



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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Mistakes, Setbacks and Failure: The only way to win!!

BY ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

No one likes to make mistakes in practice, nobody likes to encounter setbacks and obstacles in games, and certainly no one likes to fail and lose in a tournament. It's hurtful, disappointing, frustrating, and sometimes feels like you are back to square one! But there is a secret- a secret that only the top players know. Many top juniors fail to grasp what players such as Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal, Andy Murray and others have realized and used to their advantage as they have developed into the best the game has to offer. This knowledge is that mistakes, setbacks, obstacles and failure are inevitable. Further, it is how a player learns and adapts from these difficult experiences that determines whether their potential is fulfilled.

Sure, top players are disappointed by mistakes, setbacks, obstacles and losing, in fact they hate it more than anyone. However, they also realize it is an inevitable part of their process, and don't allow disappointments to sidetrack them when striving towards their ultimate goal- continuous improvement and long term success. Think about last year's world champion Los Angeles Lakers, who had been overwhelmed in six games in the 2008 finals by the Boston Celtics. With essentially the same roster, that team spoke openly of that result as motivation to win the title in 2008, and did so in impressive fashion. Such teams learn from situations and experiences, all the time changing their strategy and exploring better techniques to improve. Success is like climbing a mountain.- there is no such thing as a straight path. The player and team has to continually adjust and navigate switchbacks, pause at certain points, and even go backwards in order to find a path which can take them higher.

I like to share an example of a player that was known as a consummate hot - head in the juniors. He began his professional career ranked #803. Year one he had 2 wins

and 3 losses. In his second year, he lost in the first round of every outdoor tournament he entered, was 0-2 in Davis Cup, did not reach the main draw in two grand slam tournaments, and ended the year with 12 wins and 14 losses. The third year he lost in the first round of 21 out of 38 ATP tournaments, and ended the year with 30 wins and 27 losses. After sharing this background, I once asked a group of juniors what they would do if they were this player. Most raised their hands and explained that they would quit and find another job. Fortunately, Roger Federer disagreed!

This brings to mind a phrase I often use: "Failure is feedback." This phrase refers to the idea that failure provides a valuable window to the athlete, in which they can use the feedback from a negative experience to make necessary adjustments and changes in their game. These changes will quickly get them back on the proper path towards their goals. However, without awareness of a player's own weaknesses, the player will continue to do the same things, make the same mistakes time after time, and spiral downward.

Another famous phrase: "Failure is breakfast for champions." This refers to the fact that in order to learn, an athlete needs to fail enough to learn better methods. They need to risk, experiment, and be curious. Of course failure will sometimes come along with such experimentation, but so will success! Think about a skier or a surfer: If they don't fall, chances are the slopes and waves are not challenging enough. In fact, skiers and surfers are always looking for the next great challenge and thrill. They are never satisfied to repeat the same run, instead looking for a steeper hill or more massive wave. James Blake had this to say in his best - selling book Breaking Back: *"My greatest professional successes occurred after I had faced my most personal challenges. I used to think this*

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was ironic; now I realize that success flows directly from having cleared those hurdles."

You don't have to like failure, in fact you can even hate it! However, you must recognize it is necessary for success. It's important to notice your emotions and feelings. You deserve to be disappointed and even angry after a setback, however, this does not have to be a permanent state. Rather, by utilizing a heightened awareness of what happened, you can begin to work through the things that may have gone wrong. You may have played poorly today, but that doesn't mean you will play poorly every day. Your future results are not set in stone. If you lost, you are not a loser, but simply lost today; tomorrow is another day with another opponent. Additionally, it's vital to understand that your main opponent is yourself, and that the competition is there to help you gauge your progress and improve. Lastly, understanding that you are a work in progress and not a fixed entity opens the door for improvement, change, and different results.

The most important thing when dealing with failure is to process through it and move forward. Take the learning and move on. Remember, in the Chinese language, "crisis" means both disaster and opportunity. In other

words, with every disaster comes an opportunity for change and improvement. Another expression I often use is "The sun always rises after the darkest hour. In other words, when a situation seems dark and bleak, usually right around the corner is the break that you need to change things around.

The key point here is that winning is a process that is littered with setbacks, mistakes, obstacles and failures. If processed correctly, an athlete will recognize these setbacks for what they are, as temporary, learn from them, and ultimately move forward towards their goal. Albert Einstein says the definition of insanity is doing the same thing time after time, yet expecting different results! They say Einstein failed 8,000 times before he created the light bulb. Abraham Lincoln didn't win an election until the presidential race! These great American heroes certainly used mistakes, setbacks and failure as feedback. How will you? The next time you lose, ask yourself: What can I learn from this? How can I use this experience to make an adjustment in strategy or technique to reach my ultimate goal? Remember, behind every crisis lies a far more valuable opportunity.



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**, **www.insidethezone.com**.