

A strong mental game revolves around the ability to manage the “uncomfortable moment”. The student-athletes at Smith Stearns Tennis Academy have spent the last ten months learning to prepare for and embrace these moments to attain success on and off the court. The most confident individuals are those who are equipped with a mindset and skills to lean on when tension begins to mount and heart rate starts to rise.

What we’ve learned...

- **Compete WITH** - A great opponent is not an enemy, they are an ally. Greatness cannot be achieved alone. Without others around to push limits and stir competitive emotion, both training and competition carries little purpose. Seek out others who encourage you to bring your best and your ultimate potential will continue to emerge.
- **Expect a Challenge** - While thinking something will be easy might sound like a good idea on the surface, a deeper look shows that it actually sets the stage for mental weakness. There is nothing more difficult to manage than an unanticipated challenge. On the other hand, when a training session, match or situation is respected as a healthy challenge; emotions are primed to maximize motivation, resilience and a present-minded approach.
- **Choose Excitement** - When you get excited, what does it feel like? Science continues to show that anxiety and excitement are closely related, except for the way they are perceived. Anxiety is an elevated heart rate seen as a threat (cowering back on your heels); while excitement brings the same feelings, yet is perceived as an opportunity (leaning forward into your toes). One of these is clearly a better response to choose for performance. Rather than wasting valuable resources attempting to calm down and eliminate anxiety, view the feelings as excitement and spring into action.
- **Be Willing to Miss** - While playing it safe may work from time to time, it’s not the best way to maximize skills, develop talent and enhance performance. Learning to take appropriate risks is a critical and occasionally uncomfortable aspect of development. One of the best ways to surge forward with courage and stretch personal boundaries is by accepting that failure is a stepping stone to success. A willingness to miss frees up tension and lets skills emerge, especially throughout potential turning points on the court - like closing out a match.
- **Settle In** - A settled body sets the stage for enhanced physical and mental performance. Oftentimes strokes are executed poorly simply from an increase in physical tension. Tension decreases speed and lack of speed inhibits movement, spin and reaction times. While a relaxed body is clearly advantageous for physical performance, a settled body also lays the foundation for a settled and focused mind. By taking a few intentional deep breaths and exhaling fully to release tension, frustration and other negative emotions, mind and body get back in synch to provide a strong,

fluid and present-minded approach to performance.

- **Shape Up** - The eyes lead the body into action. By intentionally engaging in precise targets (landing spots, shot shapes or margin over the net), the body tends to respond accordingly. A specific, external focus provides greater power, increases precision and consumes less energy than trying to think about controlling the body or simply trying to “get it in”. The most consistent performers have trained themselves to look clearly and hit freely with this approach.

Individuals who commit to mastering these six themes on a daily basis place no limit on their potential for growth, learning and success. The easy path is typically not the most fulfilling one. Strive to create greater comfort by seeking moments of discomfort and enjoy what unfolds as a result.

For individualized, extra help on the mental game reach out to Matt Cuccaro at [matt@telos-spc.com](mailto:matt@telos-spc.com)

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