



Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook

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Broken Rackets, Negative Body Language Solving the Problem by Addressing the Cause

BY ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

In today's tennis circles one of the big buzz words regarding the mental game is body language. *Body language* usually refers to how the player is physically projecting him or herself. For instance, if a player exhibits slumped shoulders and is moping around the court, it is usually perceived that the player is feeling defeated and lacks competitive will. However, if the player is standing tall and appears alert and prepared, it is usually perceived that the player is mentally strong. While not an absolute, often times you can look at a player's physical cues and infer their willingness to compete.

Rafael Nadal's pre-match ritual during the coin toss is the ultimate example of positive body language. Nadal bounces around feverishly before sprinting back to the baseline, making it clear to all that he is eager to begin the match. Coaches, parents and even sport psychologists love to use it as an illustration of how today's players should act and send a message to their opponents. Although motivating to watch, I would like to suggest that it's not the outward action we should react towards, but rather the underlying attitude and emotions that are fueling Nadal's physical action. Conversely, it's not uncommon to see a junior player toss their racket and mope around the court with that hang dog look that so often precedes a downward spiral in play. While this is both unappealing and unsportsmanlike, try to imagine the anxiousness and fear that player must be experiencing to fuel these negative actions. Now make it a bit more personal: imagine it's your 12 year old child or a player you coach that is alone on the court, under the microscope, self-destructing. Possibly instead of anger at them towards the unsportsmanlike and embarrassing behavior

"you feel", your focus might shift to empathy towards your child as they individually and awkwardly try to navigate through the uncomfortable and highly charged situation.

Understanding and addressing the *underlying cause* of the broken rackets and negative body language is the key to changing the actions. Certainly, if your kid were a robot you could turn a switch and viola, their body language becomes acceptable and the racket stays in their hand. But, in reality, if this were to happen, would the fear and anxiousness be gone? Probably not. You have just affixed a bandage to the symptom not the cause. Dr. Alan Goldberg, noted sport psychologist, explains "this is precisely where most repetitive sports performance problems begin, that is when the underlying cause is ignored, and the anxieties, fears and stresses that the athlete is holding get ignored and pushed away and seemingly forgotten. But like a yellow elephant in the room, they inhibit peak performance, swell up, and overflow under another high pressure situation".

So what is the underlying cause? This is where things get complicated, and beyond the scope of this article. A few thoughts worth addressing may include: Is your child feeling intense pressure to win? Where is this coming from? Are the expectations of friends getting to them? Is the child afraid of failing? Is it that the child feels like they are being judged every time they walk on the court? By whom? Is it that they are trying to validate their worth and standing in matches? Is it that they forgot about the process and are only thinking of results? Are they holding the stress of an injury, uncertain about how it will perform if stretched out wide? Is it that they dread the post-match

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critique while bottled up in the car? Is it that the child is trying to be perfect, because that's what they think is expected? These are just some of the underlying fears and beliefs that may be behind a child throwing a racket and the use of negative body language.

While the tossed racket and poor body language are what we observe, they are not the cause of the problem, rather the symptom to a deeper underlying cause that must be addressed. In reality, the throwing of the racket is an emotional release for the child, the only way they know to vent, really no different than a good cry (only a bit tougher on the racket, fence and parents!). A young junior tennis client told me he used to punch himself in the stomach when he got into tense situations. After thorough conversations, he explained to me that he was just trying to punch his nerves away. He explained to me that it actually helped because he didn't feel his nerves, but also admitted it hurt his ribs! We discussed ways in which to accept the nerves and then release the nervous anxiety by patting his thigh.

On another occasion, I was surprised to see a top-notch high school player I worked with disgustingly throw her racket into the back fence during a match. Following the match, we discussed it. I asked her what she was feeling to display such a vent of emotions. Further, I explained that I knew her to be a competitive, diligent, and prideful tennis player. How, I asked, did she think observers of the match viewed her at the time of her racket-throwing? Did that view coincide with the qualities we both knew her to possess? I never had to tell this tremendous competitor not to throw the racket. She drew that conclusion on her own, and in my experience with her, never did throw the racket again. If it had happened again, I would have stated that throwing her racket is not acceptable or helpful to her and calmly asked "what are you going to do about

it?" This way I am placing the responsibility solely in her hands, yet giving her a choice. If it happened again, then I could have made the choice to pull her.

To gain perspective a parent and coach must recognize the context of the situation and the pressure that the player is experiencing. They can then view the situation from the player's eyes. By viewing the situation from this lens, the parent or coach will not jump to judgment and try to "fix" the action. Rather, they will be open to understanding the whole picture, seeking to understand the underlying cause. This will help the player deactivate and get to a place of calm and safety where they are not

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being judged. They may then feel safe enough to be open to talking about what attitudes, emotions and beliefs fueled the poor on court behavior, and the actions will resolve themselves from the roots.

Again, let's be clear, I am not condoning ill behavior and racket throwing. However, it is crucial that we attempt to understand what is fueling these actions and address them from the root level. Remember, from the outside, the parents, coach and even Sport Psychologist say "yea, he is acting better on the court" after a direct behavior correction. However, if the roots of the problem are not resolved, two things will happen: the emotional cause of the tension will be released a different way or the athlete will feel forced to hold the issues inside. Neither of these results will be conducive to the goal of achieving peak performance.



Rob Polishook, MA, CPC is the founder and director of Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group. As a Mental Training Coach he works with athletes and teams at the middle school, high school, national, college and professional levels. His work focuses on helping athletes and teams gain the mental edge, often the difference between winning and losing. Rob has spoken to athletes, coaches, parents both nationally at USTA, USPTA, ITA conferences and internationally conducted workshops and worked with top ranked juniors in India, Israel, Switzerland and the Czech Republic. He was awarded the 2008 USPTA - Eastern Division High School Coach of the Year award. Additionally he has published articles in national publications including USTA and USPTA publications. Rob can be contacted about his private or team consultation at 973-723-0314, rob@insidethezone.com, www.insidethezone.com.