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An Athlete's Guide to Dealing with a Tough Loss 5 Steps to Handling the Disappointment

By ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

Imagine this: you're playing in front of 200 spectators, grinding it out on the hard courts under the hot sun. The first set you've won 7-5. Then in a tight second set you narrowly lose 6-7 and that was after holding two match points! You're now in the third set tie-breaker and the score is 5-6. Your opponent hits a let court which trickles over the net. You hear an echo in your head... game, set, match. It's another disappointing loss! 7-5, 6-7, 6-7. But this one hurts even more as you had two match points in the second set and opportunities to break in the third. Slowly you walk up to the net and shake your opponent's hand. Your hand feels limp and your body feels like the energy has been sucked out by a vacuum cleaner. Your legs are wobbly and your eyes are glazed over. You simply can't believe what has happened.

So what's a player to do? How can you get over this disappointment? Your parents and friends tell you it's nothing, just move on. You'll do better next time, they say. Don't you just hate that phrase?! However, still covered in sweat and feeling partially paralyzed, you hear them but can barely say anything. You feel as if you have lockjaw, unable to mutter a word. In your mind you are still replaying the points that you feel you should have won, holding on to the advantages with dear life.

So let me repeat...what's a player to do? How do you cope with the disappointment? How do you bounce back from a painful defeat? First off, lets acknowledge, it's not easy and it hurts! However, at some point, when the pain starts lessening, anywhere from a few hours to a day or so, it becomes imperative to view the match through another lens. That is, how do you begin to pick the pieces up? And what must you do next time to get better?

How will you take advantage of certain situations and continually put yourself in a position to get over the hump?

The following are five steps to help you, the broken player, experience and move past a disappointing performance. Equally so, this list is great for parents, coaches, and friends as they try to support the player during the process of disappointment, release, and rebounding.

1. A right to be disappointed: You've earned the right to be disappointed. Let's face it, after putting it all on the line, competing with all your heart, it is practically impossible to put on a smiling face and just forget things after a close loss. Give yourself some time. It's OK to be disappointed. In fact, it's even expected. Why wouldn't you? You care, you practiced, you're a warrior, and you fought like one! Disappointment is a natural emotion, it even hurts, and that's ok too. It's not something that needs to be fixed. It is time that usually heals it. Disappointment can be equated to mourning a loss. Allow yourself the time to decompress, feel your feelings, and settle down. Paradoxically, by allowing yourself the disappointment you also allow yourself the opportunity to release and resolve the painful feelings. One of the things that makes victory so sweet, and motivates us so, is knowing the feeling and experience of disappointment.

2. One step closer: Believe it or not, you are actually one step closer to your goals! The great Babe Ruth used to say every time he struck out, "I'm one step closer to hitting a home run!" Babe would learn from being up at bat, and change his strategies every time

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he stepped up to the plate. You can do the same. It took Rafael Nadal two years to gain the number one ranking. Each time he lost during this period he wondered how he could improve and do better next time. It's obvious he learned a lot after beating Federer on grass and hardcourts. Don't forget, slumps fit in here too. It may look like you're going nowhere, even backwards, but keep on plugging away and learning. Maybe the competition is getting stronger or the match-up is not as favorable. Remember the saying: it's always darkest before dawn. In other words, the sun rises after the darkest hour! Keep plugging away. That slump may be a major learning curve that just needs to be ridden out, much like a wave. And just beyond the wave is smooth sailing. Hang on...

3. Failure provides feedback: If you listen you become aware. Failures, setbacks and obstacles always throw us for a loop, but it's the true champion that can read-just and glean valuable feedback. Feedback should be viewed without judgment and as a learning opportunity in which you can make changes and adapt, adjusting to the situation next time. Think about it Was there ever a great champion, individual or team, that didn't learn from failures, setbacks and obstacles? All great champions know why they are competing and use this big "Why" to get themselves back on track. How long did fans judge Federer during his early days? They said he was all hype. Federer was simply taking

names and learning along the way. Soon enough he flourished and now has 14 Grand Slam titles. He used failure as feedback en route to his rise and now, as we watch, he has another opportunity to do the same as he tries to regain his #1 ranking.

4. Reframe it! Simply stated, after you have decompressed ask yourself the basic questions. What's another way to look at this loss or situation? How can I find something positive from it? What's the lesson here? Even though you lost, what can you learn? And don't forget, at some point; give yourself some credit for showing up and putting yourself on the line. How many others are competing with such a heart as yours?

5. Focus on the process, not the outcome. This is probably one of the most important points and the major one that all other points can probably be folded into. While you lost this performance it is another step toward your ultimate goal. The match gave you valuable experience and exposed you to the situational pressure of match play. This is highly valuable and can't be duplicated in practice. Remember, all great champions have to pay their dues and earn their experience. There was a time people were saying Nadal would be the best #2 player in the history of the game. Now people are saying this guy may win more Grand Slams than Federer.



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.