



concentration: doing it better

We know when we lose concentration, and we can see it in others, but what can we do about avoiding it? Professor Frank Sanderson explains.

Good concentration, which implies full attention being given to the task, is necessary for success in squash. Losing players will often attribute their defeats to a lack or loss of concentration. For others, concentrating well is second nature, even to the extent of having a 'peak experience,' i.e. an apparent altered state of consciousness in which the individual can do no wrong. Golfer Tony Jacklin has spoken of periods in his career when the hole appeared to be the diameter of a dustbin with the ball being guided on tramlines.

Although how well we concentrate is partly determined by our personality, there is still much that can be done to improve concentration, first by understanding what disturbs it and second by examining what we can do to enhance it.

Concentration is often disturbed by psychological stress, which is defined as a perceived threat to the gratification of needs. The threat of losing is the fundamental stress and it frequently underlies lapses in concentration.

Good concentrators are stress tolerant, able to ignore pressures associated with poor refereeing, noisy spectators, poor court conditions, and so on. At the other extreme are those whose concentration on the task is so poor that they 'go to pieces' when the pressure is on, in some cases displaying the classic persecution complex whereby they imagine that there is a conspiracy to deny them victory.

Although all players are frequently faced with the threat of losing, this is not the only nor, arguably, the major reason causing poor concentration. Many of the problems can be traced to poor preparation before and poor application during the match.

Preparation for the match

In general terms, be well prepared: arrive early, warm up thoroughly and ensure that you and your equipment are in good condition. Get the basics right. If you are disorganised, you will of course have more excuses for losing, and you will need them, because you will lose more often. The more ill-prepared you are, the more likely you are to have other things on your mind, to play in borrowed shoes, or with a tatty old racket grip, or a racket that needs restringing. Such handicaps are avoidable distractions which make it harder for you to concentrate.

More specifically, preparation for the match also means, if possible, finding out in advance which team you are playing

and/or who is to be your opponent. This should enable you to have preliminary positive thoughts about your match and the kind of strategy you might adopt, but the twin dangers of over-confidence and defeatism must be avoided. The purpose of doing your homework is to maximise your chances of success rather than instill a high expectation of either success or failure.

This is easier said than done. If you expect an easy match, it is quite difficult to avoid complacency and lack of concentration. Conversely, preconceived notions about the invincibility of an opponent, or your dislike of a particular court, dramatically increase the likelihood of defeat. Your negative mind-set does not allow you to concentrate on what might be the best tactics in the circumstances.

Concentration in play

In matchplay focus on positive thoughts and on current objectives.

Typically, players appreciate neither how important good concentration is as a part of general match strategy, nor how much they can control it. The player's aim should be to wrap himself in a cocoon of concentration, keeping the mind free from irrelevant thought and maintaining a positive approach throughout the fluctuating fortunes of the match. This is a daunting but achievable aim for the player, providing he instils in himself, over time, a set of positive strategic and tactical principles, and providing he is able to recognise the situations which usually affect his concentration negatively.

Be positive from the outset. Use the knock-up not only to get the ball warm, but to establish your match concentration. Learn about the pace of the court and your opponent's strengths/weaknesses. If you find yourself asking for lets you are concentrating too hard!

There are dozens of situations in matches which present a natural threat to concentration. For example, playing an unforced error, having an appeal turned down, dealing with an awkward opponent, and the various reactions to winning and losing games.

Players vary in what distracts them, but many find it particularly difficult to sustain concentration after going 2/0 up or after recovering to 2/2. But forewarned should be forearmed. If, at 2/0, you think 'I've got three more games to win this match,' you're not concentrating. If you're very pleased and relieved to have clawed your way back to 2/2, the chances are

that you will not concentrate enough on what is required to win the decider.

The aim should always be to concentrate on the current objective, developing a habitual routine of switching attention to the NEXT rally and the NEXT game. Be clinical, aiming to win with as few points conceded as possible. With this strategy, you are learning to maximise your concentration in a wide variety of situations. Although top players are generally assumed to be good at concentrating, I found it informative and reassuring to observe them at the World Championships. I saw many instances of loss of concentration including players losing several points in succession following a controversial refereeing decision. This emphasises just how difficult it is to develop immunity to distractions and suggests that, although in stroke production and fitness the top players are truly exceptional, they are more like the rest of us when it comes to concentrating on the task in hand.

Danger areas

The following are some danger areas that could remove your attention from the immediate task and lead to a lapse in concentration.

1. You lose a point (you feel despondent).
2. You make a mistake (you feel despondent).
3. An opponent hits a classy winning shot (you lose confidence).
4. An opponent hits a lucky shot (you feel things are against you).
5. You hit an exciting winner (you become over-confident).
6. You've had a long, tiring rally (you seek easy points).
7. Your opponent has had a hard rally (you feel as if you have already won).
8. You have a good lead (you feel you are going to win anyway and stop focusing on key tactics).
9. You have game- or matchball (you feel you've won).
10. You've recovered to 8 points all or 2 games all (having reached your immediate goal you relax).
11. A refereeing decision goes against you (you focus on the injustice rather than the next rally).
12. Your opponent is disruptive; he blocks and barges (you focus on your opponent's tactics rather than on your tactics to avoid this problem).
13. Any situation in which you become emotional.
14. Any delaying situation such as a ball breaking or an injury.