



UNDER PRESSURE

Every competitor feels the heat in match situations. The challenge is to channel the pressure into a match-winning performance. **By Dieter Wilhelm**

You are moving and hitting the ball well in your practice matches. The challenge is to transfer this skill into your matches when it really counts. It sounds easy enough, but unfortunately, as both Anastasia Myskina and Elena Dementieva experienced during the French Open final, our minds don't always cooperate. Feeling nervous about an important match is natural - but when you get so nervous that you find yourself crying in the locker-room, as Myskina did before the match, you will find it difficult to focus on the match at hand.

Match Pressure and Arousal

Match pressure can often turn into anxiety (a *negative emotional state*) especially in important matches. This pressure is entirely natural but can result in a lack of emotional control, which can be experienced before, during or even after playing a match. Myskina, for example, experienced loss of emotional control when she was crying before the match. After the match she experienced uncontrollable body shaking for more than an hour.

Dementieva best summed up the effects of a negative emotional state. "I was maybe too excited on the court," she said. "My concentration wasn't there. I couldn't even clearly see the ball."

Dementieva's experiences are all symptoms of what is termed *over-arousal*. Arousal is a blend of physiological and psychological activity in a person and its effects can vary from a very deep sleep to intense excitement. Highly aroused



individuals are mentally and physically activated and the relative importance of a match as perceived by the competitor can raise arousal levels to a point where the athlete may become over-aroused.

Over-arousal affects concentration levels and the ability to focus. This was clearly the case with both players. Dementieva said she couldn't handle the pressure because: "I was waiting for this moment all my life."

It is the way we deal with over-arousal that becomes critical to performance. Professional tennis players are generally good at maintaining match pressure. Factors that can assist in reducing the

pressure include self confidence and/or developing good arousal control mechanisms, such as breathing techniques.

Australian physiotherapist Deb Leneghan gave Myskina a pre-match lesson in effective breathing techniques, which assisted her in controlling her emotions better than Dementieva. It may have been the difference in Myskina's 6-1, 6-2 victory over her compatriot.

The Benefit of Experience

Every player feels negative pressure at times and every player has a certain disposition (physiological trait) in handling it. The art of performing under





Myskina's first Grand Slam title was ultimately a victory over nerves.

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The conscious mind can only concentrate on one thing at a time and is consequently used when instructions are followed (such as racquet back early, step, swing forward and follow through). As a player improves, confidence increases and these skills become integrated into the subconscious. This allows us to focus our attention on other matters, such as moving the ball effectively, whilst playing matches.

Dr. Debbie Crews, a US Sport Psychologist, has undertaken extensive research on mental training and testing in sports - in particular on athletes who choke under pressure. Her research shows that when an athlete needs to perform a highly-skilled action, it must be the subconscious mode that does it. This is why players are often told by their coaches to "stop thinking about it and just let it flow."

There are no short cuts in the art of playing matches. Tennis players have to work on handling pressure continuously.

In Dementieva's case this would have been very difficult to achieve, especially after her eighth double fault when she said to herself: "I hate my serve." A statement like that during a match would make it difficult for the Russian to let her serve flow.

Game Plan

Appropriate game planning can assist a competitor in overcoming match pressure and helps a player to concentrate on the task at hand. Keeping your mind focused on the game plan will help keep doubts and distractions at bay.

Sometimes match pressure will show itself only in a breakdown of concentration. With the right game plan, a slight un-focusing of the mind is allowed.

Establishing a pre match routine is another valuable tool that competition tennis players should possess. Myskina's Grand Slam inexperience was

demonstrated by not including breathing control as part of her pre-match routine - however her match experience was a valuable tool as she attacked Dementieva's weaker backhand.

Personal Attitudes

Our own personal attitudes will largely influence our performances. Lack of confidence and negative attitudes can be severe hindrances. Dementieva's lack of self-belief and negative attitude towards her own serve were highlighted after the match when she reiterated: "i don't know how to serve."

This attitude may have cost Dementieva the match before she even stepped onto the court. The importance she placed on the performance ("I have been waiting for this moment all of my life") combined with her personal attitude towards her own serve, added so much pressure to her notoriously unreliable serve that it had to implode.

Overcoming Pressure

Regular practice under match conditions will not only improve your ability, but as your match results improve, you will also gain more confidence in yourself. The ability to withstand the pressure of competition will then enable you to perform better in matches. When you get into a tight situation, you will be able to maintain your self-confidence and go for the shot that the situation demands. In Myskina's words: "If you can control yourself, it is much easier to play important matches."

One day, all your competitors will say: "Wow, look at that, not a nerve in his/her body!"

Here are some steps that may assist you in overcoming pressure:

- Have a game plan.
- Develop a pre match routine.
- Prepare adequately.
- Replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts.
- Keep your mind on the present.
- Concentrate on your strength and exploit you competitor's weaknesses.
- Play one shot at a time and give it a 110%.
- When you start to feel tension, slow down and take some slow deep breaths.

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pressure is something most tennis players must learn and develop.

The goal is to cope with pressure in a way that allows your true playing potential to unfold. Effective techniques for this purpose can be learnt. However, there are no short cuts in the art of playing matches. Tennis players have to work on handling pressure continuously.

Lack of experience is often one of the key contributors to match pressure, as Dementieva surmised after her loss: "Now I know what is takes to be in the final of a Grand Slam, how hard it is. I understand right now that I need to be stronger mentally if I want to win this kind of thing."

For some players there is no substitute for match experience. John McEnroe famously stated that he hardly ever practiced but "just play(ed) a lot of matches."

All of us have experienced players who look great in the hit up yet fall apart time after time in match situations. Match experience builds vital ingredients that are required in becoming a successful player.

Technique alone is not the answer. In fact, technique should only be considered effective if a planned shot can be executed under pressure and on demand.

The Role of the Mind

At the professional level, almost all skills are executed using the *sub-conscious* mind whereas learning skills (such as hitting a forehand) are developed using the *conscious* mind.