create and maintain a stable spirit state of mind.

This book deals only with the second part. If the first part is missing, talk to the technical coach first.

Five signs of good health

When synthesizing what players report in their best performances, five characteristics appear repeatedly. These five characteristics are a map for you to compare — not so you can try to create them, but so you can see where you're off track.

One: very high confidence, but not always feeling confident. This is a subtle and important distinction. Successful players have a strong belief in their abilities — a belief that transcends each game, each situation. That doesn't mean they always feel confident. It means they don't lose confidence in themselves and their game because of temporary setbacks. Everyone loses. Champions don't let it erode their faith.

Two: intense focus, and it comes naturally. Players in the area are not aware of the audience, and cannot hear the plane. Their world is reduced to the field, the ball, and the opponent. The strange thing is that they rarely try concentrate. Evert talked about how her father and she simply hit as many balls as possible without missing them, and that focus developed so naturally that she rarely had to force herself. It is a skill that is built through practice, but its expression is effortless.

Three: physical relaxation. This is the most underrated feature. Research shows that tennis players play best when their muscles are least stressed. Tight muscles cause loss of flexibility; Instead of hitting through the ball, the player becomes hesitant and begins to push the ball. In tennis, where precise coordination is required, even a small amount of tension is harmful — for example, tight forearms and wrists will prevent you from stroking the ball when hitting topspin, and the ball will go long. Muscle tension also consumes energy: the muscles have to work overtime, and that becomes serious in long matches.

Arthur Ashe recounts something Pancho Gonzales told him: if you learn to relax between points, tension won't accumulate during the game like it would if you tried to concentrate every second. And physical fatigue leads to mental fatigue spirit.

Four: don't be afraid of losing. Players in the area don't care about what happens if they fail. This is the difference between play to win and Play not to lose. The player, in order not to lose, will hesitate and hold back the shot, and that holding back creates errors. Chris Evert says her father was careful to react pretty much the same whether she won or lost, and when he criticized her it was about something she didn't do right, not about the result. She never went into battle because she was afraid of how he would react.

Five: feeling of control. Players in the area feel like they are in control of the situation, not controlled by it. And the concrete expression of that feeling is: they take personal responsibility for their performance. They don't blame the wind, the pitch, the sunlight, the noise, or the referee's decision. Those things are out of control — and because of that, a person who feels in control won't spend energy on them. They spend on what they can control: their anxiety level, their anger, their breathing, their response to mistakes.

What's behind it all: do you like it?

There is a sixth factor that few technical books talk about, and it underpins the other five: enjoyment.

The peak experience comes with a heightened sense of enjoyment and excitement. This is not a coincidence. You can't continue to put 100% of your effort and energy into something you don't enjoy doing. When Borg announced his retirement, one of the main reasons he gave was that he no longer enjoyed the game and could not motivate himself to contribute like before.

And when the joy is gone, what often comes next is exhausted — a word the tennis world hears all too often, especially among young players. Young people used to look forward to waking up to play, then gradually found it difficult to get motivated, then found tennis more like work than play. The cause is often the pressure to win, the boredom of practice, a busy competition schedule, or simply the feeling that there are other things in life.

I mention this here, before getting into the technical part, because it sets the right priority. Every technique in this book is intended to make playing more enjoyable. If your goal is just to win, the techniques will work in the short term and then self-destruct, because they will become a new pressure — the pressure to "get the psychological technique right."

The goal is: play better than and find it more pleasant. Those two things are not opposites. They are the same thing.

The next chapter starts from the opposite side — not the state you want, but the state you're stuck in: anxiety.

CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 — Anxiety: four excuses and one truth

There is a sentence in the original book that I kept almost intact, because it describes it so accurately that it doesn't need to be edited: I was so worried that I could hardly breathe. My strokes felt stiff and forced instead of natural, and I felt tension in my forearms and neck. Worse, when I tried to run, my legs stiffened and I found myself very slow on the field. I started pushing the ball with little or no follow-through.

That's the description of someone who's in the middle of playing because he's worried. Not because of lack of technique, not because the opponent is better. Because something happens inside and no one sees it.

What's worth noting: Ashe, Evert and Borg — three of the calmest people the game has ever had — all said they were nervous and tense during important matches. So stop thinking that good players don't worry. They worry. They just do something else with that worry.

The numbers speak frankly

In a survey of over a thousand athletes across multiple disciplines, the question was: What is stopping you from reaching your potential? Most popular answer: I couldn't handle my anxiety before and during competition.

Not an injury. It's not a lack of practice time. It's not like there's a shortage of coaches. Worry.

Charlie Pasarell says something about this that I think is the best explanation of the book's opening question: I can name dozens of players that no one has ever heard of, who hit the ball as well and as hard as anyone in the tournament, but couldn't coordinate in a match situation. The reason Laver, Newcombe and Connors are champions is because

they always put in the big points. Most players, when they have a big score, will play it safe and let the other person make mistakes. But the others don't mind gambling. Sometimes they match, but more often they put pressure on you.

That's the whole difference. Not a shot. Is what happens at point 4-4.

Four excuses

When players say "I'm worried", they often don't know what they're worried about. But in the study, players' sources of anxiety fell into four groups. Knowing which group you belong to is important, because each group requires a different approach.

This is the most popular source, and also the most misunderstood. Its surface is fear of losing, fear of failure, fear of looking bad. But underneath, it's a threat to self-esteem.

It sounds abstract, so listen to what the players say: My ego is at stake in this match. What will people think if I lose? I don't want to disappoint my parents. If I lose, I don't dare look at my friends at the club. If I lose, everyone will think I matched.

The common point: losing a tennis match is representing something bigger than a tennis match. As if winning makes you a better person and more loved; If you lose, you are inferior and underrated. At that time, each ball point is no longer a ball point.

Rod Laver has an approach that I find almost brutal, and that's why it works. He said: What always works best for me, every time I find myself too tense to play, is to remind myself that the worst thing — the worst thing — that could happen to me is that I would lose a damn tennis match. That's it.

That's not encouragement. It's a scaling correction. Anxiety exaggerates

consequences; Laver shrinks it to true size. And when the consequences are the right size, the body is less tense.

This group is slightly different from group one. Group one fears result. Group two fears self — the feeling that "something is wrong with me".

Players in this group say: I can't concentrate, I don't feel excited, I don't have the desire to play, I don't have enough stamina, I don't get enough sleep, I can't control my stress. It can be based in reality or just a feeling — but to the person experiencing it, the two are identical.

The practical consequences are concrete: if you enter the field feeling underprepared, you've just given yourself the perfect excuse to lose. And usually you will use it. This is why feeling well prepared is almost as important as actually being well prepared.

There is a sentence in the original book worth memorizing: When I compete, I know there are players in the tournament who have better shots spirit me, but I'm confident in my body. I knew I had trained harder and prepared better spirit the other guy, and I knew if it got to the fifth set, he would be more likely to fall spirit me.

Notice the structure of that belief: it doesn't say "I play better." It says "I am more durable". It is a verifiable belief, and therefore it withstands pressure.

Psychology calls this control point. People with an internal locus of control believe that their efforts and actions determine the outcome. People with an external locus of control believe that outcomes are due to luck, circumstances, or other people.

In tennis, the second group has a lot to blame, and it's all real: the referee's decisions, the wind, the sun, the court, the noise, the audience. That's the problem. Because they are real, players can sincerely believe that they are controlled by them — and that belief in itself creates anxiety.

The clearest example is the boundary ruling. Players say their defeat was due to a wrong decision at a crucial moment. They feel helpless because they have no control over the decision. But more self-controlled players realize one thing: matches are rarely decided by one verdict, and the good and bad parts of it are something you have to accept equally. Still others use it as a convenient excuse — because if it's the referee's fault, they're not responsible.

Wind is the second example, and I find it more beautiful because it has a self-refuting logic. Player says: I can't play when there is wind. But the wind was on both sides of the field. Your opponent is also exposed to the same amount of wind. The only thing that's different is how two people react to it.

Heart beats fast. Stomach-ache. Sweat. Stretch your shoulders and neck. Urination. Shallow breathing. Everyone knows these things.

But here's where there's a loop that few people realize. Those symptoms is the result of anxiety. But players read them as proof that they are worried. And because they've been taught that worrying ruins their performance, finding out they're worrying makes them even more worried. Then symptoms increased. Then they read it as stronger evidence.

It's a positive loop, and it runs on its own without any input from the opponent.

The way to cut the loop isn't to make the symptoms go away — it's to change the way you read them. Vic Seixas, one of the greatest tennis players, said: Early in my career, I read an article quoting Ted Williams: "I've never gotten over my anxiety." That sentence followed me throughout my career. I got to the point where I actually wanted my mouth to be a little dry. I want to feel my heart beat. It gave me the edge I needed to play my best.

Read that sentence again, because it reverses the whole problem. Seixas

does not clear symptoms. He expected it to appear. A dry mouth and a racing heart, to him, are signals the body is ready — not a signal it's about to fail.

Same feeling. Two ways to read. Two different results.

What this book doesn't say

I need to clarify something that many sports psychology books ignore: the Not goal is to eliminate anxiety.

Worrying before an important match is a normal physiological reaction of the body preparing to face a difficult task. It's not a character flaw. It's a sign you're interested. And as the next chapter will show, a certain level of excitement is a condition of good form — without it, you're sluggish and slow.

The goal is: worry doesn't dictate your swing. You can still feel your heart racing at 4-4 and still hit the right second serve. Those two things are not mutually exclusive. They have never been mutually exclusive.

So how to achieve that state? First, you need to know what level of excitement you're at — and what level is good for Friend, not for some ideal player. That's the content of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 — Inverted U-curve

There is a common belief in sports: to play well, you must be excited. Must be bloody. It takes a locker room speech that makes people want to run through walls. That belief is wrong, and it is wrong in a measurable way.

Let's start with a curve.

Yerkes and Dodson, 1908

In 1908, psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson published the results of a study on rats — and even though the subjects were rats, the curve shape they found has held true for humans for more than a century.

The relationship between arousal and performance is not a straight line. It is an upside down bell curve. As excitement increases from low to high, performance increases. At a certain point, performance peaks. Beyond that point, if the excitement increases, the achievement will be reduce.

That's the Yerkes-Dodson law, and it has a consequence that most players refuse to accept: You can play poorly because of too much excitement, just as you can play poorly because of lack of excitement. Two opposite causes, same result.

Think of a guitar. If the string is too loose, there will be no sound. If the string is too tight, it will break. There is a stretch that produces the correct note. That range isn't a point — it's a region, and that region is different for each wire.

Your region is not someone else's region

This is the most important part of this chapter, and it is why imitating someone else's preparation is often counterproductive.

The optimal level of arousal varies from person to person. Some people play best at relatively low levels of stimulation — they need to be calm, slow, still. Some people play best at a high level — they need the explosion, the scream, the excitement.

Jimmy Connors plays best when he taps his leg and talks to himself verbally. Chris Evert is at his best by taking a deep breath and relaxing. Two champions, two completely opposite strategies, same result.

This has to do with personality structure and previous competition experience — just like there are introverts, there are extroverts; Some people are morning birds, some people are night owls. There's nothing better. There is something more suitable for you.

So let's drop the question of "how well a good player prepares". The right question is: When is Friend best played? And how did you realize that?

The trap of underestimating your opponents

Lack of excitement has two main causes, and the first is one of the most costly errors in tennis.

You underestimate your opponents. You think they can't afford to make things difficult for you. You believe that just by showing up you win. So you start sloppily, put in minimal effort, and never get into a rhythm.

Meanwhile, your opponents sense an opportunity. They begin to believe that they can win today — and that belief lifts their performance. You find yourself behind, realize your opponent is stronger than you thought, and try to pull the match back. But when you're being led, you try too hard. You are nervous to remove it. Anxiety increases with distance, and you

can't believe you could lose this match. At the same time, opponents are more confident and play at their usual level.

When the author of the original book asked tennis players to list their spirit weaknesses, one item always appeared: looks down on the opponent too slight, then becomes nervous and tense when being led. It's a structural error, not a random error. And it's especially expensive when you care about rankings or tournament records.

The second cause of lack of excitement is less dramatic but more common: loss of motivation due to boredom, fatigue, or too much exercise. Heavy schedule, lots of traveling, or simply playing too much. This is common in young tennis players - those who have been on the court for many hours and are no longer interested in competing, especially in practice. Repeating the same shot on a ball machine, from forehand to backhand to serve to volley, can sometimes become boring and sap desire. The result is matches where players don't even want to be on the field.

The real problem for most players

But let's be frank: lack of excitement is a minority problem. The problem for nearly everyone is too excited.

And this leads to a very specific paradox, which I want you to try the next time you play.

The 80 percent paradox

How many times have you tried to serve hard — giving it your all, going all in — and then the ball didn't go any harder, just lost accuracy?

That's not an illusion. Research has shown that when athletes are asked to put in 80 or 90 percent effort, performance is better than when asked for 100 or 110 percent. And there was an even stranger finding: simply

asking athletes to relax their jaws produced improvements in performance.

Why? Because to increase racket head speed, you need to drop opposing muscle groups. Any muscle that pulls in the opposite direction of movement but remains tense is braking you. A tense arm cannot swing fast — it can only swing hard, and strong is not fast. In tennis, racket head speed is what makes the ball heavy, not muscle force.

So when you give 110 percent, you're actually increasing the brakes. You feel like you're doing more. You are doing less.

The jaw is the best indicator of this, because almost no one thinks about it. When you tense, you clench your jaw. When you release your jaw, the entire chain of muscles in your neck and shoulders follows. Experiment: next time you find yourself trying too hard, keep your jaw slightly open and your tongue relaxed. No need to do anything else. A lot of people find the stroke is lighter and goes farther.

Exercise: find your zone

This is the most important exercise in the first part of the book, and it requires paper. It doesn't take much — a small notebook in your racket bag is enough.

Step one. Think back to your best game. Not the biggest win — the one where you feel like you're in the zone. Spend at least five minutes reliving it: the field, the light, the opponent, the feeling in your hand.

Step two. Score that state on the following pairs of opposites, each pair from 1 to 7. Score 1 is the extreme left, 7 is the extreme right.

Step three. Do it all over again with your battle worst.

Step four. Compare two sheets. Most players were surprised that the gap between the two states was so clear — and that some of the items they

thought were important weren't that different.

Step five, and this is the really valuable part. Over the next few weeks, after each outing, fill out this chart again. It doesn't have to be exact — you're making an estimate. If the status changes mid-match, fill out two sheets: one for the first set, one for the rest. After about ten times, you'll start to see a pattern: which pairs of points always come with good matches, and at what levels.

That's your zone. Not the zone the books say you should have. The region your data shows.

Two things to remember

First: the goal is not always to be at the top of the curve. No one can do it, and trying to do it turns playing into a constant test. The goal is to know where you are on the curve, and have the tools to shift up or down as needed.

Second: this curve explains why encouragements like "try hard", "be strong", "win for your brothers" are often counterproductive. They push you up to the right side of the peak — the side where performance declines. For a person lacking excitement, they are helpful. For someone who is overstretched — which is most players at a critical point — they make things worse.

So if you're on the wrong side, what to do? The next chapter is all tools for going down, and partly for going up.

CHAPTER 5

Chapter 5 — Relaxation is a skill, not a command

"Try to relax" is the most meaningless sentence in sports. Relaxation is not an action you can decide to do, any more than you can decide to raise your hand. It is a state, and you can only enter that state if you have trained your way into it.

This chapter is about practicing that entrance — and about a small set of tools that can be used right on the field, in the forty seconds between two points.

The person who invented this exercise

In 1930, physician Edmund Jacobson published a method he called progressive relaxation. He doesn't write for athletes. He writes for patients with anxiety. But it has become the most used relaxation technique in sports, because it is based on a very simple observation.

Jacobson's Four Principles:

One: tension and relaxation are mutually exclusive. It is impossible to relax and tense at the same time. Physiologically, these are two states of the same system.

Two: being able to learn the difference between tension and non-tension. Most players are not sensitive enough to recognize small increases in muscle tension. But it's a skill that can be taught — and that's the key part.

Three: relaxing the body reduces mental tension spirit. The opposite is also true, and that's why it works: you can't think yourself out of anxiety, but you can physically get rid of it.

Four: do it by scientifically tensing and releasing each muscle group.

Making

The principle of the exercise: you create maximum tension in a muscle group, learn to recognize that feeling, then release it completely and feel the difference. Repeat until you realize the tension is very low — and can release it before a critical point.

Practice conditions: lying on the floor, small pillow under the head, quiet room, comfortable temperature. Loosen clothing and shoes. Remove watches and rings. Close your eyes, breathe deeply a few times.

The first time, the exercise takes about thirty minutes. After three or four sessions, most practitioners cut it down to five to ten minutes. At that point you can skip the tension phase and just focus on releasing.

Each muscle group: tense five to seven seconds, release ten to fifteen seconds. Repeat each group twice then move on to the next group. Don't count too closely — counting distracts you from the feeling, which is what needs to be learned.

Order of practice: hands and forearms → upper arms → shoulders → neck → forehead and face → jaw → chest and abdomen → back → hips → thighs → calves → feet.

Two groups are most notable for tennis players. Ham, because as the previous chapter said, it is an indicator of stress that almost no one notices. And shoulder, because that's where tension builds up in a long match and is where serve's rhythm is ruined.

A practical note: don't try to do this exercise while driving or watching TV. It requires attention to physical sensations, and that attention is what you're practicing.

Breath: the cheapest tool

If you only learn one thing in this chapter, let it be breathing. It doesn't require a quiet room, doesn't require thirty minutes, and can be used anywhere.

First observation: your breathing is noticeably different between the two states. When calm, it is smooth, deep, even. When under pressure, it is short, shallow, irregular.

Second observation, and important one: inhaling and holding your breath increases muscle tension; Exhaling reduces muscle tension. That's why most tennis players have been taught to exhale when hitting the ball, especially on strong shots like serves.

And this is one detail I like the most in the entire document on this topic. Jimmy Connors is famous as "the grunter" because he makes a noise after nearly every blow. People laugh at him. But what Connors actually does is Make sure you exhale with each stroke. That noise is evidence of an exhalation, not a defect.

And here's where it breaks down: when the pressure increases at a critical point, most players forget this principle and start holding their breath while hitting. Holding your breath causes your muscles to tense. Tight muscles make the blow harsh. The harsh blow damaged the ball. And you just have another reason to worry about the next point.

Breathe from the diaphragm, not from the chest. This creates a greater feeling of stability and focus — and importantly, it's harder to get wrong.

Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, about five seconds. The abdomen should be bulging. Air enters from the stomach, then expands the middle and upper chest. Take it easy, don't try.

Expiratory slowly through the mouth, about seven seconds, steady speed.

You will see the muscles in your arms and shoulders relax. And you'll find yourself more grounded — legs relaxed but steady.

Three places to use it on the field:

In the shot. Exhale upon contact with the ball. Practice until it happens on its own, no need to decide.

Between points. This is the most valuable spot. Focusing on your breathing makes it harder to focus on irrelevant things — the audience, your opponent's provocations, the score.

Before serving the ball. A deep breath just before serving relaxes the shoulder and neck muscles and creates a feeling of focus and strength. This is especially important after a long point, when your breathing is short and shallow.

And in forty to ninety seconds of pitch change: that's the best window you have. If you're tired, struggling, stressed — this is the time to use it.

Eight out-of-the-box tools

The following does not replace homework. They are things that can be used even if you haven't practiced anything yet. Not all are right for you — pick two or three.

One: smile when you feel yourself starting to tense. Sounds silly, but it's very difficult to get angry and upset while smiling. Smiling doesn't remove pressure; it reminds you that this is a game, and prompts you to come back to the next point.

Two: drooping arms, shoulders and neck. Notice what top tennis players do: they let tension out of their bodies. The neck and shoulders are the two places where it accumulates the most — people turn their heads, shrug their shoulders. Others shake their arms like a swimmer before starting. Slow stretching of tense muscles is also an option.

Three: slow down. This is the most underrated tool. When the pressure mounts and you start to get upset, the reflex is to play faster — as if the way to get off the field is to get off the field faster. It doesn't work: playing fast causes distraction, then more frustration, then even more speed. A vicious circle.

Specific fix: when you find yourself in a hurry to serve, walk to the furthest ball and use it for the next point. That in itself slows down the process. A stronger approach is to have a solid preparation routine — one that forces you to slow down and stay calm even under pressure.

Four: use suggested words. Words like calm, relax, light, soft. They remind you to keep your muscles relaxed and your head clear. You will find them much more effective if you have practiced relaxation — because then words are just the gateway to a state you already know.

Five: relax and follow the ball. This was the catchphrase of Harry Hopman, coach of the great Australian Davis Cup team — the team with Rosewall, Newcombe, Laver, Stolle, Roche. It sounds absurd: how to relax and follow the ball at the same time? But it says something very true: to win big, you have to be comfortable and take begin shots. As the level increases, the pressure point cannot be won by pushing the ball and hesitating.

Meaning: if the ball is short, don't be afraid to hit it deep near the line and then advance. If you win and lose, accept and credit your opponent. What is not allowed is losing a match where you know you have faltered at important points.

Six: one point, one time. Thinking about what might happen or has happened only increases anxiety. Attention needs to be placed only on the point at play.

Seven: don't prepare to be mismatched. People who have matched before often enter the match with the thought "hopefully I won't match this time".

After a few double errors: "I hope I don't make double mistakes again". After leading 5-4 and being served: "I hope I don't lose serve like last time."

Focusing on what you Are not want to do is counterproductive. It sowed exactly the doubt it intended to avoid. Instead, focus on what you need to do for that particular shot.

Eight: have a plan and keep it long enough. This part is so important that it needs an example.

Ashe, Connors, and a suspected plan

Wimbledon 1975. Connors was in top form and almost no one gave Arthur Ashe a chance. Ashe and the coach decide that the way to defeat Connors is to feed him the slow ball. Since Connors is strong in tempo and speed, Ashe will hit a lot of cuts, soft serves, high balls, and other off-beat shots.

Worth noting: Ashe likes hits her serve hard and hits big shots. That plan went against his own interests. He still did it, and did it almost perfectly, to win.

Now the second part, and this is the part that concerns you. A lot of players abandon their plans too early, overreacting to a few shots. You realize your opponent's backhand is weak, so you decide to net play play there. The first two times, your opponent hits two beautiful backhands through you. And you abandon the plan, concluding that their backhand turned out not to be weak.

That could be an expensive mistake. A weak blow usually only breaks under constant pressure. If you stop applying pressure, it will never break. Of course, maybe your plan is wrong, or your opponent is having a special day — then the change is right. But the rule is: have a good plan from the beginning, and give it a fair chance before quitting.

And here is the psychological benefit, perhaps even greater than the tactical benefit: Planning reduces the number of decisions. Anxiety often comes from indecision. Players enter a game without planning what they will do in certain situations, then have to make decisions while the ball is in flight — and each decision is an opportunity to doubt themselves. A good plan moves most of the decisions to the front of the game.

The other side: when you're too flat

This chapter is mainly about hypothermia, because it's a problem for nearly everyone. But there is a small group that needs the opposite: players who are too flat.

Signs: heavy legs, not bouncing; don't care how you play; head wanders; feel bored; slow movement, poor preparation; lack of anticipation and enthusiasm.

You don't need all of these signs. But the more you see, the more you need to do something to trigger it. These feelings often appear when you are not well prepared physically or mentally spirit — lacking sleep, playing too much, or playing against much weaker opponents.

The tools for increasing activation are the counterpart of the above: more movement between points instead of standing still; speak louder; use faster breathing; set specific goals for the match instead of "playing to the end"; and most importantly — remember why you play the sport.

What's remarkable: this is exactly what Connors does naturally. He taps his feet, he speaks loudly, he creates rhythm. For him, it's not technique — it's who he is. But it is also technical, and players who are too flat can learn it.

The next chapter moves on to pillar two, and to one of the most frustrating phenomena in the game: you're playing well, then suddenly you no longer know what you're doing.

CHAPTER 6

Chapter 6 — Four boxes of attention

In sports psychology, focus is defined very specifically: the ability to direct attention to relate to cues in the environment, and maintain it throughout competition. That definition has two parts, and the second part is more difficult than the first.

Which signal is relevant?

The clearest — and most overlooked — signal is the ball. It sounds so obvious that it makes no sense. But most players don't really look at the ball; they look at area near the ball. That's a big difference, and it explains why so many shots miss contact.

The second signal is the opponent's racket movements and movements before they hit. Reading where the racket goes and how your arms swing allows you to predict direction, speed and spin in a fraction of a second. That's what "reading the game" is all about, and it's not a talent — it's a signal you haven't learned to see.

The third signal is the middle of the point: think about the next point, decide on tactics, choose the type of serve and position.

And this is where it gets difficult. There are only a few signals involved. But there are countless unrelated signals competing: crowd noise, opponent provocations, previous misses, the score, yesterday's events, the evening's plans, a wrong call, and whatever else the mind can come up with.

Chris Evert's consistency — which accounts for her record of stability — is often explained by technique. But it comes down to her ability to pay attention: she picks out what's important and ignores the rest. She devoted her complete attention to the match and was almost unaware of

other things.

The hard part: maintaining

Paying proper attention in one moment is easy. Maintaining it for two or three hours is difficult. The Davis Cup final between McEnroe and Wilander lasted more than six hours — it was a test of spirit endurance almost without equal.

There is a saying: fatigue makes cowards of us all. It's true with attention. Billie Jean King put it more succinctly: As soon as you feel a little tired, that's when you have to force yourself to focus more.

It's an instinct-reversing instruction. Instinct says: when tired, relax. King said: Fatigue is a signal to tighten.

Two-way, four cells

To understand why concentration fails, we need to know that attention has two directions.

Width: from wide to narrow. Broad attention allows awareness of multiple events at once — doubles players must monitor their partner, their movements, and ball position to decide what to play and where to place it. Narrow attention is focusing entirely on one thing, usually a ball; everything else is eliminated.

Trend: from inside to outside. Inside are your own thoughts and feelings — I need to break her serve in this game, I don't know whether to back up or up. Outside is towards the environment — the ball, the opponent's movement, the audience.

The two dimensions multiplied together give four cells, and each cell has a correct use:

Wide – Outside. Quick overview of the whole scene. Used when you enter

the field and need to collect information: how fast or slow the field is, how windy it is, where the sun is, how the opponents warm up, whether the audience is crowded.

Wide – Clear. Analysis and planning. Use before a match, when you're formulating your game plan — for example deciding that this time it's going to be more net play and serving and then going up.

Narrow – Outside. Focus on one or two external signals. This is the box you need while the ball is in play: look at the ball.

Narrow – Clear. Mental rehearsal or adjustment of emotional state. Use it when you take a deep breath before serving to relax your shoulders, or when you visualize serve just broke to fix it.

One hour before the match, you are at Wide – Clear: thinking about the plan, because the last plan failed. You decide to be more aggressive, net play after the short ball, and use serve and rise in some situations.

When you enter the field to warm up, you switch to Wide – Outside: collect information — the bounce of the field, the wind, the sun, your opponent's movements and shots.

At the same time, you are Narrow – Clear with yourself: feeling the looseness of your hands, the contact with the ball, the comfort of your steps. This is the only time of day you are allowed to think about shot mechanics.

After booting, narrow it down: Narrow – Outside. Look at the ball. And stayed there throughout the match, only occasionally jumping out between points.

Bottom line: Good concentration is not about holding a box. It's about moving boxes at the right time. Bad players aren't people who aren't focused — they're people who focus on the wrong box at the wrong time.

Five ways to ruin it

One: pay attention to too many signals. You try to handle the ball, the opponent, the wind, the score, and your own feelings at the same time. The result is processing nothing.

Two: pay attention to the past. You are still at the last mistake. This is especially dangerous because it takes the form of analysis — you think you're correcting errors, but you're actually hitting the next point with the attention of the previous point.

Three: pay attention to the future. You are at 5-4 and thinking about winning the match. You haven't won yet. You're playing a point while living a moment that doesn't yet exist.

Four: paralysis by analysis. This is the most sophisticated trap, and it deserves its own section.

When you learn a new movement, focus inward on correct. If you're correcting serve, you need to feel the weight shift, racket position, launch height — but only fix one thing at a time. If you switch from a two-handed backhand to a one-handed backhand, you need to feel the new movement, as the natural tendency is to fall back into old habits.

The problem comes when this type of attention follows you into battle. You start to fail your backhand, and your reflex is to focus more on your backhand. Then you start asking: Am I turning enough? Do I release my wrist? Am I opening the racket face too early? Is the elbow close? Is the backswing too high? Am I polishing too late?

That's six questions in a period of time that you can answer... none of them. You have just created Paralysis by analysis. The mind overpowers the body. And the more analytical you become, the more likely you are to disrupt the natural motion that creates a smooth shot.

Pragmatic rule: while the ball is in play, narrow attention should be directed out (the ball), with minimal attention to body mechanics. Between the point and the change of court is the right time to look inside.

Five: joints. And this is the most worth mentioning one, because it is the result of the above four combined.

Matching is a process, not a label

There's nothing worse to say about a tennis player than if they "match". But that word is useless, because it's just a label placed on the result. A match is a process, and since it is a process, you can block it in the middle.

Let's consider two situations. You win the first set 6-2, lead 5-3 in the second set, serving for the match. If you miss the serve, you lose the second set and lose the match. Or: two sets split, you serve at 4-4, 30-40, make a net play shot, your opponent hits a weak shot, you have enough time and hit the net — your opponent holds serve and wins the match.

Both look similar. But the right question is not "do I match". Which is: What happened in what order?.

That string looks like this:

Condition. An important match. An important point in that match. And — this is the part that few people pay attention to — the evaluation of others: coaches, colleagues, parents. It doesn't take Wimbledon for a match to be important; Local club finals are also enough, depending on your level.

Physical changes. Muscles tense up. Breathing rate increases. Heart beats fast.

Change of attention. This is the crucial link, and where most people miss it. Attention direction inward (you start watching yourself). Attention narrow (you only see one thing, usually your worries). And most

importantly: Attentional flexibility is reduced — you lose the ability to switch cells when the situation requires it.

Result. Quick shot. Timing and coordination are off. Pay attention to irrelevant signals (your own worries). Muscles are tense and tired.

Looking at this chain, there are three stops: reducing muscle tension (chapter 5), keeping attention outward (this chapter), and — the most powerful intervention — retaining flexibility of attention. Meaning: when you find yourself looking in, you still have the ability to look back out.

Match players are not the ones who worry more. Everyone is worried. An arthritic person is someone who, at a critical point, loses the ability to shift attention back to the ball.

The next chapter is about specific tools for retaining and regaining that ability — including those that can be used right in the middle of a breakdown.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7 — Eye and Head Holding Tools

The previous chapter describes four attention boxes. This chapter is all about the specifics to keep you in the right box — and to get back to it once you've slipped out.

One thing to say up front: these tools sound very small. Don't judge them by size. Many tennis players told the author of the original book that just a simple suggestion can create a big change in the quality of play. But suggestions only work if you choose the right ones for you — so try them out, then keep two or three.

Keep an eye on: net strings and racket strings

The most common problem isn't not paying attention during the ball — it's letting your eyes wander between points, when you're not engaged at all. If your eyes wander, your head will follow.

The simplest way to block: between points, look at the mesh wire. Don't look around the yard. Don't look at your opponent. Don't look at the audience or the field next door.

Some players do it differently: Connors and Lendl pick up the strings, lower their heads, and look at the racket until they're ready to start the point. Same principle — give your eyes a place to stay.

Roy Emerson, the Australian champion, describes how he does this much more strongly: It starts as soon as you step onto the field. When I take the field for an important match, I look straight down at the field as if I'm looking for a coin. I never looked at the caddies or the referees, or even the opponents. I never even heard anything. All I hear is noise.

Reread the last sentence. He did not say he heard noise and heard what

people said. He heard the noise as a mass without content. It is a state that can be trained.

Look at the seam of the ball

This is an idea from Tim Gallwey, and it is the most powerful tool in this chapter.

Everyone is taught to "see the ball". But experiments show that most tennis players look at the area around the ball, not the ball itself. This problem is worse when the point is long, when the match is long, when tired — and worse still when the opponent serves hard or volley sharp.

How to fix: look at the seam of the shadow. Don't look at the ball as an object, but look for the shape of the seams created when the ball rotates.

The results are often immediate: you start watching the ball from the moment it leaves your opponent's racket to the moment it touches your racket, and it's much harder for your mind to wander because it's busy finding a specific shape. Many people find the stroke to be more fluid, more natural, and more rhythmic.

It also gives you three additional pieces of free information: how high the ball was when it went over the net, its speed, and whether it was rising or falling when you made contact. Those three things are all the data you need to choose your shot.

To be honest: focusing entirely on sewing is not easy, and it takes time. But it is one of the few exercises where results are seen right from the first time for many people.

One point, one moment — and the truth about the Borg

Bjorn Borg was asked what was the most important reason for his career. He doesn't talk about physical strength, about shots, about tactics. He said: It's the ability to play one point at a time and not worry or think about

what just happened or what could happen. The only thing that matters is the upcoming score.

Now comes the part that few people know. Borg must learn that skill. As a young tennis player, he was known for his hot temper, letting things get to him — to the point where his parents put his racket in the closet for six months and banned him from playing. If he wants to continue playing, he must learn not to let things bother him and just focus on one point.

That is one of the most useful facts in this book. The calmest person in the history of this sport was not naturally calm. He was forced to study, because the price of not studying was not being able to play.

And here's the tricky part: being in the present requires the utmost attention between points. While the ball is flying it's easy — you have to be there. Between new points you initially drift into the past and future.

Practice in bad conditions

There is a strange asymmetry in the way people practice. Basketball players stand and shoot free throws while the audience screams, waves, stomps their feet — they practice under competitive conditions. But if someone walks around the stands or talks loudly during a tennis match, most players lose concentration and get upset.

The most famous example: many tennis players complain about planes flying over the US Open, because the course is on the flight path of La Guardia. It is a fixed, unchangeable, and completely trainable condition.

How to do it: anticipate distractions. Ask people to stand around the yard and talk, or pass by. If you tend to lose focus in wind or sun, try practice in wind and sun. It's because these conditions are so unpleasant that people avoid them in practice — and then completely collapse when encountered in battle.

Connors says about the heat: It's hot out there — very hot — but I know if I start thinking too much about the sun, I won't go all out. I don't worry about it when I'm on the field. When I sat down, as the sun went down, it started to take its toll a little. So I just blocked it out and pretended it wasn't there. That's what you have to do in this sport — don't let yourself think about anything that could negatively affect your game.

Notice the structure of that sentence: not "I don't feel hot". He felt. He blocked think about it.

Suggested words

A cue word is a word used to trigger a specific response. There are two types: instructive (racket out back, follow, hold your wrist) and dynamic (move, strong, fast, light, relax).

Some specific examples:

If when return of serve you are flat-footed and focused on your back foot, use next to pull yourself into the ball.

If when volley you hit the ball across your hips instead of in front of you, use punch or squeeze to press the shot first.

If you don't fully stretch your arms when hitting, use with or stretch.

And here is where Rod Laver gives the best example: If I can move my legs, things are a little better. Usually when a player loses focus, it shows up in one or two areas of technique — like not looking at the ball, or not turning his shoulders. So instead of telling yourself to focus, focus on the exact thing that's causing you trouble.

That's a very rich sentence. "Be focused" is an unaddressed command. "Move your feet" is an addressable command, and because it has an address, it is executable.

Criteria for choosing the suggested word: it must make sense to Friend, and it must direct attention to the correct reaction that produces the result. It's especially useful when you're learning a new shot, a variation of an old shot, or trying to break a bad habit.

Non-judgmental thinking

This is the most difficult tool, because it goes against a very strong instinct: the labeling instinct.

You hit a good shot and you like it. You miss an easy shot and feel terrible. Those judgments are your ego's reaction to how you see your game — and they only have one effect: ruin your performance.

Because after a few shots labeled "bad", you start to generalize: I always miss the easy shots, I have bad serve, I'm a sociable person. Gallwey points out that these types of judgments lead to poor form: shots that are out of rhythm, out of timing, out of smoothness. Your head overwhelms your body, you try too hard, your muscles tense, and you hit hesitantly.

Instead: look without labeling. Don't ignore the error — just look at the hit as it is, without adding anything.

Specific examples. During a match, you realize your first serve is at 40 percent. That's an observation. It doesn't include calling your serve bad — which often leads to anger, frustration, and discouragement.

Then you realize more: most errors go into the net, not long. That's valuable information, because it points to two possible causes — tossing the ball too low, or serving too fast. You fix either one.

Same data. A path to change; a path to self-destruction. The only difference is whether it's labeled or not.

Don't change your mind once the ball has arrived

This is a particular mistake that I see a lot of players making, and it causes very confusing looking errors.

Situation one: your opponent hits a deep net play shot, you decide to hit diagonally down. As you take the racket back, out of the corner of your eye you see your opponent move down — and at the last moment you switch to a straight shot, then hit the net.

Situation two: you have an easy smash, the opponent stands still on the backhand as if he has let go. You are about to hit the wide field. Then you see him rush past that exact spot. You change your mind and hit him behind his back — the ball goes out.

Both fail for the same reason: changing options at the last minute requires instantaneous adjustments in timing, racket angle and footwork, and even very experienced players can't do it.

And here is the original mistake: you are looking at your opponent instead of the ball.

Principle: when preparing to hit, just focus on the ball and hit the chosen shot sharply. If you hit well, you can still win the point even if your opponent guesses correctly — because if the shot is strong enough, the best they can do is bounce another shot, and you still control the point. If the ball is low and difficult enough, they won't be able to block it, and you get another chance.

Short rule: Decide, believe in the decision, and execute to the best of your ability. Don't decide twice on the same shot.

Serving habits — why they're more important than you think

Of all the shots, the serve is the only one that is under your complete control. Every other shot is a reaction to your opponent. So it is the best place to build a habit of standing up under pressure.

Look out for players with good serve — Navratilova, McEnroe, Lendl, Shriver, Becker, Edberg. Their habits and rhythm unchanged throughout the match. They have planned, practiced, and perfected it so they can be comfortable no matter the situation. Habit reduces anxiety and narrows attention to just the important parts of serve.

Five steps, and each one has a reason:

One: position and foot placement. For most players, start by placing the front toe a set distance after baseline. The exact spacing is not as important as keeping it consistent. If you approach the ball with your front foot, stand further away to avoid foot errors. It is also necessary to determine the vertical position baseline for cornering and for deception — and whether it switches between the two sides. McEnroe always stands very far from the center line, especially when serving on the deuce side, and that is unusual. The point is to find the optimal position for Your serve and keep it. Finally: pay attention to the distance between your feet and the direction of your toes — because it controls your swing and weight transfer.

Two: decide on the serve type and location. This is where I see many players do very poorly. When asked why serve spin outside the forehand on the deuce side, the answer is usually "I felt like it" or "it seemed right at the time". The right questions should be: What is my best serve? What's been working lately? What are your opponents waiting for? Where is the highest entry rate? What is the situation in the match? Which side of them is more at fault? Most of these questions can be answered before game.

Three: adjust the way you hold and retrieve the ball. Different serving styles may require slight adjustments to the grip; The racket must be comfortable in the hand. And a practical suggestion: always serve with only one ball in hand, both in practice and in matches. Two reasons. First, holding two balls forces you to be good at two different types of tossing. Second — and more important — holding one ball forces you to take the next ball from the bag after the error, and that slows you down before serve two. A lot of people rush to serve second when under pressure; Intentional habits are what block that.

Four: a deep breath. Release your neck, shoulders, hands, wrists. After a long point, many people start serving before they have finished recovering. It may take two or three puffs. Don't start the move until you are calm and ready.

Five: ball bounce rhythm. The number of bounces is not important. The goal is to create rhythm and a feeling of comfort. Once you're done bouncing, take another deep breath before starting.

This whole routine sounds like a ritual. It is truly a ritual. And the value of the ritual is not that it is technically correct — but that it is alike at 40-30 and at 30-40. When everything else changes, habits are the only things you still recognize.

The next section turns to the third pillar: how you talk to yourself — and why those words have a physical effect, not just a mental spirit.

CHAPTER 8

Chapter 8 — The voice in your head

The previous chapter ended with a promise: the words you say to yourself have a physical effect, not just a mental spirit. This chapter explains that mechanic — and shows where most players misunderstand it.

Epictetus, nearly two thousand years ago, wrote a sentence that every tennis player should stick on his racket bag: People are not disturbed by things, but by the way they see things. Shakespeare restated the same idea in fewer words: There is nothing good or bad; just thinking makes it so.

Sounds obvious. But notice: during competition, almost no one acts as if that's true. People act as if incident is the cause. The ball hit the net, and anger appeared — as if the ball had pumped anger into him. Nothing is being pumped. Between the ball and the anger there is a sentence, and that sentence is often so fast, so familiar, that you don't hear it anymore.

This whole chapter is about that verse.

One match, two sentences

You're in the finals of an important tournament — one you've never won. Won the first set 7-5 after a very tiring set. Set two, you serve at 5-4 to end the match. Then serve breaks: partly because you hesitated, partly because your opponent paid better than you thought. You lose the second set, then lose the third set tie-break 7-6 after leading 4-1.

After the game, you're so depressed, angry, and upset with yourself that you don't want to play the next week. You have a sentence in your head: Why should I keep working hard when it's clear I can't win the big game?

Now take that exact match, that exact score, that exact serve break. But

the sentence in my head is: I lost concentration at the end of the second set, and if I want to win the championship next time, I have to work harder on that part.

Same event. Same person. The next two weeks were completely different.

This is where it needs to be made clear, because it is the foundation of the entire third pillar: the first and second sentences do not differ in mood. They differ in information. The first sentence contains no facts about the match — it only contains a judgment about who you are. The second sentence contains two facts: you lost focus, and it happened at the end of set two. A sentence that can be used for practice. One sentence is not.

Mechanism: one sentence changes four things

To say that thoughts influence emotions is still vague. More specifically: a self-talk changes four things, and all four are measurable, all four directly affect the shot.

One: breathing rate. Sentence you idiot is accompanied by a short breath in the upper chest. Sentence next point is accompanied by a longer, downward breath. In chapter 5 you saw why this is important: upper chest breathing is a sign that the spirit nervous system is on alert, and it entails tension in the neck, shoulders, and wrists.

Two: muscle tone. This is what Jacobson measured back in the 1930s. Muscles are never at zero state. When you call yourself an idiot, background tone increases — especially in the jaw, forearms, and muscles around the eyes. You don't feel it. You just feel the shot "stiff".

Three: breadth of attention. In chapter 6, four boxes of attention. The self-judgment pulls you back into box narrow-internal — inside, into the ego, into the single point of disappointment. From there you no longer see the court, you no longer see what your opponent is doing, you no longer

see the ball leave his racket half a beat early.

Four: shot selection. And this is the most expensive one. People who are sabotaging themselves don't choose the best shot — they choose the safest shot or the most retaliatory shot. Both are decisions made by emotion, not by situation.

Those four things combined explain a phenomenon known to every player: you miss one shot, and the next three shots are also missed. Nothing on the course changed between those four shots. Only the sentence in my head changed.

But wait — your best performance is when you don't think about anything

At this point I have to say something that makes the whole chapter difficult.

When asked what they think about when they play their best, many players answer: not thinking at all. And serious sports psychologists agree that peak performance doesn't happen when athletes are thinking about skill. Good players reduce execution to an automatic level, without the intervention of thought. That is the situation in chapter 2.

So does a chapter on self-talk contradict chapter 2?

No — but this contradictory interpretation is what the third pillar is all about. Borg, the calmest person in the history of the sport, described tennis as several hours of thinking, thinking about each point. He didn't say he didn't think. He said he was thinking about exactly one thing.

Recall chapter 7: "one point, one moment" is not a state of mind, it is a content rules — prohibiting all thoughts except the upcoming point. That is self-talk in its most extreme form. It doesn't remove voices; it gives the voice only a single topic.

So the correct question is should you think about it or not?. The correct questions are three small ones: think how, think what, and think when. A player who thinks "the racket comes back sooner" at the moment the ball has left the opponent's racket is self-breaking. With the same sentence, thinking while practicing, is building.

And here's what few books say: The ultimate goal of self-talk is to make it shorter. Not to talk better, not to say more. Shorter, less, and finally silent.

Positive is not a tone

People often divide talk into "positive" and "negative" as if it were a happy or sad thing. That division leads players down the wrong path — to the point where they try to say nice things to themselves while believing the exact opposite, and find it doesn't work.

A more useful way to divide is by function.

Positive self-talk is the kind that boosts three things: your image of yourself, your ability to stay focused, and the quality of your performance. It keeps you in the present, not dwelling on old mistakes and not jumping too far into the future.

Negative self-talk is a hindrance because it is inappropriate to the situation, irrational, counterproductive, or creates anxiety.

Note the key point: this definition is not dependent on whether the sentence sounds nice or not. It depends on whether the sentence carries usable information or not. Idiot, how can you miss such an easy shot? isn't negative because it's rough. It's negative because it doesn't tell you what to do differently. It is a judgment, not an instruction.

Conversely, a sentence can sound completely unpleasant and still be positive in this sense: You removed that volley because you got the racket late. Next time get it sooner. Unkind. But there is an address.

This is the most important technical reason in the chapter: Good self-talk is one that answers the question "what to do now". The answer "you suck" does not answer. The answer "slow down, keep the rhythm" is the answer.

Four things that voice can do

Self-talk isn't just for reassurance. It has four specific uses in tennis, and each use has a different dosage.

First — skill acquisition. When you are learning a new shot, for example the backhand, it is helpful to remind yourself of a few important points: hold your wrist, reach out, straighten your elbow. But even at the new level, the dosage must be very low. Too much talking causes paralysis — the same over-analysis discussed in chapter 6. As the backhand improves, the self-talk must shorten: fewer times, fewer words, and a shift from technical signals to tactical signals. From hold your wrist to slippery. The goal is to reduce conscious control, not increase it.

Accompanied by a small but decisive shift: towards result, not towards mechanism. Before serving, think about where you want to place the ball, not how to hit it. In volley you often don't have time to think at all — you have to react automatically. It's not a lack of fine spirit skills. That's the nature of volley.

Second — break bad habits. Changing from a two-handed backhand to a one-handed backhand, from slice to topspin, changing the grip — these changes are difficult because you have to delete an automatic reaction and install another in its place. Self-talk is a powerful tool here, and it has an absolute rule: Focus on what should be done, not on what should not be done.

Don't drop the racket head doesn't give you any information about what to do. It only draws out exactly what you fear, and what you fear the spirit

nervous system tends to reproduce. Keep your wrist steady to reinforce the correct habit you are setting. The greater the change, the clearer the instructions must be — but they must still be instructions, not commandments.

Third — take action. Runners have been recorded to increase their speed by saying words to themselves like fast. In tennis, the same goes for your feet, especially when you feel sluggish and slow. Aggressive Volley is triggered by strong, sharp, next. Serving is triggered by slippery, with, explode. And it's not just movement words — short commands like wake up, Go, move, pick it up work too. We respond quickly to commands from the coach; The same goes for orders from yourself, if they are short enough.

Fourth — maintenance effort. Getting started is difficult; Maintaining intensity for a long match is even more difficult, especially when fatigue sets in in the third set. Physical strength is a necessary condition, but effort is also kept in words: Try your best, stay, keep it, stay. These words do not make you better. They make you not give up.

Four uses, four different dosages. And a general rule: everything must be short. A long sentence cannot fit between two points.

The first step isn't to correct — it's to listen

Here is where most players go wrong. They read a chapter like this one, decide to "think positive," go out, and lose within two games. Reason: you can't fix something you've never heard of.

And here's the uncomfortable truth — most of us don't really pay attention to what's said to us, and often don't realize how powerful it is. That voice runs in the background. It's like the sound of a ceiling fan: only when it turns off do you know it's been humming all along.

There are two ways to listen again.

Recall. Sit down and recall two recent matches — one the best, one the worst. For each match, try to remember what your friend said to you, and how many times. Most players who do this exercise are surprised by how stark the gap between the two matches is: good matches are often accompanied by positive and instructive self-talk; Bad battles are accompanied by negative self-talk, and often by repeating the same sentences over and over.

Diary. Retrospective is an estimate; Logs are data. Record it as soon as possible after leaving the field — either after practice or after a game. And here's why it's important to write it down during practice: self-talk during practice is a pretty good predictor of what will happen in the game. People don't change their tone when there's a referee; they just talk louder.

When writing, don't just write sentences. Write situation. Because the goal is not to draw up an indictment, but to find the switch — what event turns that tone on.

The list of switches that the original book's author notes, and which is worth checking out for yourself: skip each hit; lose a big point; double fault; lost serve; commit an unnecessary mistake. And one that no one expected — is leading.

The last one is worth stopping, because it's counterintuitive. People think self-destruction happens when being led. But when you are led, you still have work to do: you have to undo it. When you're leading, there's space in your head — and that space is immediately filled with don't ruin it, just two more points needed, Don't let it slip. All three of those sentences are looking at the finish line, not at the ball. That's the technical reason why people often lose a break right after having a break.

Knowing the switch is not the same as being able to fix the switch

If just knowing was enough to fix it, this book would be three pages long. Awareness is step one, and step one doesn't fix anything. It shows you what to fix.

But it's not in vain. Once you've identified the situations that give rise to negative self-talk, you've taken an important step—because from then on, you're no longer fighting a fog. You fight four or five specific, repetitive, and predictable situations. What can be predicted can be practiced.

The next chapter is three tools for practice: stopping, changing sentences, and — the hardest part — removing the belief supporting the sentence.

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9 — Stop, change the sentence, remove the root

Knowing what to say to yourself is step one. In this chapter are three tools for changing it — ordered from cheapest to deepest, and also from easiest to hardest.

These three tools do not replace each other. They deal with three different levels of the same problem, and if you only use the first level, you'll feel like you're taping a cracked water pipe. Duct tape works. But you have to know how effective it is.

Tool one: stop

The cheapest way to deal with a negative thought is to block it before it can ruin your next shot. No analysis, no debate, no understanding of the origin. Block.

The mechanism is simple, and it fits neatly into the four discussed in chapter 8. The self-judgment sets in motion a sequence: short breaths, increased tone, drawn-in attention, then an incorrect shot choice. If you cut the chain at the first link, the following three links do not occur. You don't need to stop being angry. You need to cut the sentence that generated it.

The technique consists of three steps, and almost everyone skips the first step.

One: pay attention to the unwanted thought for a few seconds. Don't push it away right away. Realize it. Ah, that sentence again. This step is important because you can't stop something you haven't noticed yet — and because the realization itself slows it down a beat.

Two: use a signal to cut. The signal can be a word — stop, Stop, Enough — or a movement: snap your fingers, slap your hand on your thigh, squeeze the racket handle. Each person must choose what is right for themselves; There is no signal that is better than another, only the signal you will actually use.

Three: bring attention to what you are doing. This is the step that people often forget, and if they forget, the whole technique is useless. Stopping a thought only makes sense if you put something else in its place — a task-relevant cue. Look at the shiny seams. Shift weight to front foot. Bounce the ball three times. If that space is left empty, the old sentence will return within two seconds.

Now comes the hard part, and I want to get this straight because it saves you months of frustration.

Breaking the habit of negative self-talk is as difficult as is breaking a bad technique habit — like bringing the racket back too high on the backswing. Same mechanism: a series of movements that are myelinated, run on autopilot, and refuse to listen to reason. There's no reason to think it's easier. It's just harder, because no one recorded the video for you to review.

And here is the number that the author of the original book noted when working with tennis players: thirty to forty negative thoughts during a training session or a match is normal. Read that number again. If you think the goal is zero, you will give up on the fifteenth thought and conclude that the technique doesn't work. The goal is not to have no negative thoughts. The goal is to shorten the gap between when it appears and when you cut it.

Itinerary, in correct order:

During practice, speak loudly. Each time you notice a negative thought, say stop out loud — or the signal of your choice — and then return to the

task signal. Speaking loudly has two effects: it makes you hear yourself, and it lets those around you know you're practicing a new skill and not mumbling impatiently. If you have a coach, this is when he sees you working.

Then, say it in your head. Once you get used to it, switch from external signals to internal commands. This transfer takes time — don't force it. It's like switching from counting out loud to counting silently when learning the rhythm.

Finally, in battle. Only if the previous two steps worked.

And a word of advice about scope: don't fix it all at once. Choose one situations that produce negative self-talk — usually the one that happens the most, like missing an easy shot — and just work on it for two weeks. Once that situation is clear, move on to the next one. People fail at this technique not because it is difficult, but because they try to do it with everything at once.

Finally, there is a way to practice without going on the field. Close your eyes, recreate the exact situation where you often sabotage yourself — not the general situation, but the specific scene: the score, the position, the feeling in your hand. Let negative thoughts appear. Then use the signal to cut it. Do it many times. This is an image — the subject of the next two chapters — but it is also the only way to practice stopping thinking without losing an actual battle.

Tool two: change sentences

Honestly: there will be times when you won't be able to stop in time. The thought had entered, the jaw had clenched, and the blow had failed. Stopping won't save the situation anymore.

Then use the second tool: change the sentence. Don't delete it — replace it with another, shorter, usable sentence.

The best way to do this is to do it first, when you are still calm, on paper. Make a list of all the statements you say to yourself and know are harmful. If you kept a journal in chapter 8, this list is already there—it's just an inventory of what you've recorded. For each sentence, write next to what situation caused it and why. Then write the replacement sentence.

Below is a sample table. The left half are sentences I have heard many times from tennis players; The right half is the alternative sentence. Don't copy it completely — the replacement sentence must be the sentence Friend believes.

Look at the right column and notice three common characteristics. They are shorter than the left column. They are present tense or commands, not promises about the future. And they contain something to do, not just a feeling to have.

Those three characteristics are not accidental. They are the criteria.

Short. You must be able to say the sentence in one exhale, between two points. A long sentence cannot fit into that amount of time, and a sentence that cannot be said does not exist.

Present or imperative. I won't match is a promise, and promises must wait. Looking at the ball is one thing, and the job can be done right away.

There's work to do. This is the most important criterion, and it goes back to the definition in chapter 8: good sentences answer the question What to do now?.

And here's the fourth, less talked about criterion: The alternative sentence must be believable. If you're losing 0-5 and say to yourself I'm in control of the match, you've just created a second sentence to fight against. The replacement sentence does not need to be optimistic. It needs to be right. One point, one moment is correct at 0-5. I'm in control of the match is not.

Regarding how to use during tension: there is a specific order, and the order is important. Stop negative sentences. Take a deep breath. As you exhale, relax — and say the replacement. Don't say the replacement sentence while still tense; the sentence will not enter. The exhalation is the condition, not the decoration. You saw in chapter 5 why: exhalation is the parasympathetic phase, and that's when muscle tone actually decreases.

As with tool one: practice in practice first, recreate in the next image, then use in battle.

Tool three: remove the root

At this point, I must say something that the previous two tools cannot solve.

Changing the sentence will not be completely effective if you still believe in the old sentence.

Specific examples. If you truly believe that the referee's bad calls cost you the game, then telling yourself that doesn't matter won't help much. You are saying something that you yourself think is wrong. And your body knows it.

Albert Ellis calls that core irrational belief. They are counterproductive because they directly affect confidence, motivation, self-image, and quality of performance. They are not sentences that appear by accident; they are premise, and the negative self-statement is just the conclusion drawn very logically from that premise.

Below are beliefs that the original author notes appear consistently in tennis players of all levels. Read and notice which one is yours.

"I can play tennis perfectly." This belief only leads to disappointment, and it works in a very specific way: every time you step on the court, you raise

your expectations to an unrealistic level. And when you think you should play perfectly, your body tightens up and you start pressing. That is what reduces the quality of implementation. A more realistic view: everyone makes mistakes, and the only thing that can be done about mistakes is to learn from them.

"External circumstances were the reason I lost." People with this belief blame everything around them — wind, a bad spot on the field, sunlight, noise. They lose more, and don't understand why. The truth is that when you lose, just like when you win, you are responsible. Not because things are within your control — but because if you believe they are out of your control, you have nowhere to work.

"Because I played poorly at the beginning, I will continue to play poorly." This is the belief of someone who tries to predict the future without any basis. You never know how you will play on any given day. There are matches where you play the first set poorly and then play the rest very well. And there's a cruel side effect: if you let a bad start bring you down, that belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy — but what produces the results is not the beginning, but the belief about the beginning.

"My achievements on the field reflect my values as a person." People with this belief are happy about themselves on good days and want to disappear on bad days. It's a roller coaster, and no one does well on roller coasters. Even on your worst day, you are still a valuable human being. Separate performance from self-worth, and your self-esteem will stabilize while your performance fluctuates — instead of both fluctuating.

"I get angry every time things don't go my way." This belief belongs to people who get angry at even the smallest things. And it's patently absurd, because always something goes wrong in every tennis match — a bad shot, a wrong call, a gust of wind, a noise. There are no clean matches. What separates winners from losers is not having fewer things go wrong, but being able to handle them without letting them take over the rest of the

game.

"I don't learn anything after losing." This sentence appears in people who don't take the time to learn from experience, but choose to sulk and try to forget the whole match. The reality is often the opposite: you learn more from losses than from wins, because wins don't show what needs fixing. Good players think back to both types of matches, because both have something that can be used for the next match.

"Self-criticism will make my performance better." It sounds like a small thing, but this is the belief that causes the most damage, because it sounds reasonable — people think being strict with themselves is a form of discipline. Not. There is a huge gap between self-assessed and task-oriented and self-criticism. Compare two sentences: You got rid of volley easily, you idiot — and You can easily remove volley; Next time take the racket sooner. The first sentence has no information. The following sentence has an instruction. If you make a mistake, think about how to fix it. Don't be harsh with yourself, because that only leads to worse performance.

How to break a trust

Reading the seven beliefs above and nodding your head won't change anything. The change is a paper confrontation, and it has four steps.

One: write down your belief exactly as it exists in your head. Don't soften it, don't write down its civilized version. If the sentence in your head is I can never win against these people, write it like that.

Two: find two-way evidence. Three cases where it is correct. In three cases it is wrong. This step often fails because people only look for one dimension — and memory is very good at providing the exact dimension you're looking for. If you can't think of a mistake, ask someone who watched you play.

Three: find a logical jump. Almost every irrational belief contains one of three words: always, never, Right. Underline them. Then try replacing it with often, sometimes, maybe — and see if the sentence is still correct. Usually the sentence is still correct, and has become much weaker.

Four: ask what that belief is paying you. This is a step that is not in the textbook, and is the most important step. A belief lasts because it is beneficial in some corner. I can play perfectly protects you from a more painful conclusion: I'm just at this level. Circumstances are the cause protects you from having to admit you made the wrong choice. Self-criticism gives you the feeling of being serious. Once you name that benefit, you can consciously pay for it — and often you won't find it worth it.

And here's the limit, to be clear: you won't erase these beliefs in one season. It may never be completely erased. They are built up over many years, often from things others said to you when you were young, and they are not your fault.

So the measure is not the absence of that sentence. The measure is period between the time the sentence appears and the time you get back to the ball. Good players don't have fewer toxic sentences. They just take less time to go through them.

Three tools are available. The next chapter turns to what can do more than all three combined — and is also the most misunderstood thing in tennis: image.

CHAPTER 10

Chapter 10 — The Battle Before the Battle

Chris Evert says a sentence that describes this entire chapter in twelve words: It was like I had played that game before I stepped on the field.

She was more specific: before a match, she spent time rehearsing in her mind what might happen and how she would react. She finds herself playing typical points based on her opponent's play style. She found herself hitting deep, sharp shots from the back of the court, and ending the score with volley if she received a weak return.

Evert is no exception. Arthur Ashe, Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, brothers Tim and Tom Gullickson — all say the same thing. And not just in tennis. Dwight Stones in track and field, Greg Louganis in diving, Jean-Claude Killy in skiing, Bruce Jenner in decathlon, Jack Nicklaus in golf. Nicklaus, who won the Masters at age 45, describes what he does before each shot — and in exactly three frames:

First, I see the ball where I want it to stop, white, high on the green grass. Then I saw it fly there: the path, the trajectory, and the way it behaved when it hit the ground. The third frame shows me making the swing that turns the previous image into reality.

Three frames. Result. Way. Movement. That's a structure, not an inspiration — and it's the structure you'll use in the next chapter.

You've already done this

There are many names for the same thing: mental rehearsal spirit, visualization, visualization, mental control, planetary practice spirit. It's all about recreating or creating an experience in the mind.

And here's where many people are surprised: you don't need to learn it

from scratch. Have you ever watched a good tennis player and then gone home and tried to imitate his serve? Have you ever remembered a day when you played really well, and tried to recreate that feeling, the way the racket sat in your hand, the way the ball moved. Both are visualizations. Your mind can record an event and reconstruct it; it can also set up an event that has never happened before — like when you think up a strategy for an opponent you've never met, and foresee how the points will play out.

It's not a special ability. That's how memory and imagination work. What you need to do is just do it on purpose, at the right time, and in enough detail.

Not just looking

The most common misconception about images is thinking it just means see yourself doing something. That's only partly true — and that part that's true is often the weakest part.

Images should use as many senses as possible. Consider a particular player, on a particular shot, and count how many channels are running.

Vision: ball, opponent's movement, space on the field.

Sense of movement: the position of the racket head when brought back. The feeling of putting weight on the front leg at the right time. This is the most important channel and the most overlooked one.

Hearing: the sound of the ball bouncing off the racket strings.

And here's a story worth knowing, because it proves just how important the auditory canal is. In the 1970s, a type of racket called the "spaghetti racket" appeared with a completely different string system. It was banned very quickly. The reason given by leading experts is not that it creates more spin — but that it breaks the opponent's moment. The ball makes a

completely different sound when it leaves the racket, and people can no longer read speed, trajectory, and spin the way they used to.

Meaning: a lot of what you call "good times" are actually your ears at work. So if your video doesn't have sound, it's missing a channel that you use every day.

Tactile: the feel of the racket handle in the hand, the firmness of the fingers.

And the last channel, the one most players ignore completely: feeling. Worry. Angry. Joyful. Tired. Recreating these states in imagery is the only way to practice dealing with them — because you can't practice dealing with anger by reading about anger.

Why does it really work?

The testimony of champions is not evidence. People believe in many things that don't work. But there are two explanatory mechanisms here, and both have been measured.

spirit nerve-muscle mechanism. Richard Suinn attached electrodes to the legs of Olympic downhill skiers and asked them to imagine themselves skiing. Electrical activity in leg muscles change. And it doesn't change randomly: it peaks at exactly the moments when the real slide requires more muscle work — the rough spots. Their bodies are running a non-existent slide.

Other studies confirm the same thing with simpler movements: imagining a movement creates activity in the exact muscles that will perform that movement. The activity level is lower than the real thing — but the spirit path used is the same.

This is why the image is not "think tennis". It's about running a weak version of the same campaign. You are practicing serve without a ball.

Cognitive mechanism. The second mechanism is simpler and less talked about: images help you understand what has to happen. You create a detailed plan in your head. In doubles, you must be familiar with how your partner moves, his or her strengths and weaknesses, to know what to play and where to stand. In singles, you have to think of the best way to beat a particular opponent. Imagining in advance what is most likely to happen brings you to the match with your decisions already made.

The two mechanisms add up to one sentence: images program both the body and the decisions. The result is a smoother stroke, and less work on your head.

Limits — make it clear

At this point I have to pull back, because this is the most hyped skill in the whole book.

The image does not replace a basket of balls. Activity spirit is much weaker when imagined than when performed. If you only imagine serve and never hit, you will have a beautifully visualized serve that will still fail on the field.

And it doesn't turn you into Navratilova or Lendl if you have average skills. It helps you reach your potential, not create new potential.

There's another problem, on the other side, and it's equally common: players don't believe visuals are useful, so they do it superficially. This cancels itself out, because the image is often more vivid when you believe in it. Vicious cycle: not believing → doing it superficially → no results → not believing even more. The only way to escape is to take it seriously enough for long enough to get a result, no matter how small.

And don't expect overnight success. Imagery requires the same kind of commitment as changing your backhand: lots of repetitions, time, effort, and a faith without immediate evidence that it will give something back.

Two perspectives, and which one to use

There are two ways to construct images, and they differ in a very specific way: where you stand.

Outside angle. You observe yourself as if you were watching a movie, or as if you were watching yourself on a videotape. If you imagine serve from the outside angle, you see the ready position, the toss, the swing, the follow — and you see your back and the nape of your neck, because you're looking from where a spectator sits.

Inner corner. You take the shot from your own eyes. It's like having a camera above your head, recording exactly what you see. With serve, you see your opponent, see the racket and ball in your hands at the ready, see the toss, see the point of contact. You Are not seeing the back of your head, not seeing the swing back, not seeing anything beyond your normal vision.

Both are effective. But research tends to show that the inner angle produces a stronger impact — because it puts you in the exact position you'll be in when doing the real thing, so it's much easier to feel the movement. And because the electrical activity in the muscle performing the skill is greater when imaged from an inner angle. If visualization works by facilitating muscle activity, then the inner angle gets you there faster.

But — and this is where textbooks often miss out — don't worry if the inner corner doesn't come naturally to you. Some people have a natural tendency to visualize from the outside, or find the inside angle uncomfortable. If so, use the outer corner. A clear, detailed, and controlled image from the outer corner is better than a blurry, disorganized image from the inner corner. And you can switch back and forth depending on skill and situation: inside angle to feel the shot, outside angle to see the whole point play out.

Six things images can do

People often think that images are for practicing shots. That's just the first of six.

One: control emotional reactions. This is the most underrated use. You recreate the same situation that caused trouble — matching on a key point, angry at a wrong call — but this time you find yourself handling it in a good way: take a deep breath, pay attention to your breathing, then return to the next point. You don't practice so that situation doesn't happen. You practice your reaction to it.

Two: improve attention. Visualizing the game and shots before playing keeps your mind from wandering to unrelated things. And you can set up exactly the situations where you usually lose focus — after missing an easy shot, after a wrong call — and then find yourself keeping calm and coming back.

Three: build a strategy. This is exactly what Evert describes. Practicing what you want to do before going on the field makes you make better decisions during the game, because the decisions have been practiced. And it allows something that no training session can do: you can visualize counterattacking your opponent's strongest weapon — a server's good serve — net play, for example — before meeting it.

Four: build confidence. Imagining yourself serving the ball strongly and accurately gives you confidence even when the real serve is having problems. And more importantly: you can recreate the exact situation that broke your confidence — miss a serve, miss a few easy shots — and find yourself recovering afterward. Confidence does not mean it has never collapsed. I know I can stand up.

Five: practice and refine your stroke. This is the most common use. If you're learning a new variation — spin serve, backhand topspin — or

stuck with a particular shot, imagery is a powerful tool. But it's not just for problem areas: it's also for refining and automating already good shots.

Six: bug fixes. You can replay a past match in your head and figure out when, why, and how a bug occurred. Replaying helps you see the chain of decisions that led to the outcome, and correct the links. Let's be fair here: video does this too, and in some ways better. But the video doesn't show you what you were thinking before choosing that shot. There are images.

And one more use, rare but worth mentioning: pain and injury. One of the hardest things for a tennis player is to sit out for weeks. Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, you can imagine yourself taking all the shots, playing matches, practicing. There are athletes who have used imagery during their time off and returned to their previous skill level in less time than expected. And with pain right away — on a hot, humid day — visualizing yourself in a cool place (swimming in the ocean) can draw attention away from the discomfort. Sounds strange. But it's the same mechanism as everything else in this chapter: wherever your attention goes, your feelings will follow.

Biggest mistake

Most players only use images when there is a problem. They get into trouble with a shot, or with a part of the game — being behind early, not being able to finish the game, or matching — and then they start to figure it out.

Images are helpful in those cases. But limiting it to error correction is wasting half the tool. Images are also used to consolidate what's going well. If you already have a good serve, that doesn't mean you can forget about it and not practice it regularly. Same principle: muscle memory also needs to be reminded.

And here's the best moment that almost no one uses: right after leaving the field on a day when you hit well. It feels new, the racquet is in your hand, and you can reconstruct that exact shot — not a generic ideal shot, but the one you just hit. It's the easiest and most powerful visualization you'll have all week. Don't let it slip away while you change your shoes.

The next chapter is the missing piece: how to turn this from a good idea into a program — measure your current level, work on the two foundational skills, then put it in place during your week.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter 11 — A ten-minute show

The previous chapter talked about what imagery is and why it works. This chapter is the hard part: turning it from a good idea into something you actually do, at a certain time, for how long, and in what order.

Three steps. Measure current level. Practice two foundation skills. Then put it in your week. Skipping any step is a fail, but the step that's skipped the most is step one — and that's why most people try images for two weeks and then stop.

Step one: measure first

Image is a skill, not a talent. That means it has a current level, and that level varies greatly from person to person. Some people can build a whole game in their head with all the colors, sounds, and feelings. Some people close their eyes and see a void. Both are normal, and both improve.

The measurement below is adapted from Rainer Martens' questionnaire. You will create four situations, then rate the four aspects of each situation on a scale of 1 to 5. It takes about fifteen minutes. There are no right or wrong answers — you're measuring, not testing.

How to do it: read the situation, think of your own specifically example (what skill, who, where, when), then close your eyes, take a few deep breaths to relax, put everything else aside, and build it for about a minute. Then dot.

Four situations: (1) you practice a shot in the place where you usually practice, without anyone else; (2) you practice with your coach and teammates, and you make a mistake that everyone sees; (3) you observe a teammate miss an easy volley or make a double mistake in an important passage; (4) you played a very skillful game, and the audience and

teammates are showing their appreciation.

Four aspects: (a) how clearly and vividly you see it; (b) how clearly you hear the sound; (c) how well you feel your body movements; (d) how well you perceive the mood or emotion of the situation.

Calculation: add four numbers in each column. Each column gives you a score from 4 to 20. Whichever column is closer to 20 is your strong channel; Whichever column is lower is the channel that needs to be trained. The overall score isn't as important as the shape of the four columns — because it shows exactly where you should spend your time.

An important note before you get disappointed about your score. Many players, when doing this for the first time, discover that their emotional channel is almost zero. They see the image, hear the sound of the ball, feel the swing — but feel nothing. This is often not because they are incapable, but because they have never been asked to pay attention to their emotions while imagining. And that is the most important channel if you want to use images to practice handling pressure.

Step two: vividness

It sounds simple, but here's the number one criterion: the more your images resemble the real experience, the better the transfer to real life. So most of the background work is making the image more detailed — not longer, more detailed.

The five exercises below have nothing to do with tennis, and that's intentional. They practice channels, not shots. Do it slowly enough, a few minutes for each exercise.

Lesson one — screen and circle. Close your eyes, relax, set up a blank white screen. On it, a dark blue circle. Let it fade to green. Then it turns golden — smooth, shiny, solid, bright yellow. Let the brightness recede from yellow, to dull amber, then orange, then deep red. Sprinkle a few

drops of blue into the red circle and watch them blend in, gradually mixing until the purple circle is even. Let the purple deepen until it becomes black: a shiny, bottomless black hole. Grasp the edges of the black ring and square it to form a black square. Leave it gray, then fade to white, giving you the original white screen.

This article sounds like an exercise for children. It's also the most difficult of the five, because it requires you to control color — something sports images don't typically have. If you can't do it right away, don't jump to conclusions. Do it again tomorrow.

Lesson two — juice bottle. A glass bottle on the kitchen counter, about three-quarters full, left out long enough to be at room temperature. Dip your index finger in. Notice where the finger breaks the surface tension of the water and the ripples spread out, bouncing off the sides of the jar. Notice how it feels: wet, warm, slightly sticky because of the sugar. Put your finger to your mouth — smell comes first, taste comes first, then the remaining juice stays on your tongue. Reach into the ice bucket and grab a handful; His fingers were cold when he touched the damp ice. Drop the ice into the jar, slowly, and hear it fall into the liquid, splashing. Pick up the long spoon and stir well; Listen to the sound of the spoon hitting the rim of the jar, watch the swirl of liquid. Pour into a glass — pay attention to the flow when the glass is full. Lift up, drink. Tastes real. When swallowing, the feeling of coolness goes down.

This exercise trains three channels at the same time: touch, smell, and hearing. This is the closest thing to a real tennis experience, as it forces you to feel it with your hands.

Lesson three — your living room. You are at home, in the living room. Look around and remember all the details: the shape and surface of the furniture. What sound is there? What's the temperature? Does air move? What smell? Use all your senses.

This lesson is important because it teaches you something you'll use again and again: You can't build a place you haven't looked closely at. That's why Olympic teams visit the venues months in advance — so they can build the exact field, not a generic field.

Lesson four — serve perfect. This is the first lesson with tennis. Select your serve. See and feel yourself doing it perfectly.

You are in a ready position, look at your opponent and the service box, choose where you want to place the ball. Watch and feel yourself starting to move, releasing the ball at the right height, the toss going in the right place. Feel your back arch and shoulders tense as the racket goes behind your head. Feeling the weight begin to shift forward, the arms and racket reach up to the point of contact at the right height and angle. Feel your wrist pop when you hit the ball. Then watch and feel it, with the full weight ahead. You see the ball go exactly where you want it, forcing your opponent to return the ball high. You advance net play and end up with a diagonal volley.

Notice the structure — it's exactly like Nicklaus's three frames, just in a different order: feel the action, see the ball, see the result, then see the finish. And notice a small but important detail: you must feel wrist pops. If your image is just a picture, it will pass like a movie. The new feeling is what plugs it into the body.

Lesson five — your finest hour. Recall, as vividly as possible, a time when you played very well. If there's a good hour in recent memory, use it. This article has three channels.

Vision: what you look like when you play well. Here's where it's worth noting — you looks differently when you play well and when you play poorly. You walk differently. You carry a different head and shoulders. When an athlete is confident on the inside, it shows on the outside. Watching videos of old good matches helps you crystallize this image a

lot.

Hearing: hears back the sounds of that day — and especially the inner dialogue. Here's where most players are surprised when doing this for the first time: the best performances often come with a silence inside. No comments. There is no grading. Listen to that silence again. And notice what you say to yourself, how you say it, and how you react when faced with adversity while you're playing well.

Sense of movement: rebuilds the entire body. How do the feet and hands feel? Do you feel fast, loose, speedy, or intense? The racquet often has a unique feel on a good day — how do you feel it on your forehand, backhand, serve, volley?

Step two (continued): control

Vividness is half. The other half is control — and this is where a lot of good players find themselves blocked.

The problem is very specific. Many people say that when they set up their serve, the continuous ball falls right outside the service box. Or their groundstrokes go into the top part of the net. Or they don't finish the point: no matter where they hit, they still see the opponent return the ball.

This is not a technical problem. This is a matter of the image running its course — and if you let it run, you're programming your body with exactly the error you want to get rid of.

Four exercises to practice control.

Lesson one — ball. You are holding a tennis ball. Check carefully: color, seams, surface, every detail you can build. Then bounce it and catch it again after each bounce. Then you prepare to serve and find yourself bouncing the ball as many times as you always do. Then toss the ball to the exact point you want to make contact.

Lesson two — basic shots, to the right place. Choose a position on the field and hit that exact spot. Work with both topspin and cut — and notice the difference in height over the net and bounce of the ball. Then down the sideline, also aiming at a specific point. Repeat for the remaining shots in the set: serve, volley, header, approach ball.

Lesson three — the shot that caused trouble. Choose the shot that caused trouble. Notice what you did wrong. Then set it up perfectly: watch and feel the movement, and watch the ball go in the right place. Then do it again, this time in a specific match situation — serving to tie the game, being behind early, serving second under pressure, a key pass, an overhead shot. Put yourself there, then find yourself staying calm and hitting successfully.

Lesson four — a specific opponent. Choose someone who has caused you trouble. Win points with him exactly the way you want. Create many types of situations: serve, return of serve, groundstroke, volley, header, lob. Formulate a strategy in your head — the best way to beat this person — then execute that strategy in imagery. For example, you find yourself attacking deep, waiting for a short one, moving in and ending with a sharp volley. It is imperative: you must be in control of your shot selection, shot placement, and movement placement. It is not the opponent who decides. You decide.

And a little tip for all four: if you're practicing on a new court, get there first and stand in positions — serve and return of serve on both sides, from the back of the court, at the net, in a forward position. In each location, spend some time reconstructing exactly what you see. The more accurately you build the actual yard, the stronger the image.

Step three: put it into your week

Here you have the tools. The remaining question is where to place it, and there are some rules that cannot be ignored.

Place. Quiet, comfortable, rarely disturbed. Bedroom before bed, dressing room before matches, break time at work. Once the skill is leveled, you'll learn how to use it amid interference — and eventually in battle.

Relax first. This is the most overlooked rule and it takes away a lot of effectiveness. Research shows that visualization after relaxation is more effective than visualization alone. Before each session, use the process in chapter 5 — progressive relaxation, or deep breathing. Relax your head and body and you will forget your daily worries and focus on the task at hand. And a relaxed state gives a stronger image, because it doesn't have to compete with something else.

Mostly successful — but with room for error. Most of the time, get it done right. You visualize a cross-court backhand and see that every shot goes deep, diagonally, in the right spot. But there will be times when you find yourself making mistakes or having bad results, and that's normal — because no one plays perfectly. The important thing is not whether you make mistakes in the image or not. The important thing is whether you can put the bad shot behind you and move on to the next point with a clean mind.

So set up those situations as well, on purpose. Very specific example: you serve at 4-5, 30-40 and need a big serve. You leave it. Instead of finding yourself nervous and tense, see yourself taking a deep breath, doing the pre-serve routine like in chapter 7, executing serve two confidently and in the right place, keeping the game. Or you find yourself losing set one in a difficult match. Instead of getting frustrated and angry, you find yourself more determined and focused, then go back to winning the game with a few inspired plays.

Trigger words. As in chapter 7, the trigger word is not part of the image — it is the start up image. If your serve is jerky, use smooth to press for an easy, controlled swing. If you often get caught flat-footed during return of serve, use next to emphasize getting your feet and racket going early. If your feet are slow, use fast.

Memory aid. There are four types, and they differ from trigger words in that they are real objects or experiences. Bruce Jenner keeps an obstacle course in his living room so that every time he sees it, he imagines himself running a hurdle — his weakest event.

Video. This is the most powerful tool, because there's a problem most players have: when asked to imagine their serve, they build their teammate's serve — because they see it every day — but get stuck with their own shot, because they don't know what they look like. That's not strange: it's difficult to imagine something you've never seen. Have someone spin you, all the way, from the sides and front to back. If possible, cut again, keeping only the best ones. The first time you watch yourself on video, the typical reaction is is that me? — and that's the point: you've just got the right image to recreate.

Video is also great for debugging, because you see the problem instead of hearing it described. But there's a limit to know: watching someone else hit a perfect shot doesn't turn his shot into your shot. There are programs built around that idea — choose a professional tennis player as a model, spin each shot to perfection, and add the sound of a racket hitting the ball. But no matter how perfect those shots are, they are still his own. Use yourself's video.

Recording tape. There are many commercially available photo tapes, but a more effective way is to make your own. Start with a few minutes of relaxation instruction, then move on to visuals — as detailed as possible, following the principles in this chapter, with cue words and trigger words, setting the right competition scene. You can make multiple tapes for

different purposes.

Physical signals. Play the shot in slow motion, very slowly, and pay attention to the feeling at each point: ready position, turn, bring racket back, shift weight, swing forward, contact, follow. Are your wrists, forearms, and shoulders tense when moving from one segment to the other? How does the foot move throughout the swing? Can you feel the weight shift? This is the fastest way to load the sensorimotor channel, and it is also the best way to warm up imagery before a session.

Visual signals. Go out on the field, stand in positions, and reconstruct what you see.

Implementation and results. This is a very common and very specific mistake: many people visualize making the shot but don't see the ball land; Others see the ball land but don't see themselves hitting. Must have both. With a diagonal backhand, you feel the shot — feet, position, racket angle, weight shift, follow-through — then you see the ball go over the net and bounce deep near the baseline.

True real time. This is a rule that nearly everyone breaks, and it's more important than it seems. The time you spend setting up a shot should be equal to the time it takes to actually make it on the course. If your serve, including the pre-delivery routine, takes ten seconds, then the image must also be exactly ten seconds long. Most players build much faster than they actually do.

Why this matters: you want the transition from photos to real life to be as easy as possible. If the image runs twice as fast, the timing and coordination advantages will not transfer to the real field.

How to practice timing: have someone go out on the court with a stopwatch and record the time it takes you to typically serve, return of serve, hit a groundstroke, and complete a point — including the intervals between points. Then at home, time yourself doing simple things: going

from room to room, going to the mailbox and back, walking the dog. After clicking, imagine it again and see if your image takes the same amount of time.

When to use

The most common question about images is when to use. It can be used almost at any time, but there are some times when the benefits are much higher.

Before and after the workout session. This is the easiest place to build a habit. About ten minutes at a time — more than that and most people can't stay focused. Before practice: set up the movements, exercises, and shots you will do, following the principles of seeing, hearing, and feeling. This gets you into tennis and warms up your spirit nervous system before hitting the court. After practice: review the shots and strategies you just did for real. This is a golden time, because the kinesthetic sensation is fresh in the hand — the image will be much clearer and more detailed than re-imagining it the next day.

Before and after the match. Before the match, visuals keep your mind focused on the upcoming match and help you strategize for different situations. The timing depends on the person: some people like it right before going on the field, some people like it starting an hour or two before. Some people use two or three sessions — two hours, one hour, thirty minutes before the game, ten minutes each time. If using multiple sessions, work on the strategy in one session and feel the shots in another session.

The most overlooked moment is right after the match. With the game still clear in your mind, you can replay points and shots you did well — and get a strong, easy, free image. You can also repeat the mistakes, but this time you see you got it right, or choose another shot. For example, if you lose a few important points from the back of the court, review them and

find yourself being more patient, scoring with a short shot and then going to volley.

Before serving and return of serve. These are the only two places in the game where you actually have time — because the rules give it to you. Imagery can become part of the serving routine and return of serve described in chapter 7. Of course, it must be practiced first before it becomes natural.

While changing fields. This is the longest space in a match, and almost no one uses it. After catching your breath and drinking water, sit down and set up the next two games. If you are about to serve: see yourself serving a ball successfully and follow net play. If about to return of serve: find yourself returning the ball in front of you, keeping the ball low at the feet of the person rushing net play. Then use the images to decide how much you want to play the game — what shots to choose, where to place them.

At home. There are days when you don't go to the field, and there are days when it's hard to find a quiet place before practice. So practice at home, at a fixed time, ten to fifteen minutes. Some people like it right before bed; Some people like it after dinner. The important thing is permanent — making it a habit, not something you remember in your free time.

And a diary

As with self-talk in chapter 8, images need to be recorded. Not to report to anyone, but because it is recorded, you can see what is moving forward and what is standing still.

Four columns are enough: what do you build today; How long is the session; Which channel is clearest? Which channel is the faintest? Add a line for what you notice — for example Today I could clearly see the swing but couldn't hear the sound of the ball, or The first time I felt afraid before

serving at 5-4.

That last line is more important than you might think. After a few weeks, it will give you something no other test can give: a map of what you avoid build. People usually have one or two situations where their images refuse to enter — and almost always, those are the situations they need the most practice on.

End of third pillar. The next chapter opens up the final pillar: the belief you have about your abilities — and why it's not what you convinced yourself to have.

CHAPTER 12

Chapter 12 — Faith in ability

Jimmy Connors, before the US Open final with Bjorn Borg, said a sentence that many people copied without understanding what mechanism it was describing: It's important to never be negative about yourself. Okay, your opponent may be very annoying, he may have beaten you last time, and you may not have played well either. But as soon as you start thinking about those things, you die. I go into every match with the belief that I will win.

Reading it for the first time, that sentence sounds like an exhortation. Read it a second time, notice the word right after . Connors doesn't say those thoughts are wrong. He says they're right, and it's because they're right that they kill you — because once you start considering them, you've moved from playing to evaluating, and from evaluating to self-preservation.

This chapter is about that state: the belief that you can. And about something most players don't know — it's not something you have or don't have. It is something that is built, and built with very specific materials.

The case of Raul Ramirez

There's a story that's even more helpful than Connors's, because it shows you how beliefs are formed how.

Raul Ramirez reached the final of the North American Davis Cup against Connors. Before the match, he didn't give himself many chances. But when reporters asked him what he thought would happen, he was forced to answer that of course he thought he would win. Then they asked why — and he began to think of reasons.

And here's where it's worth noting: The more I thought about those

reasons — especially the fact that I had Davis Cup experience and Jimmy didn't — the more I started to realize that I would actually win. By the time I stepped onto the field, I was very confident.

Ramirez did not self-hypnotize. He found out the reasons, and those reasons were real. What changed wasn't the facts about the match — it was that he spent ten minutes listing the facts in his favor instead of the unfavorable ones.

That's the whole technique, in its raw form. And it's also the reason trust can be built: you don't need to convince yourself to believe something baseless. You need to find out the existing bases that you haven't looked at yet.

Ramirez won the first set and annoyed Connors throughout the match. But the outcome is not the point of the story. The point is: his confidence was built in the time between entering the press conference room and stepping onto the field.

What is it, exactly?

People use the word "confidence" a lot and define it very little. Sports psychologists agree on a narrow definition: the belief that you can successfully perform a desired behavior. That behavior could be a serve, a pass, or defeating an opponent.

Roy Emerson describes it differently, and better. He said of John Newcombe: when Newcombe serves well, you feel confidence on the other side of the net. He doesn't worry about the ball going into the net. He's just blasting.

Then Emerson says the most important line in this chapter: The worst thing you can do on the court is ask yourself: am I going to hit this serve hard or am I going to put the ball in? You cannot think in those terms. You have to decide that you're going to hit that serve and keep hitting it.

Notice: that's the same rule in chapter 7 — Don't decide twice for the same shot — but looking at it from the perspective of belief. People who lose confidence don't miss shots because of lack of technique. They miss because they are considering two shots when they only have time for one.

And there's a deeper layer to the definition, one that most players ignore. The most important belief is not believing that you in progress are good. It is believing that you can get the necessary skills and abilities — both physical and mental spirit — to reach your potential.

Those two beliefs are very different, and the difference explains why some average players improve steadily while those with better shots stay stagnant. The first person believes in process. The second only believes in Current Status — and the status quo has its limits.

Why is it the most important variable?

Research on highly successful tennis players versus less successful tennis players shows a fairly consistent result: the most consistent difference between the two groups is confidence. The first group shows strong belief in their abilities.

That says nothing about the cause — maybe good people are confident because they're good. But there are specific reasons to believe that the opposite is also true, and each is observable on the field.

Confidence creates freedom in the shot. When you believe, you hit hard, fast, smoothly. You stay calm under pressure, so you don't hesitate, so the shot goes all the way. When you don't believe it, the shot is retracted right where it needs to be opened the most — and a retracted shot is a shot you've just ruined yourself.

Confidently return the attention. This is the reason that is rarely talked about and it is the most important. People who lack confidence are busy with a secret job: avoiding failure. That takes up space in my head. It turns

each score into a test, and you can't take a test and play tennis at the same time. Confident people don't have that hidden agenda, so their heads are free for the ball.

Confidently decide on your goals. Confident people set difficult goals and pursue them. People who lack confidence set easy goals — easy enough not to fail — and therefore never push themselves to the limit.

Confidence determines effort and perseverance. This is the most consistent finding in the field, and it has been tested directly: when people of the same ability are differentiated solely by the presence or absence of confidence, the confident group always tries harder and holds on longer on an endurance task. With equal abilities, the winner is usually the one who believes in themselves.

Confidently decide the shot at the important point. Most matches are not decided by who has more shots — but by who dares to hit the chosen shot at the right spot. It's not uncommon to see people push the ball in big spots and pray for their opponents to make a mistake. That way of playing worked to a certain extent, then it stopped. Confident people choose the right shot and hit it with power. They don't swing the racket wildly from their heels; They swing normally, follow the ball, and keep their hands relaxed.

Connors is the best example of this, and it's not something you're born with. When he was growing up, his mother — Gloria — and grandmother taught him to win big points and never back down, because that was the only way to become a champion. Connors said repeatedly that his confidence came from that support, from someone who never let him lose faith in himself. And the result was there for everyone to see: he took the line and struck out, no matter how important the play, no matter how close the score.

Numbers worth remembering

There's a study that answers this question better than any argument, and it's worth remembering because it quantifies something that everyone just talks about emotionally.

The research team watched about twenty thousand matches of male and female tennis players, from tweens to professionals, and defined "adversity" very succinctly: losing the first set in a three-set match, winning two. Then they asked: after losing the first set, how many people win the match?

Twelve percent.

Divided by gender: boys fourteen, girls eight. That means on average, losing the first set is almost like losing the match. Everyone knows that intuitively; The number just makes it sharper.

Then they repeated the study with twenty of the world's top professional tennis players.

Thirty-seven percent. And there is no difference between men and women.

Three times the average. Same subject, same rules, same pressure. So what else?

The team concluded that the answer doesn't lie in physical talent—many people outside of their twenties also have great physical talent. It lies in the fact that, when losing the first set, top players often Don't surrender because you believe you can't win. They see the situation as a challenge, and they increase their effort and determination instead of decreasing it.

And there is a detail about Borg that many players of his time recounted: when Borg lost the first two sets in a five-set match, that was when he was at his best. For most other players, losing the first two sets is a sign

to give up.

Rod Laver describes this mechanism better than anyone, and from the inside: You get into win or lose patterns, and a lot of them are resting. If you win a lot of close games, your attitude going into the next close game is: okay, I've been here before and I'll be here again. But if you start losing a lot of close games — or you take the lead in one — then the whole picture changes. The other person starts to catch up, and you start thinking: oh, oh, there it goes again.

Read that sentence again and notice: Laver isn't talking about technique. He talked about The story you brought into a close match. And that story is written by previous close matches. He also points to a specific case: Stan Smith, according to Laver, lost just enough that the people he had won against started winning against him — and that changed his entire attitude about the game.

The four-minute church

Here we need an example from outside of tennis, because it shows what a psychological limitation looks like when it is generational.

For decades, no one could run a mile in under four minutes. People run 4:03. Then 4:02. Then 4:01. No one passes. A book has been published claiming that it is physiologically impossible.

Most athletes believe that. Roger Bannister did not. He believed that under the right conditions, he could break the four-minute mark — and he did.

What's worth mentioning is what happened next: within a year, more than a dozen other runners also broke the mark. None of them worked out more or suddenly faster. What has changed is the belief that it can be done.

This mechanism is not unique to sports. People have been given a sugar pill, told it is morphine, and reported pain relief equivalent to real morphine. And in the classroom, when teachers are told a certain group of students will improve, that group improves the most — even though IQ scores are no different.

All of these examples say the same thing, and it applies directly to a tennis match: Your expectations about the outcome are part of the outcome. It's not because the universe hears you. But because expectations change effort, attention, perseverance and shot selection — and those four things are the game.

The vicious cycle runs in the opposite direction and is just as effective. Players expect failure; That expectation makes them play not to lose; That way of playing loses; results confirm negative self-image; Expectations of failure increase. They end up placing psychological limits on themselves — believing they can't beat certain people, or can't learn a certain shot.

The curve, and its two ends

Now here's the part that a cheerleading book would leave out: the relationship between confidence and performance is not a straight line. It's an inverted U—the same shape as the relationship between anxiety and performance in chapter 4.

Performance increases as confidence increases, up to an optimal point. Beyond that point, increased confidence causes performance to decrease.

That means there are two ways to fail, and the second way is rarely talked about.

Diffidence. This is a much more common problem, and it has a very easy sign: warm up well, then in the game start pushing the ball. You've seen it a hundred times — the groundstroke is deep and clean in the warm-up,

the volley is sharp and solid, the serve is powerful. Then the first score is called, and everything shrinks.

What's easy to miss: lack of confidence is often not about the game as a whole. It is attached to a specific shot, or a specific situation. Some people lose confidence when being led. Some people lose confidence when they lose serve. There are people who play well the whole match but don't believe they can finish. Some people just lack confidence in one shot — the backhand, or the ball over the head — and it only shows up under pressure.

Julie Anthony, a former professional tennis player and later a sports psychologist, talks about the mechanics of such a shot: if you have a big shot that you really believe, it tends to lift the rest of the game. She argues that one of the reasons many of the male tennis players of her time were more confident than the female tennis players was because so many of them were extremely confident when serving — and when the serve was running, the worst thing they could do was hold the serve. Most female tennis players at that time did not have that luxury.

You could argue with the gender comparison part — it's tied to a specific era of the sport. But the principle below is true for anyone: a shot you absolutely believe will change the entire course, because it gives you a place to stand when everything else falls apart. If you don't have one, building one is one of the highest-reward things you can do — and it's technical, not psychological.

Overconfidence. At first glance, this is a misnomer. You can't really be overconfident if your confidence is based on real skills and abilities. People call it "overconfidence" but it's actually misplaced confidence: believing that you are better than you are.

Bobby Riggs, after his loss to Billie Jean King, described himself more brutally and accurately than any commentator: Mainly because I'm too

confident. I overestimated myself and underestimated Billie Jean's ability to handle pressure. I let her choose the court and the ball because I thought it wouldn't make a difference, that she would beat herself. Even if she wins the first set, I'm not worried. In fact, I'm planning to put more money on me. But I miscalculated. I'm out of gas. She plays better and better. I played worse and worse.

The classic situation of misplaced confidence is when two players of different levels meet. The better guy goes in believing the game will be easy, plays haphazardly, and lets his opponent take the lead. Opponents — having gained confidence from those early games — became much more annoying. And the better person, now having lost his comfort, has to come back from a disadvantage. Even the best players have looked at their first-round opponents and then watched the rest of the tournament from the stands.

The counterweight is Chris Evert. In fifteen years, she reached at least the semi-finals in forty-four of forty-five Grand Slam tournaments. That number is almost impossible to explain by talent alone. Part of it is that she never underestimates her first-round opponent — she doesn't allow herself to get the feeling that this match will be easy.

Before building, you must know where you are

As with every skill in this book, step one is awareness. And with confidence, awareness is harder than usual because confidence isn't a state you realize — it's the foundation of everything else.

Eight questions to get started. Answer on paper, not by memory:

When does self-doubt appear? How do you recover from errors? Are you afraid of hitting certain shots? Do you really expectation play well? How do you react to adversity? Did your confidence change during the match? When are you overconfident? Do you like intense and close matches?

That last sentence is worth stopping at, because it categorizes players very quickly. Some people really like close matches. Some people say they like it but their body doesn't — and the body doesn't lie.

Then comes the inventory test, and it uses a very strange scoring method, so read carefully. For each category below, divide 100 percent by three states: what percentage of the time in the past year did you feel lack confident in it, what percentage did you feel sufficient, and what percentage did you feel too confident. The three numbers must add up to exactly 100.

How to read: add each column and divide by the number of lines you filled in. The higher the "just enough" column, the closer you are to optimal. A high "missing" or "too" column is a sign there's a problem in a specific area — and to know which area, look at each line, not the total.

This article does not give you a score. It gives you a map. And the map is what you need before you build, because confidence isn't one block — it's fifteen separate blocks, and you can be very strong in ten and very fragile in the other five. The next chapter is how to build each block.

CHAPTER 13

Chapter 13 — Build with deeds, not words

You can't decide how confident you will be. That's bad news. The good news is that you can decide to do eight things — and belief comes next.

But before entering the list, we must solve a knot that everyone encounters.

Two-headed trap

Research on confidence has a very consistent result: the strongest confidence-building factor is accomplished performance. In other words, the fact that you have done something in the past increases your belief that you will be able to do it again.

Sounds reasonable. But it creates a circle with no entry. Brian Gottfried, in his prime, said exactly the same thing: Now I'm winning because I'm confident, but the reason I'm confident is because I'm winning.

So do you need confidence to win, or do you need to win to be confident?

The answer from research: for the most part, performance creates confidence, and confidence then improves subsequent performance. The starting dimension is achievement. The circle has an entry point, and that place is work.

That sounds like bad news — because if you've lost ten matches in a row to a tough opponent, "just win and you'll be confident" is useless advice. But it's not useless, for two reasons. First, "achievement" doesn't mean "winning a tournament" — it means any act you successfully perform, even in practice. Second, you can produce results under conditions you control, even when your real opponents are not there.

Eight ways to build, ranked by strength.

One: real achievements

This is the strongest way and also the one that requires the most effort. Simple rule: nothing builds confidence like experiencing, right in practice, exactly what you want to do in game.

But there is a very common trap. You can hit great shots in practice and see them fall to pieces in play. When that happens, the explanation is usually: You don't really believe that shot yet. If you believe, you keep that belief no matter how important the game is. So the problem isn't that you're not hitting enough in practice — it's that you're not hitting enough under match-like conditions.

Specific example with serve, because it is the easiest to isolate. One hundred serves per session, both first and second serves, both sides of the court, both spin and slice. But a hundred serves in a row is not serving in a match — because in a match you serve one, then there's a range, then another, and there's a score. So step two is to deliver each point, with rest and rhythm. Step three is to deliver under specific ratios: 4-4, 30-40. 5-4, 15-40. 5-5, 30-30.

This is where most players skip the most important step. The more successful you are with that serve in a variety of conditions, the more you will trust it in battle. And "multiple conditions" doesn't mean multiple balls — it means multiple situation.

The same principle applies to everything else. If you don't believe you can finish the match, practice ending the match: set the score, serve to end, play from 5-4. If you are afraid of being led, practice from 0-3. There is no other way to achieve success in a situation than to create that situation.

Two: images

But there's one situation you can't create in the episode: your archrival.

You can't arrange to play with that person every week, and if you lose consistently, "accumulating achievements" is impossible. This is when images do what nothing else can.

You may find yourself defeating someone who has never been defeated by you. It's not about daydreaming — it's about getting your plan right, every shot, and seeing it work. You can also recreate situations that have made you miserable and see yourself handling them differently. If you get stuck on return of serve, find yourself shortening the swing back, stepping in and hitting sharp, low returns. If you tend to get passed at the net, find yourself hitting good, deep approach shots, then finishing with volley sharp and deep.

Pictures cannot replace real victory. But it gives you something that real winning also gives: the feeling that it's possible. And that feeling, as the four-minute story in the previous chapter shows, is part of the possibility.

Three: act like a confident person

This is the easiest of the eight ways, and it is despised for being too easy.

Thoughts, emotions, and behavior influence each other in all three dimensions. You don't just act the way you feel — you also feel the way you act. So acting confident is a valid way to become more confident, not an act.

And here's the part that makes it more important than you might think: a study of videotaping hundreds of matches found that in most cases, observers could tell who won and who lost just by looking at how the players walk and move between points. Don't look at the shot. Don't listen to the score. Just look at the gait.

That means your body is broadcasting a message throughout the match, and your opponent is reading it — without either of you knowing.

Chris Evert and Bjorn Borg never tell you whether they are confident or not. Their expressions, movements, and demeanor do not change whether they lead 5-1 or are led 5-1. That tells your opponent that they are in control and not worried about losing. And most players go find a negative reaction from their opponent — because it signals that the opponent has lost faith, lost desire, or lost hope, and that gives them confidence. Evert and Borg gave no such signals. They don't give their opponents anything to hold on to.

The reverse is also true, and it's the part you need to pay the most attention to. If you walk with your shoulders slumped, racket dragging, head bowed, face in pain — you're telling everyone you've quit, and that drags you down even further. Not because the opponent sees it. Because Friend sees, and your body believes what it is doing.

So four things, very specific, between the points: high head. Shoulders open. The racket head is facing up. Facial muscles drop. Not for acting. So that you have a place to stand when your insides are shaking.

Four: think confidently

This section goes back to chapters 8 and 9, so it is only necessary to talk about its own section here.

Confidence is largely about thinking that you can and will achieve your goals. If you think like that, your body is more likely to react accordingly. A tennis player who worked with the author of the original book put it succinctly: If I think I can win, I'm extremely difficult to beat.

What you need to do is replace four specific sentences — I'm so stupid, I can't believe I played so poorly, I never got better, I can't beat this person — with four other sentences. Not by saying it sounds better. By sentence

have work to do: try there, One point is not the whole match, just look at the ball, I can beat this person.

And the criteria remains the same: the sentence must be instructive, not judgmental. I can beat this person is not a directive — but it is not a judgment, and it is a premise. Sometimes you need premises first, instructions later.

Five: physical strength

This is the most overlooked way, and it's the only way you can't fake it.

To feel confident on the field, you must be in the best shape possible. This sounds obvious now, but it wasn't obvious a few decades ago — when the popular notion was that you only needed to play tennis to stay in shape. Navratilova, Evert, Lendl, Vilas are people who have proven otherwise: lifting weights, running, conditioning exercises, nutrition — it's all part of being in top shape.

And it gives you something very specific: the belief that you can stay on the field all day if necessary to win a match. It's not a vague feeling. It's a fact you know about yourself, and it's the foundation for everything else.

Jack Nicklaus said: As long as I'm prepared, I always expect to win. Another tennis player said more briefly: You cannot be confident without practice.

Notice the structure of the first sentence: not "I always expected to win". It's "as long as I'm prepared". That belief is conditional, and because it is conditional, it is trustworthy. Unconditional faith is something you cannot verify, and your body knows it.

Six: a plan of attack

Many players go into a game without a plan, then wonder why they don't feel confident. You cannot believe in something you have not yet determined what it is.

But note: the plan of attack is not a play-by-play script. It is a general idea of what you want to achieve and how. Marty Riessen, former Davis Cup player, describes it exactly like that: You always go into a match with a general idea of how your opponent can hurt you, and you try to fix a few things. You think back to the last time you played that person and try to understand what happened — did he beat you, or did you beat yourself. If he wins with better shots, you need to find a way to put more pressure on him. If you beat yourself up, you might think about just keeping the ball in play. But you have to speak at a general level, because you never know before the match how his shots will run, and how your shots will run.

The last sentence is the wisest part: the plan must be general enough to survive reality. A plan that's too detailed will fall apart in the second game, and when it breaks you lose faith — because you've just lost what you relied on.

There was an exception, and that exception was one of the game's most famous plans: Ashe against Connors in the 1975 Wimbledon final, told in chapter 5. It was so detailed that it was counterintuitive—slowing the ball down, cutting the serve wide to the right side of the two-handed backhand, which was Connors's strong point. But it worked because Ashe believed in it and did it. A detailed plan only works when you believe in it enough to not abandon it at point three.

Seven: a pre-match routine

A consistent pre-match routine reduces stress and anxiety, and brings attention to the upcoming match. Knowing exactly what will happen and when it will happen gives you confidence and leaves your head free.

Know when you eat, when you warm up, when you stretch, when you go on the field — those four milestones are enough. They don't make you play better. They eliminate a specific type of noise: uncertainty about things unrelated to tennis.

This is the subject of a later chapter, so just put it on the list here.

Eight: schedule the competition

The last way is the one few people want to hear, and it's the one you have complete control over.

There is a common belief: you should always play with people who are better than you, because better people will raise your level. There's nothing wrong with going overboard every once in a while. But only doing so has a very specific long-term consequence: if you're always on the winning side, you're constantly losing. And when you lose continuously, you are learning how to lose. Your confidence is eroded by your own competition schedule.

So schedule it so you have a real chance of success. You need to learn how to win as well as how to lose — and most amateur players only practice one or the other.

This sounds like avoiding a challenge. It's not. It's the same principle as practicing serving at 4-4, 30-40: you're creating the conditions where performance can happen, so that performance can breed belief. A schedule full of unwinnable matches is a schedule that leaves no room for achievement.

And here is the entire chapter, wrapped up

These eight ways have one thing in common, and it is the most important point: there is no way to "try to be more confident".

You cannot control your beliefs directly. You are in control of hitting a hundred serves at 30-40. You control the replay of the loss in your mind and find yourself handling it differently. You control whether or not your shoulders open between two points. It's in your control to have a general plan before stepping onto the field. You have control over choosing your opponents.

Faith is what happens after those things. It's a byproduct — and like all byproducts, the more directly you aim at it, the harder it is to get.

The next chapter turns to what faith always needs to hold on to: the goal. Because belief doesn't exist in a vacuum — it's always a belief about something. And if your goal is "winning this tournament", you have just given your trust to something that is not in your hands.

CHAPTER 14

Chapter 14 — The destination

The previous six skills are useless if you don't have a reason to use them. This chapter and the next are about that reason — and about a target-setting mistake that nearly every tennis player makes.

A professional tennis player talks about goals in a way that no textbook can write: Goals commit me to work, to time, to pain, and to whatever else is part of the price of success.

Read that list again: work, time, pain. There is no word about victory. That's because the goal isn't the reward at the end — it's what makes you endure the middle.

Keith Bell wrote a shorter sentence: Wandering around in sports without setting a goal is like shooting without aiming. You may like the bang and the jolt, but you'll have a hard time bringing the bird home.

Why is it the last chapter of the skills section?

At this point you have six skills: anxiety regulation, relaxation, attention, self-talk, imagery, beliefs. Each is something that has to be done — and each needs to be done consistently over many months before it gives something back.

That's why motivation isn't a side chapter. Without it, you'll practice for three weeks and then stop, and three weeks isn't enough for anything in this book to become a skill.

But here is one thing that most players misunderstand about motivation. People often think that motivation comes from the number of hours on the field — the more you practice, the more motivated you are, or conversely, the more you practice, the more you lose motivation because of fatigue.

Both are incorrect.

The factor that determines motivation is stronger than the number of hours is the level of success you feel. And notice the word "feel": it has nothing to do with how others see or judge you. It's how Friend views your own performance and progress. As long as you feel like you are succeeding and moving towards a meaningful destination, your chances of staying highly motivated are great.

Meaning motivation is not something you wait for to happen. It is something that is produced — by you seeing progress. And you only see progress if you have defined what progress is.

Number

Goal setting is one of the most replicated findings in psychology, and it has a memorable following.

In 99 out of 110 studies, people who set difficult, specific goals performed better than those who did not set goals, those who set easy goals, or those who were simply told to "do your best." On average, setting goals increases performance by about 16 percent.

Sixteen percent. That's the level of improvement that usually takes a season of training to achieve. And it comes from writing a sentence.

Of course, that number is an average across many areas, not a promise for your backhand. But it's enough to answer the question: is this worth doing?

Five ways it works

The target is not affected by magic. It works through five paths, and each path has a specific reason why you should write it down.

One: it shows you what's important. It's easy to forget where you're

aiming, especially when the destination is far away — college is three years away, for example. The goal is to bring everything into proportion: once you determine where you want to go, you find the surest and shortest path to take.

Two: it keeps the momentum going over the long haul. There are boring periods of training. There are persistent injuries. There is fatigue. During those periods, it's easy to give up — or worse, keep going but only run for the rest of the session. People with short-term and long-term goals see the connection between what they do today and results months later. It's the systematic mapping of steps that proves that connection — and that connection is what holds you back.

Three: it increases effort. When you set a meaningful goal, you put in more effort to achieve it. If you're ranked twenty and your goal is to get into the top ten, you'll have to try harder. There's no substitute for hard work — but goals are what give hard work direction.

Four: it directs attention. This is the path closest to what was said in chapter 6. When you have a goal, it draws attention to the correct process of creating results. If your goal is backhand consistency, then each practice session you must focus on that aspect, with specific exercises. Without a goal, you'll hit the ball and hope.

Five: it forces you to find a way. This is the most overlooked path and it is the most pragmatic. When setting goals, you are forced to answer the question: how? For example, the goal is to reduce unforced errors from twenty to ten per game. What do you do to achieve? Maybe you decide to hit more topspin to have a larger margin of error than your current flat shot. Maybe you decide to spend half an hour every day just hitting groundstrokes, trying to break the previous day's record for consecutive shots without misses.

Both are strategies. And the important thing is: you only think of strategies

when you are forced to think. A goal is something that makes you think.

Four types of goals, and an important distinction

A goal, in its most basic form, is the destination of an action. More specifically: achieving a standard of proficiency in a task, usually within a time limit.

People divide them into four types. Subjective goals: try your best, achieve your best performance. Common objective goals: win the club tournament, join the school team. Specific objective goals: twenty consecutive groundstrokes between the service line and the baseline; 15-5 record on the season.

But the most important distinction — and the subject of the rest of this chapter — is between outcome goals and achievement goals.

The outcome goal is the standard of the final result: win or lose, championship or not. A performance goal is a benchmark of improvement over your own level: increase your first serve rate from 50 to 55 percent.

And here's the bottom line, frankly: The resulting goal depends on the opponent. If your goal is to win this tournament, you can play the best match of your life and still lose to a better player — and you'll miss your goal. In contrast, performance goals have nothing to do with who is on the other side of the net. It just depends on you.

Two fantasy matches

To see why this matters, consider two games.

Battle one. You reach the quarterfinals against an opponent who is in great form and barely misses a shot. You raised your level and played one of the best matches of your life. You lost three close sets: 7-5, 6-7, 7-6.

According to the outcome goal, you just failed. And the emotional consequences are: frustration, anger. Instead of congratulating yourself for playing the best game of your life, you're forced to be sad — because you didn't achieve the only thing you call success.

Match two. You face a weaker opponent, play poorly, and win 7-5, 4-6, 6-4. According to the outcome goal, you have just succeeded. Should you feel satisfied with that performance just because you won?

Both situations are absurd, and both happen every week. That's a sign that the measuring stick is in the wrong place.

Why does everyone set the wrong target?

The answer to this question lies in an unexpected place: look at the children who are just playing.

At first, most young players adjust their expectations according to their level. Each time they succeed, they raise the goal a little to keep the challenge high. Each time they fail, they lower themselves a little to keep success within reach. It's a near-perfect self-correcting system — the target is always in the hardest spot and still gets it done.

Then they grow up. They enter more competitive environments, and it becomes harder to control their goals. Parents, coaches, teammates began to convey a message: winning trophies, being on top, winning big games — those things were more important than self-improvement and self-satisfaction.

And then the worst happened. Many tennis players begin to equate wins with success and losses with failure — not just as a result, but as a judgment about who they are. If they win, they are capable, valuable, and worthy. If they lose, they are failures and incompetent. By associating tennis performance with self-worth, they turn competition into a constant threat.

You encountered this mechanism in chapter 9, in the form of an irrational belief: My achievements on the field reflect my values as a person. This is where it is born — not in your head, but in the way an entire environment teaches you to measure yourself.

Redefining success

The solution is not to abandon outcome goals. You still want to win; Winning is still important. The solution is to change the hierarchy: winning becomes secondary to achieving your own standards.

Meaning: success is seen as exceeding your own level, not as beating others. A performance goal isn't based on wins or losses — it's based on whether you achieve a specific level of performance. And so it's completely in your hands, regardless of who's on the other side of the net.

Three benefits, and the second one is what you will feel within the first month.

You must take responsibility for your progress. You cannot use your opponents as the reason for your lack of progress. You take credit for your successes and blame for your failures — and that's a much stronger position than the victim position.

Motivation is maintained at current levels, and confidence is gradually built. This is where it differs most clearly. Outcome goals put you in a position of either being too easy or too hard, because most of the time you won't meet anyone on your level. Achievement goals are always within reach, because they are measured by yourself. And each time you pass, you get a brick of faith — the same mechanism in chapter 13.

You don't have to worry about how your opponent plays. You only control your performance. Performance goals just ask you to do your best every time you go out on the field — and that's all you can really do.

For example, so that it is no longer theoretical

In-game: increase first serve ratio from 50 to 55 percent. Reduced unnecessary errors from 10 to 5 percent. Reduced double errors from 3 to 1. Increased success rate of hitting volley from 30 to 40 percent.

In practice: twenty consecutive groundstrokes between the service line and the baseline without failure. Ten consecutive shots without failure. Ten forehands and ten volley backhands in a row without failure. Ten backhands and ten cross-court forehands in a row without failing.

Notice something about the second list: they can all be counted with one hand. Don't need anyone's help. No coach needed. No need for opponents. You can know whether you pass or fail right on the spot.

And one thing about practice sessions

A common mistake is to only set goals for the match. But most good players spend a lot more time practicing than playing — so if goals only exist in-game, most of your playing time has no goal at all.

The old adage says "practice makes perfect". The better saying is "perfect practice makes perfect" — and perfect practice needs a standard to compare against.

Exercising every day can be boring. There are times when it's hard to find a reason to start. A daily goal solves exactly that problem: it gives you something specific to accomplish, today. Without it, you go out, hit the ball for an hour, and go home having accomplished nothing — even though you've worked up a sweat.

If you remember only one sentence from this chapter, remember this one: you need to accomplish something every time you go out on the field. Not every week. Every time.

The next chapter gets technical: how to write those goals so they actually

work — and seven common writing mistakes people make.

CHAPTER 15

Chapter 15 — Write your destination correctly

The previous chapter talked about why goals work. This chapter is the harder part: writing them so they actually work. Because not every goal will work — there are ways to write that are sure to screw up.

Seven rules. Each rule is a way to avoid a specific error.

One: correctly determine your destination

Sounds obvious. But this is where many tennis players get stuck for years without knowing it.

Determining where you want to go as a tennis player sometimes requires some real soul-searching. And for young players, there is something more difficult: having to separate their goals from the goals of their parents, coaches, and other players. Their opinions should not be ignored. But the decision about what you want out of this sport has to be yours — because otherwise, you'll quit in month four, when things get tough and there's no one around to remind you.

Eleven questions to get started. Answer in paper:

What is my biggest weakness as a tennis player? Biggest strength? What aspect of tennis interests me the most? How much time am I willing to spend practicing? Am I working hard or just taking my time? Am I avoiding shots I need to practice? Am I thoroughly spirit prepared for training and competition? Am I in good shape? Do I understand the strategy part of the game? Are my shots effective? Six months from now, what kind of tennis player do I want to be? Another year?

The fifth question is the most difficult, and it is the one that sorts players the fastest. Am I working hard, or just taking my time? Those two things

look the same from the outside: same number of hours, same amount of sweat. The difference is whether there is a standard or not.

Two: difficult enough, but not impossible

This is the clearest finding in the entire literature on goal setting: the more difficult the goal, the better your performance — as long as it doesn't exceed your abilities.

Both ends of the mistake have specific consequences.

Too low. If your goal is too low, you will be satisfied with less than your ability. For example, your goal is to get on the school tennis team. You get in — and you're satisfied. But if you worked really hard, you could have entered the main formation. With the goal of just "getting on the team," you'll probably never progress enough to get on the field.

Too high. If the goal is unrealistic, you create repeated failure, and repeated failure erodes both motivation and belief. For example, you're playing number six on your school team, and your goal is to play professionally. That's not a goal; it's a lottery ticket.

And here's a phenomenon worth recognizing in yourself: people who set unrealistic goals often justify themselves with a sentence — But I know someone who did. The fact that it happens one in a thousand times seems to have no effect on their beliefs. But one in a thousand is not a plan. It is a story.

This doesn't mean you shouldn't shoot for the stars. Everyone has the right to dream of standing on Wimbledon's center court, because for some people that dream has come true. But you must separate your dreams from your current circumstances. Keep your dreams. And set goals that are hard enough for Present — goals that can move you toward that dream.

Three: short term and long term, at the same time

When asked to list their goals, most players only give long-term goals: winning the X tournament, winning a scholarship, and reaching the top ten in the province at the end of the year.

The problem is that long-term goals don't give you feedback. It only gives you one answer at the end of the year, and if the answer is no, you've spent a year without knowing where you went wrong.

Short-term goals solve just that. They tell you whether you are going fast or slow. For example, the long-term goal is the top ten provinces after one year, currently twenty-fifth. So the short term goal is to improve rankings each month. And short-term goals can be as short as daily: serve fifty shots, run three miles, practice volley thirty minutes per session, hit ten cross-court backhands in a row without missing a beat.

This gives you two things that long-term goals don't.

Feedback, and correction rights. If the goal is to be number one in the team at the end of the season and mid-season you are in number eight, perhaps you need to re-evaluate. Adjusting to the top six is more realistic — and more importantly, it's still a target. On the contrary, if you reach your goal faster than expected, you have the right to raise it. Hitting number one mid-season? Aim to win 70 percent of the remaining matches.

Visible motivation. It is difficult to feel that all the sacrifices today will lead to another three-year scholarship. But it's easy to stay motivated when you see results within the week or month. Each short-term goal achieved is one time you tell yourself that the direction is right — and that's the mechanism from the previous chapter: motivation comes from a feeling of success, not from the number of hours.

Four: specific, measurable, dated

This is the most violated rule, and it's the easiest to fix.

Four goals that people often write about: improve serve, Reduce unnecessary errors, tougher in terms of sperm spirit, Play more offensively.

All four are worth doing. And all four are useless in this form, because they don't indicate when you've achieved it. Ask each question:

What does Play more aggressively mean — net play more, hit harder, go down the line, or serve net play on both serves?

What does Improve serving mean — hit harder, place better, hit a certain first serve ratio, reduce double faults, or learn to serve two spin?

What does Stronger in sperm spirit mean — improve focus, reduce anxiety, build confidence, or spend more time preparing sperm spirit before the game?

There is no right answer to those questions. But the very fact that you can't answer shows what the target is missing.

The two examples are done right, and they're worth copying in their execution, not just their writing.

Example one. I want to increase my first serve rate from 45 to 55 percent in the next six months. Now you — or your coach — can chart your progress and record your first serve rate in every match. The goal has a number, a benchmark, and a date.

Example two. The goal is to increase the depth of the second serve. How to do: draw a line parallel to the service line, between the service line and the baseline. Each day during practice, serve fifty shots and record how many fall in the second half of the service box. Target: forty out of fifty

results within two months.

Notice that example two does something that example one doesn't: it breaks down a big goal into units so small that you can start it this afternoon. And it gives you something to do in every practice session — the same "get something done every time you go out" principle from the previous chapter.

Five: write it down, and keep it where you can see it

When starting out, people are often very excited about their goals. Then time passes, and it's easy to lose focus on what needs to be done.

So don't just write it down. Put them where you can see them: in your dressing room, on your wall. Writing it down increases the clarity of your goals, and it serves as a reference for all types of goals at the same time. More importantly: when all goals are on the same page, the relationship between them becomes clear — which is a stepping stone to which.

The best way is a notebook of goal statements. Its biggest benefit is regular feedback: a timed record shows you how fast or slow you're going, and you can review it periodically. Through this you learn to evaluate your own performance — and that's a skill that has lasting value, because it makes you less dependent on a coach or expert.

And there's a small but real effect: simply writing something down increases your commitment to it. A goal itself means nothing if you are not committed to it. A permanent record of your goals and progress is a good way to keep that commitment — because it keeps you from forgetting.

Six: find a way, not just a destination

This is the most common reason why people don't achieve their goals: they have a very clear destination and cannot determine how to get there.

The example used in the previous chapter is now complete. Goal: reduce

groundstroke errors from twenty to ten per game in two months. That's a good goal — specific, measurable, with a date. But it doesn't tell you what to do yet.

Four strategies, and you only need to pick one or two:

Spend an extra fifteen minutes each session just for groundstrokes for depth and consistency.

Hit more topspin, to have a larger error margin than the current flat shot.

Shorten the swing back, to avoid hitting too hard.

Play more cross-court, because cross-court is less likely to go out than along the sidelines.

Each of those four strategies is a different answer to the same question, and all four can be right for different people. It is important that you choose. A goal without a strategy is a wish.

Seven: don't order too much

The most common mistake when starting a goal-setting program is setting too many goals — because at first everyone gets excited and everything seems important.

Two consequences, and the second is worse. First, you cannot track the progress of each goal. Second, you split your attention by trying to do too many things at once — and as a result, none of them get done well.

It is very difficult to make significant improvements in every aspect of the game in a short period of time. A more effective way: prioritize and focus on one or two most important goals. When achieved, move on to the next one.

This sounds slow. It's faster, because a completed goal creates a brick of faith — and that faith makes the second goal easier than the first.

Goal sheet, and a card

Combine the seven rules into one page. Five parts:

Long-term goals — dreams. One sentence. Not feasible this year.

Subdivided landmarks. Mid-term goals by month. Short-term weekly and daily goals. Goals for the whole season.

Other long-term goals — because there's rarely just one.

Target date for each milestone. Date for long-term, medium-term, and short-term goals. Without a day there is no goal; there is only one intention.

Strategy. Daily exercise. In-game application. Seasonal planning. Try to identify specifically what you need to do to achieve it.

Here's the tracker, and it's more useful than a general plan because it ties goals to each specific shot:

Seven incorrect spellings

To conclude the chapter, here is a list of the errors mentioned above, compiled for you to check your version:

Set outcome goals. "Win this tournament." You have no control over it.

Set unmeasurable goals. "Play more offensively." No one knows when it will be achieved.

Order too much. Ten goals at once is no goal at all.

No reassessment. The goal was set in January and no one opened it to review.

No strategy. Know the destination but don't know the way.

No date. An open-ended goal is a desire.

Other people's goals. Your parents' goals, your coach's goals, someone you want to prove something to. This is the hardest to recognize, and it's the reason many people give up in the fourth month without understanding why.

End of skills section. Six techniques, one target system. From here, the book moves on to the hardest part of any sports psychology book: what happens on an actual match day, from the moment you open your eyes.

CHAPTER 16

Chapter 16 — Competition day

Many matches are decided before the first point — by how you prepare, or by your lack of preparation.

This is the part that most technical books skip, and it's also the part that most amateur players leave blank. People practice their shots every year, then on match day they drive to the field, change, walk in, and hope they're "in the game."

A pre-game routine serves two purposes, and both are very specific.

One: gradually narrows your attention. Before the game, your mind is full of other things — work at work, tests, unanswered calls, family matters. You can't turn it all off in one second. But you can narrow it down: from the whole day, down to the afternoon, down to the match, down to the first point. A habit is the funnel for that.

Two: eliminate uncertainty. This is a less talked about goal and it is as important as the first one.

Jack Kramer describes it more accurately than anyone. He said he wanted to do as much in advance as possible to avoid distractions; that he was a creature of habit; that it's important to sleep well the night before and eat on time — early enough to avoid bloating, but not so early that he runs out of energy if he has to play for four hours. He is very careful about equipment: the racket must be properly strung. And he had to go outside to warm up enough to feel the sun, wind and bounce.

Then he said the most important sentence: If I'm not sure about all these things in advance, I start thinking about them a little bit during the match — and that affects my concentration.

That's the mechanism, in one sentence. An unresolved uncertainty turns into a thought. And a thought in play is a spot occupied in the sixty seconds that you need for the ball.

Evert and the yard in his head

Chris Evert talks about her preparation in a way that you should read twice: I started thinking about an important match the night before. I imagine how the match will go, and that keeps me from sleeping. I have a yard in my head, and I visualize the points. I keep the points in mind as I think about the next day.

This is the pattern and also the warning. Model: she prepares visually, just like chapter 11 says — and she does it the night before, when her head is free. Warning: it causes insomnia.

Don't imitate the second part. Evert is Evert; She endured insomnia and still won. If you visualize to the point that you can't sleep, book your visualization session earlier in the day — early evening, not bedtime. Good preparation is preparation for sleep, not preparation instead of sleep.

Two-hour chess game

Allen Fox, former NCAA champion and coach at Pepperdine, tells a story that every tennis player should read before each tournament.

He is preparing to play Jon Douglas in the Pennsylvania grass court tournament. That year he beat Douglas twice on hard courts, and now they met on grass — Douglas's worst surface. Fox thought the match was over. So right before that, he sat down for a two-hour chess game.

When he went on the field, he found himself physically weak. Worse: he found himself so emotionally drained that he no longer had enough mental spirit energy to concentrate as long as was necessary to win the battle.

He lost.

His closing sentence: I went out there poorly prepared and paid the price. Bad preparation leads to bad results.

There are two lessons in it and the second is less recognized. Lesson one: he won the game in his head before it happened — the same mistake of misplaced confidence in chapter 12. Lesson two: the game of chess did not take away his legs. It took away exactly what he needed most — the ability to concentrate. Two hours of deep focus on something else is two hours spent on this task.

That's why a pre-match routine isn't just about eating and stretching. It's about protecting a limited resource.

Superstition, and why it's true

Now comes the strangest part of this chapter.

Tennis players engage in more superstitious behavior than most athletes in other sports. Do not step on the line when changing courts or between points. Wear the right "lucky" pants or shirt. Always put on the right shoe and sock first. Make sure the last warm-up serve is not broken. Always wear a watch when competing. Always choose to start on a certain side of the field, regardless of wind or sun.

Objectively, this is a misapplication of cause and effect — the very definition of superstition. How you play does not depend on whether you wear green or yellow.

But here's where it gets fair: those behaviors are functional. They calm your head and give you confidence before the game. It doesn't matter whether the action is actually related to the game or not — what matters is whether you believe it is important or not. If you believe that wearing the correct sock first will help you play better, then it probably will.

So don't try to dismiss them because they don't make sense. Know what they are doing.

And this is the best story about it. Tom Okker and Ray Moore are about to enter the semi-finals of the Paris indoor tournament. When they walked out of the locker room, they walked side by side — and fast. Halfway to the referee's chair, the pace increased with each stride, as if it were a race.

Moore recounted: Yes, it's a race. A race to see who gets his lucky seat first — though of course neither of us wants to admit it. I played well in that tournament, beating Vilas and Tanner, and both times I sat to the left of the referee. Okker also uses that side in his matches. Neither one wanted to risk breaking the routine, so we engaged in this farce: trying to get a certain spot on the field ahead of the other, when we should have been walking calmly next to each other. At the last minute, that poor Okker broke all the rules and sprinted the last few meters, so of course I had no chance. I mean, that person runs as fast as a rabbit. I was very angry.

They both knew they looked ridiculous. And they both do. That's the extent to which a structure — however absurd — carries weight with a person about to enter battle.

But don't rely on it too much

This is the part that a chapter on habits often leaves out, and it's the most important part.

There are days when you just can't do your routine. Flat tire. A family affair. A long meeting. A class doesn't let you leave early. Those things happen, and they will happen on the exact days you need the habit the most.

If you put too much into the habit, you create a hole: the day the habit is

broken, you lose that feeling of readiness — and you lose for reasons that have nothing to do with tennis.

So let's do two things. First, accept that you have to be flexible enough to play well without getting into a routine. Second — and this is specific — sometimes intentionally plays practice matches without making a habit of it. Arrived a little late. Eat at the wrong time. Start quickly. And see if you can still play. You will play, and you will know it — and that knowing is what protects you on the day your tire goes flat.

Routines should be designed to make you more confident and comfortable. Not to become a mandatory condition.

Physical part: eating

There are no absolute rules for pre-match meals. But there are general principles, and there is a memorable timeline.

Two hours before the match is the best for most players. Eating within two hours before a fight often makes it difficult for you to digest and convert food into energy in time. If you eat five hours in advance, you will have exhausted your reserves and will hardly have enough energy for a long, difficult match.

Regarding the type of food, six principles:

Avoid irritating foods — spicy foods, rough foods. Avoid foods that cause gas — onions, cabbage, apples, baked beans. Avoid fatty foods, as they slow down digestion. Keep protein to a minimum. Eat starches — cereals, bread with jam or honey — because they are the main source of energy; and meals must be light for easy digestion. Drink enough water, including juice and milk.

And there's a useful exception for those who have to fight early. If you can't get up two to three hours before the game to eat breakfast, research

shows that a meal of cereal with milk under 500 calories, taken up to 30 minutes before the game, causes no side effects. It's one of the few places where pragmatic advice and data match.

Physical part: muscle stretching

This is the part that amateur players overlook the most, and it has three clear benefits.

Reduce the risk of injury. Injury is a concern for players of all ages, and it has ended or changed the career of many talented young tennis players. Common injuries: elbow, back, stress fractures, shoulder, heel spur, knee. Proper stretching increases joint range of motion, and greater range reduces the risk of overstretching the muscle or joint.

Real performance boost. This is a benefit that few people think about. Specific example: in serve, to put the racket behind your head you have to stretch your arms back. If your muscles are tight, you don't move the racket back far enough — and your serve speed decreases. Flexibility gives you more power and farther reach. Those two things are the whole of this subject.

Release stress. This is where it connects to the rest of the book. Anxiety and stress reduce performance. Stretching reduces muscle tension, and focusing on a specific muscle group that is tense can push away anxious thoughts about the upcoming match. You have something to do with your body, and that takes the place of worry.

How to do it, briefly:

Ten to fifteen minutes before the game. Go slowly and gently, pulling until you feel a stretch (static stretch) and hold for a minimum of ten seconds; After a period of practice, hold each position for thirty seconds. Stretching is most effective when your muscles are warm, so warm up first. Repeat each movement three times. Cover the major groups: lower back, calves,

hamstrings, quads, shoulders, neck — and anywhere you know your weak spots are. Don't bounce. Exhale gently as you stretch, as exhaling promotes relaxation. And repeat the sequence after the match, to avoid pain and pull back the muscles contracted during the match.

A small but effective detail: if you practice in a team, ask a teammate to help you stretch. If someone else pulls, you can pull farther, and it turns this from an obligation into something you do together.

The funnel

Putting it all together, your pre-match routine is a funnel: from all day, down to afternoon, down to game, down to first base.

And each step in the funnel has something to do. Eat on time. Stretch your muscles. Check the device. Go out into the yard and feel the sun and wind. Then — the final step, and one that the next chapter covers in detail — sit down in a quiet place and mentally build the game.

But before we get to that part, there's one more thing that must be in place before you can build a match in your head: you have to know how you're going to play. That's the game plan, and it's the next chapter.

CHAPTER 17

Chapter 17 — Plan and ten minutes

There's something that nearly every player overlooks when preparing for a match: a specific plan for that specific opponent. And there's something that nearly every player takes for granted: ten minutes of warm-up.

These two things are closely related, because the plan is what you bring into those ten minutes — and those ten minutes are the first time you test whether the plan works today.

Building a plan: nine questions

The plan begins by listing your opponent's strengths and weaknesses — both mental spirit and physical — and then matching them to your own.

This is much easier if you've met the person before, and it usually is. Let's reconstruct the most recent match and answer nine questions:

Can you win from the back of the field? Can you win when net play? Does the opponent prefer to play cross-court or along the sideline? What obvious weaknesses does that person have? How is their Volley? At important points, where do they usually serve the ball? How do they handle the ball? Do they tend to become hesitant? Can they control their emotions?

The last two sentences are the two most overlooked, and they often decide matches at the amateur level. A hesitant person at 4-4 is someone you can wait for. A person who loses control of his emotions after a wrong call is a friend who can apply pressure at the right time.

Then look at yourself, really

This is the difficult part, and the part that most players do wrong unconsciously.

Many tennis players are not good at self-assessment. It's not uncommon for them to think they're consistent in areas where they actually aren't. And there is a specific form of this error: taking the best day as the benchmark.

If one day you hit fifteen aces and serve one 70 percent of the time, that are not means you can use that big serve as a weapon — if you normally hit about five aces and 45 percent of the time. You are building a plan on someone who is not you.

Don't fool yourself. Come up with a strategy that you know you can actually execute. Having a good plan but failing to follow through is worse than no plan at all, because it gives you the feeling of being prepared.

The bottom line of a good plan

A good plan does two things at once: Match your strengths to your opponent's weaknesses, and Protect your weaknesses from your opponent's strengths. Most people only do the first thing.

Specific example, and it is a very common situation. Your opponent beat you last time by playing steadily and attacking serve your two weaknesses.

So what to do? There are at least two things, and they hit two different places.

About your serve: reduce the power a bit on the first serve, or play more spin, to increase your entry rate. It sounds like you're weakening yourself. But it reduces the number of times you have to serve the second ball — which means it reduces the number of times they have a chance to hit

your weak shot. You are protecting the weakness by reducing the number of times it appears.

Regarding points from the back of the field: attacks their backhand and net play, remember that this person has difficulty controlling their backhand topspin. You are grafting your strengths onto their weaknesses.

Those two things have nothing to do with each other, and you need both. A half-baked plan is a plan that will collapse in the second set.

Change roles

There's a trick that few people use and it's very effective: pretend you're an opponent, preparing to fight yourself.

Sit down and think like them. Where will they aim? What will they avoid? If they watch the previous match, what will they see in you? How will they try to upset you?

You will be surprised because you know the answer quite well. And once you know, you can come up with a way to preempt it — often with just a small adjustment in position or shot selection.

Committed, but not blindly

Once you have a plan, commit to it to the best of your ability. But commitment doesn't mean hanging on to it when it clearly won't work that day.

The problem is knowing when to change. And here there are two symmetry mistakes.

If you're losing 6-2, 5-1, it's probably too late to change your strategy — you don't have enough time left for the new strategy to give anything back.

If you lose the first few points because of net play, it's probably too early to give up putting pressure on their passing.

Knowing when and how to change takes experience, and there is no formula. But there is an insurance rule: if your plan is well thought out, it will get you through most of the game. If you go out without a plan, there will definitely be trouble.

And to be fair: planning sounds like a lot of work. Most serious players find it the most enjoyable part of the game — because it's the only place where you're thought of as a coach instead of as a batsman.

Ten minutes warm up

Most tournaments limit warm-up time with opponents to about ten minutes. Many players find that too little and try to find another course to warm up more thoroughly than before. Some top players warm up about an hour before the match, shower and change before entering the court. But there are also people like Guillermo Vilas, who like to go straight from the practice field to the field, using the time on the practice field to focus and relax.

Whatever your type, those ten minutes have five functions, and knowing the five functions will help you use it better.

One: relax and find the feeling of the ball. This is the time to finish stretching and fine-tune your footwork and position. Not the time to play well. It's time for the body to know where it is.

Two: find out what's running today. This is the most overlooked function and it is the most practical.

Must accept the truth: the suggestion that helped you play well yesterday may not be effective today. The shot that felt comfortable yesterday may feel wrong today. It's not a sign that you're out of form; That's a normal thing for the body.

For example, if your flat serve isn't coming in, start hitting more spin until

you get your rhythm back. This is an adjustment in battle, made in the ten minute warm-up — not a technical change.

Three: read the conditions. If you have never played on this course, pay attention to the speed of the court, reactions to spins, slippages, space behind the baseline, background. And about the environment: wind, sun, audience position.

I have to say something here: most players barely pay attention to the wind — other than not liking it. A 15 mile per hour wind can completely change the way a game is played. And the downwind lob is a different shot than the upwind lob, not only in terms of power but also in terms of movement. If you don't read the wind in those ten minutes, you will read it with losing points.

Four: read your opponents. If you know little about them, it's time to collect: right-handed or left-handed? Topspin or cut? Does Volley have color? Move well? How to serve one and two? And importantly: get used to the speed, depth and flight of the ball they hit.

But be fair to yourself: many people try to hide the actual shot during the warm-up. And there is one more important thing — preparing oneself is a primary function; Competitor analysis is just a secondary function. Spending too much time worrying about your competitors is a disaster. You will enter the match with your head full about them and empty about yourself.

Year: enter the correct crystal state spirit. The simplest and most effective way: focus on the ball. Get familiar with its speed, spin, trajectory. This requires a great deal of self-discipline — and that discipline is what you need for consistent contact. It also takes away the worry about the result, because you can't look at the seam of the ball and worry about the score at the same time.

And at the end of those ten minutes, build confidence in your shots. One

condition: that belief must come from within you, not depending on whether your opponent plays well or poorly. If you only feel confident when your opponent starts poorly, you're borrowing confidence — and it will be reclaimed in the third game.

And the last ten minutes, before going on the field

This is the last one, and if you only choose one from this chapter, choose this one.

Find a quiet place — if possible, arrange it in advance, a room, a corner of the hallway — and set up the match in your head. This session serves three purposes, and those three purposes are three different things.

Consolidate the plan. This is the time to review your strategy and shot selection. If you intend to attack their weak backhand, find yourself attacking patiently from the back of the court, waiting for a short shot. Then when it comes, find yourself entering the backhand and ending up with sharp volley. See the points play out exactly as you want them to happen.

Feel the blow. This is the second purpose and it is different from the first purpose. I found myself hitting the groundstroke smoothly and effectively. Volley is decisive, in place, sharp. Find the rhythm in serve. Enter the return of serve shot. This builds confidence in your shots — the correct mechanics from chapter 11 — and from there you go out on the court with a positive attitude.

Pay attention to the game. This is the third purpose, and it is one that nothing else can do. When you imagine yourself competing, you automatically focus on the task at hand. You can block unrelated thoughts and focus on what needs to be done.

And here's the most practical reason: as the match approaches, most players start to worry, and some start to lose their temper spirit. It's a

block of time—usually fifteen to thirty minutes—that no one knows what to do with. Images fill that space with positive outcomes instead of with worry.

That's the last thing before you go out to warm up. Then it's ten minutes with the opponent, and then the match.

The rest of the book is about what happens in there: one person is trying to make you lose your temper, and one person is standing on the same side of the net as you.

CHAPTER 18

Chapter 18 — The person on the other side of the net

Bill Tilden, who dominated the sport nearly a century ago, said something he didn't feel the need to hide: I would rather destroy my opponent's confidence by forcing him to make mistakes spirit win outright on my own. Nothing destroys a person's confidence, disrupts his game and destroys his fighting spirit like mistakes. The more he misses, the more worried he becomes, and in the end the worse he plays.

Pancho Gonzales is even more specific: Sometimes I look across the court and see something in the other guy's eyes that makes me feel like he's worried about double-faulting. So I might cover the ball a little bit on his second serve forehand — and a lot of times, the double fault comes.

This chapter is about those things. But before we get into it, we need to clearly state our stance, because this is the most easily misread chapter in the whole book.

This is not a guide to doing those things. It is a guide to not being swayed by those things. The two are different, and the difference isn't just ethical — it's technical. There will be a paragraph at the end of the chapter explaining why.

What does Psych-out do, exactly

In the slang of this subject, people call it psych-out. And it has a very neat definition: it makes the player start to think about his shot or his game, at the very moment when he should be playing instinctively.

Key point: It doesn't matter what the player thinks about, as long as they start thinking about something.

You encountered this mechanism in chapter 6, under another name: choking. The chain of choking is: condition → physical change → attentional change → outcome. Psych-out jumps right into the third link. It doesn't make you weak. It just takes up space in your head — and that space is where the ball should be.

McEnroe and Nastase are famous for doing this to their opponents. Not by playing better, but by making opponents think about their antics and outbursts instead of about the game. And when you have to think about something else, the rhythm needed for the shot is interrupted.

Where is the boundary?

Tennis rules are very specific about physical things: net height, court length, scoring, ball size. And the laws of psychological behavior are not black and white. What one person sees as spirit bad sportsmanship, another person sees as good strategy.

Two examples to show you how blurred the boundaries are.

Example one. Your opponent's serve is unbelievably good, the ace keeps piling up, and you can't handle it. After another loud serve, you say: Man, I've never seen you serve so well.

Suddenly he had awareness of his serve — whereas before he was hitting it fluently and instinctively. He may try to hit harder to prove it. Either way, that little distraction causes him to start missing first serves, and you have your way back into the match.

Is it strategy or dirty play?

Example two. Connors, at a crucial moment in the match against someone serving, looked down at the strings and lost a lot of time before the point. His opponent stood waiting, nervous, unable to deliver because Connors wasn't looking at him and clearly wasn't ready. When Connors

finally looked up to receive serve, his opponent's rhythm was broken.

Is it smart tennis or unfair play?

I won't answer those two questions for you. But I will say one thing: you need to know the difference, and you need to choose your side consciously — because if you don't, you will choose according to the inertia of those around you.

Ten minute warm-up: where most of this happens

This is the best time to hit your opponent's head, especially if you don't know them yet. And it has four channels.

Channel one: through shots. The simplest way to annoy someone is to not let them warm up properly. You net play to practice volley — they hit the ball past you. You want some bob to warm up the top — they hit it too deep, you can't reach it. You practice groundstrokes — they hit wide so you have to stretch, or short so you have to hit every shot on the second bounce.

These tactics are certainly frustrating. And pre-match frustration is an expense you don't need.

Channel two: through impressions. This is the most dangerous channel for movement players.

Imagine warming up with someone who goes through every serve practice, groundstrokes deep and fast, and doesn't miss a single shot or volley. You might conclude that you're playing against McEnroe and give up before the game even starts.

In fact, he or she may not be able to reproduce those shots under the pressure of competition. But that doesn't matter — if it's already beaten you before the game even starts.

And here's the antidote, just one sentence: boot without information. It's a workout without consequences. Don't draw any conclusions from it — even conclusions that are favorable to you.

Channel three: through speech. Small sentences, often careless, but they create an impression for the upcoming match. Sentences you will hear:

I was so tired yesterday, but I'll try. It's really hot out here — I don't know why I'm here. My back still hurts when I stretch. Can you hit me with a few quick shots? This yard is in terrible condition. It's too noisy around here.

Read again and notice: each sentence does one of two things. It lowers your guard (they're tired, they're in pain, they don't care) or it heightens your contempt. Both work in their favor.

Channel four: through the body. Carry five rackets. Wear expensive clothes. Or vice versa: wear old, torn clothes. Deliberately not talking. Intentionally avoid eye contact.

This channel is more powerful than it seems, as research shows that 50 to 75 percent of person-to-person communication is nonverbal. It's the same on the tennis court: gestures, movements, expressions, clothes all speak. And it's more important when you don't know your competitors yet — because then you have no other data.

The man broke his pinky finger

The best story on this channel, and it's worth telling in full.

Allen Fox meets Arthur Ashe in an All Star match. He had a broken pinky finger on his tennis hand, so he knew he needed a trick if he wanted to have a chance. He looked for a psychological weapon and chose two available.

First: it was a bad day, it took a lot of motivation to play. Second: they were placed in a field with almost no spectators, further reducing

motivation.

So on the way out to the yard, Fox grumbled: Oh my God! This was supposed to be a big fight and they put us in this place. He started off with an indifferent attitude and looked like he was disgusted with the whole thing.

From all that, Ashe could only conclude one thing: Fox did not consider this match important. So of course Ashe wouldn't try if Fox didn't try.

Ashe fell behind from the start and never regained her focus. And what Ashe didn't know at the time: Fox always tries.

It was a lie told entirely by behavior, not a single word was untrue. And it's more effective than any saying.

In battle

The warm-up is over, the match begins, and a new state emerges: now it's time to find a way to win points. In most matches there is a psychological struggle that runs parallel to the technical struggle. Six common weapons.

Posture. You don't want your opponent to know how you're feeling. Walking with slumped shoulders and bowed head says you've given up or are bored — and a good player will seize that moment.

But there is another layer, and it is a layer that few people know about. Ken Rosewall, one of Australia's great champions, after several points would go as if he had almost no energy left to baseline for the next point. His posture says: this person is defeated. And anyone who believes that will usually congratulate Rosewall on a good victory afterward.

So the way to deal with it is not to read your opponent's posture. The way to deal with it is to keep your posture straight, regardless of the situation — and remember that the person with his head down may be preparing to

shoot you with everything he's got.

Slow down. This is the most counterintuitive weapon, and it is based on a little-realized truth: in most cases, The person leading is under more pressure spirit the person being led.

You win set one and have a break, leading 3-1 in set two. What you think is: I have to hold on, because I definitely don't want to go to set three. Your goal is to finish early and leave the field. And when you think like that, your playing style becomes a bit hesitant. At the same time, at this point you is expected to win — so if you win, you will gain very little, and if you lose, you will lose a lot.

If the opponent knows that, they will keep you on the field as long as possible. They walked very slowly between points and used up the 30 seconds allowed. They serve and receive the ball very slowly. They used up all the time to change fields.

Note: this is use the law, not breaking the law. And it works because it makes you spirit tired and changes the rhythm you're comfortable with.

Slow down the ball. Another way to slow down the game: slow down the shots themselves. Most players like the ball to be strong and sharp. Playing against someone who returns high, deep, off-speed balls often requires more effort and more patience — especially when you're leading and just need a few extra points.

Tracy Austin, as a teenager, was at the top of the world and often used this strategy. Many people just want the match to end and don't have the patience to wait for a ball to attack. Sometimes just a few high balls are enough to make people lose interest.

For many players, this is not tennis — this is a battle of wills. It may not be pretty. But if you put more balls through the net than your opponents, you are very difficult to beat.

Praise and no praise. Players like to be praised. They like to be told that they played well, looked good, tried hard. Basically, everyone reacts to compliments to show that they are a kind person.

So one way to make your opponent uncomfortable is to Are not acknowledge good shots — verbally or with attitude. They hit a good shot, you just keep going, walking at a normal pace, normal face, onto the next point. That said: I'm not impressed, and I'm not swayed.

And there is the opposite, more subtle extreme: too much praise, even the bad ones.

The author of the original book recounts a match where his opponent only praised him after he hit a weak shot and the opponent had an easy shot. It was clear that he did nothing special and won points mainly thanks to his opponent's weak shots. The implicit message is: the only way you're going to win points is if I trap myself.

That kind of compliment makes him angry and more determined to show off his arsenal — and that often leads to overplaying and mistakes. He said that from then on he learned to ignore condescending compliments and just focus on playing.

Call the border. Most players not only have to play the match but also have to run it. There are written and unwritten rules about calling the ball, but on-field behavior doesn't always follow. If one is not sure whether the ball is in or out, one should give the advantage to the opponent. If you clearly see your ball going out in your opponent's court, you should call it out.

Sometimes you meet people who don't. And as mentioned in chapters 6 and 7, calls can seriously disrupt your attention. Some people know that and use it.

There are other options besides blowing up. First things first: ask them if

they're sure. If they're sure, leave it there — at least they know you know what's going on. If it happens many times, ask for a line judge. And don't retaliate by calling it wrong: it's morally wrong, and it draws your attention away from the ball even more.

Arguing with your opponent is counterproductive. The best thing — though not the easiest — is to ignore it and move on. Very few games are decided by one or two calls. The better player usually wins, and if you keep your cool and play your game, you're maximizing your chances.

Distracting. Outbursts, scolding oneself, challenging calls, getting angry with the audience. McEnroe, Connors, Nastase, Gonzales — the four most famous. Most of those attacks have nothing to do with the opponent, but they are disruptive.

Some people are just upset with themselves and react emotionally, regardless of the score. Some people are more calculating and choose the time to get angry. And the best time to distract your opponent is when they are regaining control of the game, or just have a chance to make a comeback. A small interruption is sometimes enough to throw someone out of rhythm.

But there is one condition: if you create a distraction, you must make sure you don't distract yourself. McEnroe is one of the few who looks like he's playing better after the explosion. But he himself said in interviews that those angers and emotional reactions affected his performance — and in fact kept him from becoming the first American in more than twenty years to win the French Open, in 1984.

Four things in stock, and you've got all four

This is the practical part of the chapter. If you're not the type to play the psychological game, you still might not have a choice — because your opponent does.

One: self-talk, prepare in advance, target the right behavior. This is a direct application of chapters 8 and 9, but with a difference: the sentence must be written before, for each specific game.

For example, with the game of hitting the corner in the warm-up instead of keeping the ball in play. The typical reaction is anger — exactly what they want. Instead, use a prepared sentence: If she does this, she must feel inferior to me, or If I don't get the boot then neither does he.

The argument is not that the sentence is correct. The argument is that it keeps you calm and rational, so that other people's antics don't force you to play their game.

Two: focus on attention. The main goal of most games is to destroy your attention — to make you think about something other than playing well.

So the first thing is to avoid making eye contact with someone who is trying to get your attention. Look down at the ground. Adjust the racket strings while they talk and move on. And use the task signal: breathing, a cue word like relax, next, move.

If your opponent is arguing with the referee, talking to the audience, shouting — don't become a participant, and don't become a spectator either. That's a good time to think about strategy for the next two games, or about a part of the game that's not working and how to fix it.

Three: build in advance in the image. If you know your opponent is argumentative or prone to temper tantrums, create the exact scene — find yourself in the middle of a game, your opponent stops to argue about a call, and you ignore what's happening across the net, disregarding emotions, focusing only on what you need to do in the next two games.

If it's a new opponent, set up typical disruptive behaviors: arguing, scolding yourself, challenging the ball to call, talking to the audience. The principle is the same: stay calm and pay attention throughout the

disturbance.

Four: practice in bad conditions, on purpose. This is the principle from chapter 13 — practice should simulate competition conditions. If you only hit groundstrokes and volley and never practice approach balls, you will have trouble with approach balls in play. That principle applies to the psychological part: if you've always trained alone and suddenly fifty people are watching you at a tournament, it's a shock.

So most of the time practice in normal conditions, but occasionally practice in adverse conditions. Need someone to play the opponent. Six scenarios:

A practice match with people walking around right outside the field. A practice match with almost no warm-up. A practice game was stopped several times to argue about the ball being called. One in the wind and with the sun shining directly in my eyes. A match where the opponent deliberately prolongs the time and slows down the tempo. A match where the opponent constantly scolds himself.

Those six games teach you something that no amount of advice can teach you: you can still play when things aren't normal.

Why should you not use it?

Here is where I must speak frankly, and speak with pragmatic reasons first, because everyone knows the moral reasons.

Every game in this chapter has a price, and that price is paid by attention. The person running a game is also thinking about that game. The person who is watching should always get angry and is watching instead of looking at the ball. The person who is slowing down to break the opponent's rhythm is also slowing down his own rhythm — and his own rhythm is the hardest thing to regain.

That's why the people who win the most in this sport are often the people who don't need it. It's not because they are more moral. Because they have figured out the math.

And here's the moral argument, neat: don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you. Sometimes it's hard to tell what's part of the game and what's spirit bad sportsmanship — but that sentence always makes the distinction.

Within that limit, there is plenty of room for intense competition. You need to know how to use psychological strategies to your advantage, and you need to know how to counter other people's psychological games. Those two skills are both within the law.

The next chapter is about a situation where those two skills have to work at the same time, and is much more difficult: when the person standing on the other side is not your opponent, but someone standing on the same side of the net as you.

CHAPTER 19

Chapter 19 — Doubles is a communication skill

Club tournament final, 4-4 in third set. The two people on one side of the net didn't say a word to each other for twenty minutes. Not because of anger. Because they ran out of things to say, and no one wants to be the one to say the wrong thing. They lost the next eight points. In those eight scores there wasn't a single bad shot.

This chapter is about that thing that lost eight points.

Why is doubles forgotten?

Let's count a typical week for a club player over the age of forty. Tuesday men's doubles. Thursday mixed doubles. Saturday morning doubles. Single: maybe once a month, and usually when someone is sick.

This means that most of the playing hours of most players in this sport are doubles. And most of the coaching material — including most of the sources that make up this book — is about singles play.

That deviation has a reason, and that reason is wrong. Doubles looks similar singles with extra players. Same pitch, same ball, same shots. So people assume that the psychology is the same.

It's not the same, for structural reasons: unit produces variable results. In single typing, the unit is you. In doubles, the unit is the pair. And a pair has a property that an individual does not: it can fail from inside, without anyone hitting a single bad shot.

That's why this chapter exists, and why it's near the end of the book. The previous eighteen chapters assumed there was only one head on the field. Now there are four.

Four heads, two on your side

Each person enters the field with three unique things: a unique type of anxiety (chapters 3 to 5), a unique attention habit (chapters 6 and 7), a unique voice in their head (chapters 8 and 9). Four people, four sets. That's the easy part to imagine.

The harder part is coupling. The partner's status is an input to your status. If your partner is tense, you can feel it — by their gait, by the speed of their steps toward baseline, by whether they look at you after the point or not. And your response to their stress becomes an input for them.

This loop can run in both directions. It is the only part of tennis psychology where intervention is not an intervention with a person, but with a relationship.

The pragmatic consequence is simple and somewhat counterintuitive. In singles, when you stretch, you correct yourself. In doubles, when partner is tense, the quickest way to correct yourself is often to correct them first — because their tension is what's feeding yours. You can't calm down by telling yourself to calm down while there's someone shaking next to you. You calm down when the person stops shaking.

Send and receive

Communication has two halves, and players only practice half.

Send is what you said. Receive is what they hear. Between the two is the channel, and the channel is mostly non-verbal.

This is the best example in the entire literature of doubles, and it deserves to be told slowly. Your partner just missed an easy volley. You say: It's okay, try your best. At the same time, you shake your head.

Two messages. Completely opposite. And which one does the recipient believe?

Trust the head. Always trust your head. Because words are easy to fake, bodies are hard — and the recipient has spent their whole life learning to read other people's bodies, long before they learned how to hit a ball.

So the first rule of communication in doubles is not what to say. It is: Don't send two messages. If you can't send a clean message, send none.

And this is where many people misunderstand silence. Silence is not neutral. Silence is also a message, and it often reads as the worst message possible — because the recipient will fill in the blanks with their greatest fears.

Much of what is transmitted is not words

The figure in the document is about 50 to 75 percent. The exact number is not as important as the list: what actually transmits on a doubles court.

Whether or not you look at your partner after the point. The absence of look is a message, and it's loud. The player spares his partner a bad shot by looking at them; the player condemns the partner by turning away.

Step speed to baseline. Step speed means I want to get this over with, or I'm angry. Walking slowly means I'm thinking, or I'm hurt. Both are read, and both are read before you can decide what you want to transmit.

The stand is at the beginning of the following point. Standing towards the hallway means I don't believe you can hold the middle. You probably don't mean it that way. But that's what gets read.

Racket. Hold it low and loose, or hold it tightly. No one said it, but everyone saw it.

Do you say anything at break time, and how long do you wait before saying it? Saying it right away is processing. After twenty seconds it is said to be digested. Saying nothing is a judgment.

And here's the trap: you can't consciously manage these things for three sets. No one is alert enough to remember to control their gait at the seventieth point. That is, the only reliable way to send a good nonverbal message is for actually to be in a good state.

That's why the chapters on anxiety and attention are as important in doubles spirit as in singles, not less. In singles, your bad condition ruins your shot. In doubles, it ruins your shot and the head of the person next to you.

Choose a partner: complementary, not intimate

A compatible pair is usually not the same pair. It is a pair of complementary.

Classic pattern: one person returns everything, and one person likes net play to finish the point. Neither of them is complete. But put together, they cover two types of course failures: scores that never end, and scores that end too quickly.

On the contrary, two people with the same profile type will have gaps in the exact places that that profile type does not cover. If two people only know how to persevere, no one will finish. Two people only know the ending, no one can keep it.

And this is where the document says something bluntly that many players don't want to hear: you don't need to be friends. Friendship is neither necessary, nor sufficient. What you need are three other things: complementary play, a common plan, and one of you to listen to instructions.

Two types of conflict, and both are equally common.

Both want control. The exchange before each point turns into a negotiation, and the negotiation eats up the point's time budget. By the

time the ball was served, both were tired from negotiating.

No one wants to be in control. No one calls the cut, no one decides formation, and the pair defaults to what their opponent is doing.

The second type is harder to see because it looks like politeness. But it is just as expensive as the first type.

The case of harmony is the case of having one person as team leader. It doesn't matter who. The important thing is that it is decided before the match, not in the middle of the second set at 3-4.

Six rules of talking on the field

One: support, but don't give fake compliments. Recipient. And fake compliments do something worse than saying nothing: they let the recipient know that you think they need to be managed.

Two: protect your partner's confidence against your own. This is the hardest rule and the one that makes the biggest difference.

Scenario: 6-5, box ad, your partner has just missed three numbers in a row. What happens at club level, almost without exception? The person who returns the ball better begins to encroach on his partner's side of the court, or begins to take more risks, or becomes silent. The couple stopped functioning as a couple.

At the professional level, this almost does not happen. It's not because the professional is nicer. Because they've learned something club players haven't learned: The pair's confidence is a shared resource, and the fastest way to win is to spend your resources on your partner.

Specifically, in the above situation: stand in the same place you are still standing. Order the exact piece you always ordered. And if you say anything, talk about the plan, not about the failure.

Three: talk less. Talking too much is the most common mistake of responsible players. Every break turns into a briefing. But briefings are thinking, and thinking is slow, and the next point starts in forty seconds.

Rules: one idea per break. If you have three ideas, you have none.

Four: be honest about your worst shot. Not the best shot — the worst shot. Because planning depends on it. A couple who doesn't know each other often plans on the shots the other wants has, not the shots the other actually has.

Seven questions that two partners must answer to each other before their first fight:

Five: don't apologize for a mistake. Three reasons, and all three are technical reasons.

It focuses both people's attention on the right and wrong things, at the exact moment they both need to leave it. It erodes your own confidence, because you just said out loud that you are the problem. And it gives confidence to the opponent, because they hear it.

Six: short compliments, and specific compliments. Pretty is noise. That return was good — he took half a step back is information. Specific praise is also a disguised instruction, so it works twice.

Know your partner's tendencies

Predicting in doubles is not about reading your opponent. It is guessing the partner.

Your partner is the batter and net play. This means the ball will come in short and low, and the opponent will have to hit the ball up. This means you have to get closer to the net than usual, not back.

Your partner is struggling with serve double vortex. This means the return

will be deep and high. This means you have to take a step and a half back and prepare to hit from the bottom up.

In common: your footwork at the net is a betting on your partner's upcoming shot. If you don't know their trends, you don't move based on information — you move based on hope. And hope always comes late.

Improved loop

Communication is a skill, which means it improves with practice, and that means it needs to be measured.

Communication log. Six sentences, after each doubles match, written within ten minutes:

How many times have I spoken to my partner, and how many of those times have been specific ideas? Do I apologize for an error, and what is it? Do I look at my partner after each point, or are there points where I turn away? What did my partner do that I read as a sign of stress, and how did I react? Have I ever sent two contradictory messages? And the last sentence, the most important one: if my partner wrote this diary about me, what would they write?

Visualization applies to communication. Most players only practice visualizing the shot. Practice visualizing the conversation. Break time at 4-4. What will you say, in what voice, in how many words? Practice it three times before bed, and you won't say it wrong at the crucial moment — because you've already said it.

Role play. With a partner, on a practice field, set up three situations that always go wrong: double fault at 30-40, volley easy to miss, a controversial call. Say the sentences you're going to say out loud, until they get boring. Boring is the goal. Once a sentence is boring, it can no longer contain emotions.

Paradox

Doubles is where mental skills are most important, and where they are practiced the least. The reason is simple: in singles, one psychological failure costs you one point. In doubles, it causes you to lose a partner.

And one more thing needs to be said about reverse transformation. The six rules above are not a new skill set. They are the skills of chapters 8 and 9, just in different directions. Talking to yourself means talking to yourself. Communication in doubles is talking to yourself when there is another person in the room.

That means the solo player has nothing to learn here — other than where everything in this book leads: if you can't say a nice sentence to yourself in 4-4, you won't be able to say it to the person next to you either.

The next chapter is about the other side of the same skill: when your opponent's communication is something you need to interrupt, and when the person on the same side of the net as you is of the opposite sex.

CHAPTER 20

Chapter 20 — Doubles: what is left unsaid

In singles, the opponent's head is a target. In doubles, it is a system with seams. And that seam — the rope between two people — is the easiest place on the court to cut, because it's thinner than a shot and no one practices it.

The previous chapter was about keeping your side of the rope from breaking. This chapter covers the other two: cutting the string on the other side, and situations where the string is pulled taut by things unrelated to tennis.

Play on the weak — but only if it doesn't cost a percentage

The most common advice about doubles strategy is: find the weaker player and hit that person. That advice is correct. And it's also the most misapplied advice.

Because there's one shot that everyone thinks is the best way to do it, and it's often the worst shot: the forehand cross to the weak guy at the net.

Three reasons, and all three are geometric.

The net in the hallway is higher than the net in the middle of the court. You are hitting over the top of the net, letting the ball go into the narrowest part of the court. The remaining yard gives you less. And the person standing at the other side of the net has more angles to return from than any other position on the court.

That means you just hit a ball with the lowest probability of entering the court, right where your opponent has the most options.

The real rule is: hit the weak, but find a ball that does that while still maintaining percentage. Usually it's a shot through the middle of the court

— where the net is low, the court is wide, and where two people have to decide who gets the ball. The ball through the middle isn't just aimed at the weak. It is aimed at they have to talk to each other.

That's why it works, and that's the theme of this whole chapter.

Make them think

There is an effect in doubles that is absent in singles: a pair must unified before each point, even if only for one second. Who gets the middle ball? Who catches the lob? Is there a shadow cut?

When that unity is automatic, the couple plays fast. When it comes to negotiating, the couple plays slow. And a slow pair is a bad pair — not because slow is bad, but because every second of negotiating is a second of not looking at the opponent.

So the goal of the strategy pieces below is not to win points. It makes them talk.

Formation Australia. The server and the net player stand on the same side. It breaks the default that every couple has practiced thousands of times, and it forces the returner to decide all over again each time.

Formation letter I. Both stand in the middle, the mesh person bows low. It hides where the mesh is going, so it deprives opponents of what they need most: information.

Cut the ball once or twice, then stop. This is the cheapest and most effective piece. You don't need to be good at cutting the ball. You need to cut the ball once, at a point they don't expect. From then on, every time you move, they have to check you — and checking you means not looking at the ball.

One correct cut is worth ten correct cuts. Because what you buy is not the point. What you buy is suspicion, and doubts never go away after a point.

The price of exchange

It needs to be said now, because the previous chapter said the same thing in a different way: everything in this chapter costs you something.

Changing formation means you are playing in a position you are not used to, in a formation you have not practiced. Serve Australia requires a different trajectory, and the netman must read a different angle. If you change formation in 4-4 sets of three without ever practicing it, you're not attacking anyone — you're attacking yourself.

So the rule is: Change twice, don't change ten times. Change enough to make them think, not enough to make you think.

And this is where many players misunderstand the strategy in doubles. They consider formation a weapon, so they use it constantly. But formation is just a once weapon. After the first time, it's just an unusual stand that you don't practice.

Mixed doubles: strength gap

Mixed pairs have a structure that same-sex pairs do not have: there is almost always a gap in force and speed of movement, and that gap usually lies along gender lines.

That distance is not the problem. The problem is what is built on top of it.

There are three types of failures, and all three are common at club level.

The man calls everything. Not because he's domineering, but because he thinks he has to — and because the other person, in a polite reflex, lets him. The result is a pair with one brain and one walker.

The man took the middle of the field. This is the most subtle type of failure, because it is both physical and otherwise. Physically, it's correct: the person moving faster should take the middle ball. But the way it's done

sends a message — and that message is I don't believe you. A pair where the other person believes he or she cannot be believed will stop moving, and then the prophecy will come true.

The woman stopped calling. After a few points of encroachment, the natural reaction is to withdraw from decision making. The couple still wins, maybe. But it wins as one player plus one partner, and it loses exactly when the first player has a bad day.

The way to fix it is not in attitude. It's in the structure, and it's the same fix as the previous chapter: decide who calls before the game, and decide who takes the middle ball before the game, and write it down.

One more thing, and it's counterintuitive. Couples often need to talk more clearly than same-sex couples, not less — because of untransferable assumptions. Two men who grew up in the same tennis culture shared hundreds of implicit assumptions about standing and how to divide the court. A male-female pair usually does not exist. So what couples of the same sex resolve with instinct, couples of men and women must resolve with words.

That's its disadvantage. And that's also its advantage, because if you say it, you can fix it.

When having sex, it's an emotional relationship

This is where the source material stops and says there are no easy answers. I agree, and I'll be more specific about why.

A technical instruction from a tennis partner is a message about tennis. That same sentence, from someone with whom you also have ten years of history on the field, is a message about those ten years.

He took a step back — from a stranger, is the strategy. The word spouse is a comment on your entire being, at least in the way it is heard.

The problem is not in the content. It's in the voice, and the voice is already loaded.

The only method I find valid is shoulder separation. On the field, one person is the captain — and that role is decided first, spoken out, and agreed upon by both. Off the field, it is no longer effective. There's no such thing as bringing tactical decisions to dinner.

But to be honest, there's something that the literature often avoids: many couples can't do it that, and not for lack of trying. For those pairs, the solution isn't to practice more. The solution is to not play doubles together in competitive matches. It's okay to play together for fun. Winning prizes is not.

It wasn't a failure of communication. It was the right design decision.

Unwritten law

There's a question that every mixed doubles player encounters and almost no one answers out loud: how hard is the man allowed to hit the other woman?

The source document asks questions and does not provide answers. I also don't give an answer, because there is no general answer. But three things can be said about the structure of that question.

One: it is a local convention, not a rule. What is considered normal varies between clubs, regions, and levels. There are places where serving the ball to the body is normal for everyone. In some places it is a provocation.

Two: you should learn convention before violating it. This is pragmatic advice, not moral advice. A newcomer to a club who serves the ball to the other woman in her first match will spend a year correcting that impression — and often not know what she did.

Three: the test is how the opponent receives it. If they handle it as part of

the match, it is part of the match. If they treat it as an insult, then it is an insult — regardless of your intentions, because what is exchanged in a match is something both parties understand.

And one more thing, vice versa: the woman on the other side of the net also has the right to hit you hard. Any convention that only runs one way isn't a convention — it's an exemption, and good players on both sides recognize that right away.

What doubles teaches that singles does not teach

If I had to compress both of these chapters into one sentence, the sentence would be: In doubles, you don't control the outcome, you only control what you deliver.

In singles, you can win a match by playing well and lose a match by also playing well. In doubles, the second variable is a person, and that person reads you more accurately than any opponent — because they stand three meters away and look at you between each point.

That means doubles is the toughest test of this entire book. A person can pretend to be calm with himself. No one can pretend to be calm with the person standing next to them for three sets.

And that is also why doubles, although neglected, is where psychological skills are most honestly tested. You don't need to believe me. Just ask your regular partner.

There is one more thing to do before this book closes. Its title promises something that the past nineteen chapters have left unsaid: the four pillars are clear, but there's Big 3 thinking — three men who have divided most of two decades between them, in three completely different ways. The next chapter is about them.

CHAPTER 21

Chapter 21 — Three answers to the same question

Federer twenty Grand Slams. Nadal is twenty-two. Djokovic is twenty-four. But if that's all they're not worth a chapter. What's worth a chapter is this: those three people answered same question in three non-interchangeable ways, and all three ways were correct.

That question is the question of chapter 1: how to play this game when every point can be the last point, and when there is no one to help you.

Federer: the answer of frugality

If I had to find a word for how Federer solved the psychological problem, that word would be save.

It's not about saving energy, even though he's also saving energy. Which is saving decision. Federer plays matches in which there are fewer decisions to make than his opponent, and each decision is one he has made a thousand times. The forehand into the court, the short return, the unexpected net play — these are not difficult shots. These are the usual n shots used at times when difficult shots should be used.

The psychological consequences of that frugality are very specific. If each point requires only one decision, then each point requires only a small amount of attention. And if each point requires only a small amount of attention, you can play five sets without running out.

That's why his elegant appearance is not an aesthetic quality. It is index of an architecture. People look at it and say: he plays nicely. But beauty is a consequence, not a goal. The goal is to make the shot cheap.

And the way he talks about losing is the same architecture. After most big losses, Federer says something that fans read as modesty and analysts

read as technical: that it was just a tennis match. It's not that he doesn't hurt. It's that he decided, very early on, that The value of a match must not depend on the result — because if it did depend on the result, then each match was a total bet on itself, and no one could stand twenty years of betting like that.

This is a direct connection to chapter 9: it is about unlearning an irrational belief. The belief Losing means I am the loser is the number one belief in Ellis' list of seven beliefs. Federer doesn't overcome it by will. He undid it by redefining what a match measures.

Where it's broken. It needs to be said, because a chapter filled with praise is useless.

The answer of frugality has a structural weakness: it depends on the ball coming the way you predict. When the ball comes in a different way — high, spinning, to the body, slow — the economy loses its effectiveness, because every familiar shot becomes a thought-provoking shot. That's why in the early stages of Nadal's career on clay, it was a problem Federer couldn't solve: not because Nadal played better, but because Nadal took away the cheapest thing from him — a familiar ball.

And that's also how to read the 2019 Wimbledon final. At 8-7, 40-15, serve, two points to win the championship. Federer lost four straight points. It was not a psychological collapse in the usual sense. That was one time frugal architecture worked backwards: at the most crucial moment, he started thinking about consequences instead of hit, and each hit became expensive.

A system runs for twenty years and fails exactly once. That's not an accusation. That's an indication of where any system is thin.

Nadal: the answer of etiquette

If Federer makes the shot cheap, Nadal does the exact opposite: he makes the shot identical.

Look at the ritual. Two water bottles placed in exactly the same place, labels facing the same direction. Hair is slicked back behind the ears, first on this side and then on the right. Two nose touches. Then serve the ball.

People call it superstition. It is not superstition, and the difference is important — for superstition is believing that a meaningless action changes the outcome, while ritual is using a fixed action to make the internal state no longer variable.

Here's the mechanism, and it's beautiful: If the sequence of actions preceding each point is identical, then the first point of the match and the last point of the fifth set start from the same place. Not from the same emotion — emotions cannot be controlled. Which from the same location. Where are the feet, where are the hands, where is the breathing.

And when the starting positions are the same, the shots start to be the same. That's the whole technique.

The statement that Nadal repeats many times — that he plays each point as if it were decisive — is often read as a statement about effort. It is a statement about time. If every point is a decision point, then no point is a decision point, and therefore there is no future to worry about. The future is removed from the field. Only the score remains in progress.

That's why fourteen Roland Garros championships is not a physical record. It is a record of never playing a single point in the is protecting something state.

Where it's broken. The answer of the ritual has a very specific price, and that price is paid in the body and in career. Running at that intensity, with

that level of focus, for twenty years, is not free. Nadal's career has been a systematic series of injuries, and that's no coincidence — that's the operating cost of his chosen architecture.

And it has a second, less talked about consequence: he doesn't get to play a game of light. There is no save mode. Each match, including first round matches, is played with the same level of attrition. That means each tournament is one draw, and each year is fifteen draws.

For amateurs, this is the most direct lesson in this chapter: Ritual is the cheapest of the four pillars, and the only one you can copy almost entirely. You don't have Federer's forehand. You don't have Djokovic's defense. But you have two bottles of water.

Djokovic: the answer of elasticity

If Federer reduces the number of decisions and Nadal reduces the number of variables, then Djokovic does a third thing, and it's the hardest: he refuses to consider scores as information.

Take a look at the list, because this list cannot be luck. The opponent had two decisive points in his hand in the 2011 US Open semi-finals, and he won. Two points decided the 2019 Wimbledon final, and he won. Two sets down in the final of Roland Garros 2021, and he won. The odds of winning matches where he is behind in the third set are so high that they cannot be explained by a normal distribution.

The mechanism is not "not giving up". To give up or not to give up is a matter of will, and will is something that dries up. The mechanism is something else: he does not treat the score as a fact about his chances of winning.

For most players, the score is one input. Down 2-5, the shot changes — riskier, or more conservative, or both depending on the person. For Djokovic, the shot at 2-5 and the shot at 5-5 are the same shot. It's not

because he doesn't know the score. Because he has decided that the score is not information about the next shot.

That's exactly what chapter 7 calls Don't decide twice, pushed to its limits.

And there's one small detail that shows this is a technique and not a personality: the ball. Djokovic bounces the ball many times before serving. People are upset about it. But look at the function: it is How to control rhythm. Nadal controls himself with ritual; Djokovic controlled match with time. Every time he hits the ball, he decides when the point begins — and the person who has to wait is out of rhythm.

It's another form of the same thing from chapter 18, but legal and without the need for a weakened opponent.

Where it's broken. Elasticity needs something to be elastic. For Djokovic, that is usually a grandstand, an opponent who is more popular than him, or an unfavorable position. When there's no outside pressure, the mechanics sometimes don't kick in — and that's how the games he quits or gets eliminated early are confusing. It's not because he lacks skill. Because the spring has nothing to compress.

That's an observation about structure, not a criticism. But it's useful for amateur players, because it says something that few people say: Motivation in tennis often does not come from within. It comes from a posture. If you play better when you're behind, it's not a personality flaw. That's a feature of the system, and the system can be fixed by creating a battle position — like chapter 13 talked about creating your own challenges in the episode.

The three things they shared

Three different answers, but three things in common, and these three things in common are more important than the three answers.

One: all three have a ritual before the fixed point. The content is different — Nadal has two water bottles, Federer has a shoulder swing, Djokovic has the ball — but the function is identical: returning the body to a known position before the starting point.

Two: all three have taken the score out of shot selection. It's not "ignoring the score" — no one can ignore it. Which is: the shot is chosen using the same criteria at 0-0 as at 4-5. This is what chapter 17 calls The plan does not change according to points.

Three: all three have a stable explanation for why they play, and that explanation survives failure. This is the hardest, and the only one of the three that cannot be practiced in one session. It is the result of having answered that question before when it was needed.

Those three common points are the four pillars of this book, arranged: ritual belongs to pillars one and three, type of ratio belongs to pillar two, explanation belongs to pillar four.

And what you can't copy

At this point I have to say something that books of this type often avoid, because avoiding it makes the book easier to sell.

You can't copy Federer's answer, because that answer is built on hands that you don't have. You can't copy Nadal's answer, because his physical budget is something you don't have and shouldn't want to have. You can't copy Djokovic's answer, because that elasticity only makes sense if you defend like him — if you can't defend, being down 2-5 is still down 2-5.

The only thing that transferred was not the content of the three responses. It is the behavior that created them: each of those three people has built a system around his own limitations, not around a model.

Federer doesn't have the best endurance, so he builds a style of play that

makes endurance less important. Nadal doesn't have any shots that are absolute weapons on fast courts, so he builds a style of play that makes slow courts the default. Djokovic doesn't have the best finishing shot, so he builds a style of play where the point never ends.

Three people, three limits, three systems. That's something that can be transferred.

And the fourth answer

But the reader of this book is not one of those three, and this is where I must make it clear that this book does not advise you to become one of the three.

The amateur player has a set of constraints that none of the other three have. You have about six hours a week, not forty. You don't have a team. You have a job, and that job doesn't care if you lose 4-6 3-6 on Saturday.

Meaning the fourth answer is not the best answer. It is the answer The cheapest still works. And that's the whole reason this book is written the way it is written: each chapter tries to give the smallest version of a skill, not the full version.

Four pillars, amateur version, in four sentences:

Regarding anxiety: you don't need to stop worrying. You need to know what type of worry you have and have something to do when it comes (chapters 3 to 5).

Regarding attention: you don't need to pay full attention. You need to know which of the four boxes you are in, and have a verse to return to (chapters 6 and 7).

Regarding self-talk and visualization: you don't need a twenty minute program. You need ten minutes, and one sentence (chapters 8 to 11).

About confidence and goals: you don't need to believe you will win. You need a measurable goal, and something to do today (chapters 12 to 15).

The other three have twenty years and a team. You have four sentences above. It's not a sad comparison. That is the entire content of this chapter, and also the entire content of the book.

CHAPTER 22

Chapter 22 — One page

The last twenty-one chapters are a toolbox. This chapter has one thing: say what you'll bring to the field this Saturday.

It will not summarize the book. Summary is table of contents's job. It will do three other things: rearrange the four pillars in the correct order in which they appear on the field, give a page to use, and state what the book does not do.

True order

The four pillars are not equal, and this book has presented them in the order of syllabus, not the order of match. In a match, the order is reversed.

One: pay attention. This is the only pillar you can directly control, as it has a physical lever. Where do the eyes look? Where are the feet? You can't control your emotions with your will, but you can control where you look — and where you look follows the rest.

Two: tension level. It follows the attention, not before. When you focus your attention on something narrow and specific, your stress levels self-regulate — not because you decide to calm down, but because your spirit nervous system fails to sustain a panic response to a narrow, doable task with a thirty-second time limit.

Three: tell yourself. It comes after tension, because the voice in the head changes with breathing, and breathing changes with attention. This is why self-talk often doesn't work when you try to use it before while steadying your breathing. You are talking to someone who is running.

Four: confidence. It's not going anywhere. It is a byproduct of the above

three plus what you did during the week. That is why chapter 13 says: build by deeds, not by words. Confidence is not a tool you pick up. It is the temperature of the room.

Pragmatic consequence: When things are falling apart, don't work on the fourth floor. Don't try to be more confident. Look at something. That's all there is to it, and it works because it's the first floor.

Five sentences

If I had to compress the whole book into five sentences, these would be those five sentences, and each sentence is a pillar.

You don't need to stop worrying — you need to know what type of worry you have, and have something to do when it comes.

You don't need to be completely focused — you need to know which box you're in, and have a line to return to.

You don't need a spirit note — you need a sentence shorter spirit the one you're saying, and a shot to stick with.

You don't need to believe you can win — you need a measurable goal that only you control.

And you don't need to play better today — you need to sabotage yourself less for three points in a row.

One page

This is the usable part. It's not a ritual — it's a piece of paper you can copy out and stick in your racket bag. Six landmarks.

If you can only remember one row in that table, remember the third row. Three things, in the right order, between each point. That's all psychological engineering at the operational level, and the rest of the book is an explanation of why those three things work.

What this book cannot do

Four limitations, and all four need to be mentioned because people often buy this book to solve a problem that is not its problem.

It doesn't fix a bad backhand. There is no level of confidence that makes a technically incorrect shot right. If you lose because of a backhand, the problem is on the practice court, not here. This book only helps you prevent more a second layer of failure on top of the first layer of failure.

It doesn't make losing feel good. Losing still hurts. The goal is not to get rid of the pain. The goal is pain without losing three days, and pain without drawing the conclusion that you are a loser.

It doesn't work if you just read. This is the biggest limit and also the one that is violated the most. No chapter in this book creates change with information. They create change through work — and work takes six weeks, not an evening.

And it has its own trap. Reading about psychological skills creates feeling already has psychological skills. You nod at chapter 9, you feel it's right, you feel like you understand it — and that feeling of understanding replaces practice, in a very effective way. That's why many people read five books on this topic and play no different.

The way to fight that trap is not to read less. It means reading a chapter, then stopping, and doing one thing, for two weeks, before reading the next chapter.

One thing

If you do one thing right after finishing this book, choose the one that is cheapest and has the most leverage. For most players, it's one of three:

Ritual before serving. Three fixed actions, done exactly the same, every time, even in practice. It's the only tool in this book that you can copy

almost entirely from the best, and it starts working in about two weeks.

Three things between points. Exhale. Look somewhere. One sentence. This is the one that changes the most with the least effort, since most amateur players don't have any gaps between points — they go from one point to the next without a second in between.

A measurable goal, only you control. Not "play better". It's "seventy percent of first serves on the court, in Saturday's match". This is what turns every remaining chapter from idea to testable.

Choose one. Six weeks. Then choose the second one.

Last sentence

There is one thing that these twenty-two chapters say in many different ways, and I want to say it once, briefly.

Most amateur players don't lose because they don't play well enough. They lost because during three consecutive points at 4-4, someone in their head started doing very specific things: saying a sentence they didn't want to say, looking at a place they shouldn't have looked, choosing a shot they didn't choose at 0-0.

That person is not the enemy. That person is you, and they're trying to protect you from something — usually from losing face. The problem is that protection comes at the cost of the right match.

This entire book is a description of that person: when they appear, what they say, where they look, and what calms them. Not to chase them away. No one can chase it away.

Which lets you recognize them three points earlier.

That's all. You don't need to play better. You need to sabotage yourself less.

CHAPTER 23

Quick lookup table

This section is for reference, not for reading. If a term in the book comes back and you don't remember what it means, look it up here and then go back to the original chapter.

Source and scope

This book stands on three types of sources, and needs to address all three clearly.

One: classic sports psychology literature. Most of the mechanics in the book — the inverted U-curve, the personal optimal zone, the four attentional cells, the distinction between cognitive and physical anxiety, the visualization process, the vividness scale — come from the stream of sports psychology research that built up in the middle of the last century, with names like Martens, Suinn, Gallwey, Tarshis. The section on irrational beliefs is based on Albert Ellis's framework, and the section on relaxation is based on Jacobson and Benson.

Two: the player's narrative. Evert, Navratilova, Borg, Connors, Ashe, King, Gonzales, Tilden, Nicklaus, Laver — the quotes in the book are their words, not mine. I use them for a specific reason: a mechanism described in their own words by someone who has won twenty Grand Slams is more credible than a mechanism described in jargon.

Three: my part. Places where I take responsibility for myself: the arrangement of the four pillars, the order of operation in chapter 22, the chapter on the Big 3, and everywhere I say what a technique *Are not* does. This book intentionally doesn't promise much, and that's an editorial choice, not one of prudence.

Scope. This is a book about competition psychology, not technique. It

assumes you've got a shot and are looking to not ruin it under pressure. If you're looking to build your shot, this book will be useful in chapter 13 and useless in the rest.

And a note on reading. This book is written in Vietnamese for Vietnamese players, and I have intentionally kept the English terms where they are lost in translation — psych-out, choking, IZOF. Not because of lazy translation. Because a term translated into a four-word phrase is no longer usable on the field, and everything in this book must be usable on the field.

Elite Sport Psychology — Four pillars of bravery and Big 3 thinking

Pham Duc Hai

English edition. Typeset from the Tennis Knowledge Base reading page.