

A Zen Coaching Philosophy for Tennis: Play-to-Play

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I have observed that performance is enhanced when players enter a particular frame of mind called “Play-to-Play,” instead of the more typical “Play-to-Win” disposition. Playing-to-play is a counterpunch strategy in which the player doesn’t go for winners, though points may be systematically constructed. The top player in the world, Rafael Nadal exemplifies this philosophy beautifully. Players at all levels will hit the ball better in this psychological state. Errors are reduced and more importantly hidden potentials open up. In the case of Nadal, one such potentiality, previously unseen, is the extraordinary spin he has developed to contain the play while exhausting opponents. The “play-to-play” approach is the key to maintaining a psychological edge. To harness the collective force of these hidden potentials players may think of the objective as “introducing opponents to the Abyss.” In this vast space of nothingness, all potentialities remain possible whereas when you “play-to-win” only one outcome is acceptable. With a “play-to-play” strategy you become the battering ram upon which your opponents will eventually psychologically defeat themselves (all other factors like technical merit and conditioning being equal).

The oxymoronic aspect of the “play-to-play” approach is fundamental to the formula for ongoing development because it stops the mind in its tracks. The proper use of the mind during match play is one in which the mind serves primarily as a feedback mechanism. Players perform better from a “feeling space,” commonly referred to as the “zone.” With the mind only making adjustments as an after-thought, the brain and body function with greater synergy. In Zen Buddhism the practice of emptying the mind incorporates an excellent tool, the cognitive device known as a koan. For example, “what is the sound of one hand clapping?” The question short-circuits the machinery of an incessant mind. In the same manner the seemingly paradoxical construct of “play-to-play” enables the mind to diffuse into the field and harness the possibilities there. That process of “emptying out” may also render one as seemingly unbeatable to an otherwise equal opponent, as Nadal at times appears to be.