

CONCENTRATION

Concentration can be defined as the ability to focus on the relevant cues in your environment and to maintain that focus for the duration of the match. The most obvious cue is watching the ball. Other relevant cues include the movement of the racket work of your opponent, cues players give themselves before hitting the ball or focusing between points on strategy or shot selection. It is vital that concentration is maintained over the course of the match, since a single lapse in concentration could be the difference between winning and losing.

'Losing' Concentration

First, it is important to understand that concentration is not 'lost' but redirected to both internal and external distractions. Some of these typical problems are provided below:

1. Attending to past events

Many players experience the inability to forget about the previous point or game. Focusing on what happened in the past simply undermines our ability to focus on the relevant cues. This can be especially difficult if the error has led to a break of serve or a missed chance to win a set.

2. Attending to future events

Many players have attentional problems concerning attending to future events and the consequences of certain actions.

Many of these thoughts start with the words 'what if'. For example, 'What if I double-fault?', or 'What if I lose (win) this match?'. Worrying about what might happen acts purely as a distraction and can cause excess muscle tension and negative play.



3. Paralysis by analysis

The final type of attentional problem is focusing on body mechanics during a stroke. When you are learning a new stroke trying to refine your technique this is precisely what you are doing.

Until the new movement pattern becomes automatic, your performance is likely to suffer. In fact, this is the purpose of practice; focusing on improving your strokes by getting a better feel of the action.

The problem arises when this type of focus occurs during a match. For example, after missing a few first serves you might start thinking if you are throwing the ball up properly, bending your knees, lifting up too soon or snapping your wrist.

If you start to think about any (or all) of these things while hitting your serve, it is likely that you will be thinking about too many things to execute the stroke effectively, causing 'paralysis by analysis'.

Improving Concentration

To help cope effectively with these problems, several tips for improving on-court concentration are presented below:

1. Use cue words

One of the best ways to keep your mind focused on the match is through the use of cue words. These simply are words that can help trigger a particular response.

These words can have an instructional component (e.g. watch the ball, take the ball early, follow-through) or they can be more motivational or emotional (e.g. relax, positive, strong, move). The key is to keep the words simple and let them trigger the desired response.

2. Practice with distractions present

One of the ways to cope better with potential distractions in a tennis match is to practice with distractions present.

For example, crowd noise can be generated, movement by players on adjoining courts can be created and bad line calls from opponents and umpires can be incorporated into practice.

3. Play one point at a time – disregard future and past

Since attending to past and future events is one of the main problems with keeping concentration, it stands to reason that playing one point at a time is essential for proper concentration.

When Bjorn Borg was asked ‘what was the most important reason for his incredibly successful tennis career?’ he replied ‘it was my ability to play one point at a time and not worry about what just happened or what might happen. The only thing that was important was the point to be played.’