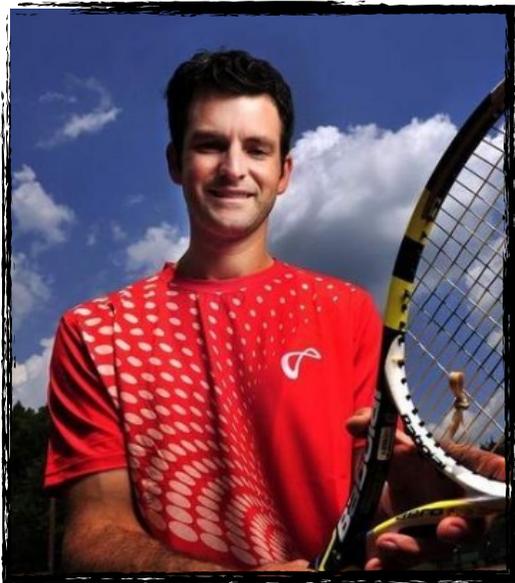


Mental Toughness Blog

When one fails to prepare, they are preparing to fail. In order to be the best athlete possible, you must have the belief in yourself that nothing will stand in the way of your dreams and aspirations. Obviously being healthy physically is a vital part of the process, but being mentally sharp is perhaps even more crucial. To truly Define your DNA, an athlete must work at their mental game just as much as their physical.



To gain insight on the topic of mental toughness, the team at Athletic DNA thought it would be beneficial to present this knowledge from both a coach's and player's' perspective. And who better to do so then Belmont University's, Coach Jim Madrigal, and American tennis professional Brian Baker.

Upon finishing a long illustrious career as a tennis professional, Madrigal has bolstered his reputation even more as a coach. For 16 years, Coach Madrigal has made a dramatic impact on the lives of many young tennis players at the infamous Belmont University. One of those lives is Brian Baker.

Baker, a Nashville native, has seen action at every level and is widely respected in the sport of tennis.

Both of these individuals have a unique story to tell, and their experience as both a player and college coach gives us an incredible opportunity to get their personal take on gaining the mental edge.

How do you mentally prepare before a match?

BB: “Everyone has a slightly different routine to best prepare them mentally for a match. The main goal is to put your mind in a position to compete well from the first point and to handle early nerves effectively. I think a big key to getting ready for a match is to avoid feeling rushed or unprepared (whether that's equipment, hydration, or physical warm up). I like to always make sure my rackets and drink mixes are ready to go well before my match and that I finish my warm up with at least 5-10 minutes to spare before I walk on the court.

In those last few minutes (when I'm basically ready to go) I like to get in what I call "match mode". I want to start thinking about my gameplan and also prepare myself for some adversity. There is rarely a match that does not include some form of adversity.”

JM: I always advise athletes to find a quiet place and listen to music/jog/stretch while they think of how they're going to play, how they're going to compete, and how they're going to give themselves the best chance for a win. Starting well is important so make sure that you've got a little fire in your belly/energy prior to entering the court.

How far in advance should an athlete start to mentally prepare for a match?

JM: Some preparation may occur 1-2 days before your match (depending on schedule, knowledge of opponent, etc.). Certainly any dietary preparation will occur even several days before your match. Feeling prepared

mentally gives me the comfort that I need to feel focused and determined prior to the start of the match.

Brian, how far in advance do you typically take to prepare?

BB: I think it is great to start mentally preparing for a match the day ahead of time (it makes it harder if you don't know your opponent yet). Now the goal is not to start stressing about every detail of the match, but it is helpful to put together a general game

plan of how you would like the match to unfold tactically. Another benefit of mentally preparing ahead of time is that it makes you focus a little better on your physical preparation. Preparing early makes it easier for me to focus on hydrating well and not being on my feet all day. Just being

on your feet for hours at a time can take away a ton of energy for the next day. I always feel, it's important to stay relaxed and not think about tennis all the time.”

If things aren't going your way on the court, how do you advise regaining focus?

JM: “When I see guys/girls aren't playing well, timing is off, feeling sluggish, etc., I tell them of 1 helpful thing...."Go to the details". The details are all of the fundamental aspects of anyone's game. They are the foundation of solid play. Move your feet, bend your knees, watch the ball, breathe, focus, etc. "going to the details" gives you the best chance of putting the train back on track.”

“ The details are all of the fundamental aspects of anyone's game.”

- Jim Madrigal

Brian, what are some tips you have learned over the course of your career?

BB: “Let's face it, we rarely play as well as we want to during a tournament. There are just some matches where nothing seems to be working or feeling good. In these kinds of moments, I remind myself to try to stay positive and focus hard on the basic details Coach Madrigal talked about. I remind myself, that a tennis match is a best of 3 set match. And although it is nice to get off to a great start and win the first set, the goal is to win the match, not just the first set. Too many juniors believe the match is over after losing a tough first set or a set when they aren't playing well. Momentum changes quickly in a match and if you have the right attitude, you can give yourself the best chance to grab it.”

“You can't always control what your opponent says or does, but you can control how it affects you.”

-Brian Baker

When playing with the lead, what are some ways to ensure you don't get too comfortable?

JM: When our team gets a lead whether it's an early break, 2 breaks, or even serving for the set/match, the thought is "put your thumb on top of his/her head and press down". Ultimately, to me, it means that I want to continue to apply steady pressure. Letting up or "playing not to lose" is exactly the reason why many people lose. You have a choice in these moments. Play not to lose or play determined to win. I choose the latter.

BB: When I play with a lead, I try to focus on the things that have given me the lead. I also try not to focus too much on the score and play every point like I need to win it. It can be

a bit easy to lose a little bit of focus if you are cruising, but have the competitiveness to finish your opponent at every chance you get. Sometimes a brief lack of focus can change the momentum and then you can be tight trying to close a match out.

If you notice an opponent's antics or energy is distracting, what are some ways to stay focused on your own game?

JM: Instead of initially blocking it out, I focus on determining whether his/her behavior is affecting their play. If so, I would use whatever strategy that would most likely

keep them irritated and play as many points/games quickly (faster pace of play) while they're in that state of mind. If their play is not affected by their behavior, simply buckle down and focus on the tasks at hand.

BB: “I think it's a good idea to periodically glance at your opponent in between points to get an idea on their current feelings or mood. Sometimes it can give you confidence to see an opponent struggling either mentally or physically. However, if an opponent is being loud or distracting, you have to be able to stay tough and block it out. You can't always control what your opponent says or does, but you can control how it affects you. Just focus on your game and definitely don't show your opponent negativity even if you are a bit distracted. Sometimes it's part of their game and they want to see if it works. If you have no negative reaction to it, the distracting behavior will most likely stop.”

What is your best advice for a junior working on developing their mental game? Are there things you can do in practice?

JM: - set mental goals as well as practice goals..
(Ex. Practice goal-I'm going to focus on my footwork today in practice. I'm going to focus on every detail of positioning...
Ex. Mental goal- I'm going to miss some shots. Maybe because I'm primarily focused on my footwork and preparation. Regardless, I will remain focused (and not become distracted) so that I can maximize my focus on my positioning today.

BB: “I think the best way for a junior to develop a stronger mental game is to treat practice similarly to matches. One will never be able to reproduce the same amount of nerves in practice as a match, but if practice is competitive, one can get some of the same match like feelings. The more times one deals with pressure or nerves, the better he will handle it. Another way to improve mentally (I've already mentioned it) is to make it a point to just focus on things that one can control. One can't control the weather, bad line calls, playing well, etc., but one can control how he competes and responds to adversity. Tennis is hard enough as it is. Don't make it even more difficult. If something is out of your control (even if it's frustrating), try not to spend too much energy worrying about it.”