

Wild Card

**Mastering the Mental Game
in Tennis, in Sport, and in Life**

Learn mental strategies
from a top professional player



Laura Siegemund
Prof. Dr. Stefan Brunner

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FOREWORD

I have every reason to be grateful for my handball career. So much went according to plan: World Champion in 2007. That same year, I won the Champions League with THW Kiel—German Champion several times in a row. Yet in 2009, the break happened anyway: Heiner Brand did not nominate me for the 2010 European Championships. Ouch!

Getting psychological advice wasn't really a thing in men's handball. We're the toughest; we have no weaknesses. As a team, we go through thick and thin. But during this disappointing phase, I chose to see Jürgen Boss, a performance coach.

At the start of our first conversation, I was surprised when he repeatedly posed the same question: "What does it feel like when you're in good form? When you're on fire?" He wasn't satisfied with my answers until I nearly burst and jumped out of my seat and planted myself in front of him in typical handball defensive posture. My muscles were taut; my gaze was focused. "This is what it's like when I feel good!" He didn't have to ask again; I could suddenly feel it myself. That was it, precisely that feeling had been missing in recent months. The break was followed by a click.

After that I called him before every game. Sometimes we spoke for only three minutes. He asked simple questions and my answers tended to be the solution. Being able to find the solution yourself is the best way. We have to keep focusing on ourselves, take charge, make our own decisions. After all, it was *me* who decided to consult a coach, or to transfer to Nantes after ten years at the world-class club Kiel, or end my career at age thirty-four, even though I could have undoubtedly played longer.

And then there was a second break: in 2015, I tore my cruciate ligament. It was really my first injury. The day I was diagnosed was horrible. But one day after surgery, when I was still in my hospital bed, there was another click. I already had a plan, even a mantra: come back stronger!

I don't regret my injury. It provided a lot of clarity and propelled me forward. After eight months, I was back. Champions League group play. I subbed into the game for the final five minutes. We were one goal behind Veszprém. The first throw from a tight angle didn't go in.

But I didn't let that unnerve me. What helped was that I did lots of visualization during rehab. I mentally walked through lots of plays, even planned certain throwing scenarios. I even stood at the edge of my bed, rudimentarily simulated the throw, and let myself fall back onto the bed. My second throw was on target. Equalizer. And in the end, in almost the final second, I was able to score the winning goal. It was pure adrenaline and goosebumps!

The mental component in all of this is quite large. That's why it makes sense to create a repertoire in your head that you can tap into as needed. But sports psychology requires an athlete to be honest, otherwise it won't work. Rushing and giving instructions won't work. A better approach would be for a club or association to make the service available to everyone on a voluntary basis. Or you set an example or write a book or at least a preface.

And one more important thing: our basic attitude. When I talk about what makes a team successful, I always pose that question to the audience first. They have lots of suggestions, such as, for instance, passion, ambition, discipline. And those are all correct. But, to me, it is primarily something else. I believe it is mostly respect for each other. When eight different nationalities give it their all for a club, I feel deep gratitude and yes, respect.

—Dominik Klein

Hanball world champion, three-time winner of the Champions League, 187 games for the German national team

GETTING WARMED UP

ON THE WAY TO CENTER COURT— THE AUTHORS START WITH AN EXCHANGE OF IDEAS

Let's talk about success, Laura! Those who have it are happy, those who don't are sad. That seems like a blanket statement, but it's undeniably true. Success is how we measure and rank each other, and we unfortunately have no scruples secluding someone when they're unsuccessful. It is how we behave in sports, in society, in politics, and economics. We seek "formulas for success"; an internet search of the term will yield 1.5 million hits.

Absolutely, Stefan! Every ambitious person wants to leave no stone unturned. Everyone wants to be satisfied with himself and life and ideally—and that's an important point—receive recognition.

The high number of hits on the internet also proves that there isn't just one formula. The combination depends on the individual, on life context, and on the goals we set. This means the path to success can vary quite a bit.

That will be disappointing to many who would prefer a universal recipe for success. But it's not that simple. We are so different, even just in the way we think. The first important step toward success: we must realize that it's about finding our own path. And that depends on many aspects, as well as discipline and our attitude toward a challenge.

And talent of course plays a role. But as Malcolm Gladwell (2009) writes in his bestseller "Outliers: The Story of Success", performance does not primarily result from talent but from years of preparation. Only someone who has logged 10,000 practice hours can become a champion.

I agree with his sentiment. Success is largely based on diligence and hard work. No matter how great the talent, it alone will not produce success, and not in tennis either. A whole is made up of many individual pieces. I am not convinced by talent, but I do believe in diligence. I am certain that I achieved my own goals only through above-average discipline, endurance, and precisely-executed repetitions. That is a long-term process. We're not on YouTube where you can become famous and successful overnight.

Tennis is complex and offers many situations through which an athlete can and must grow if he wants to get to the top. It is a microcosm that can be easily applied to other competitive sports as well as life's overall challenges. In coaching, I often refer to analogies from tennis. For instance, the net cord shows how even small things can tip the balance. There's a fine line between luck and misfortune. The takeaway: we cannot control everything, no matter how much we want to.

That is my experience as well. In tennis I practice how to handle challenges I encounter in many other areas of my life. That is one of the reasons we chose to write this book together. I am convinced that our topics will resonate with every ambitious person. The problem-solving strategies that help me in tennis can be successfully applied to many other areas. Handling pressure, stress, and adversity—those are overarching challenges one must deal with at a certain level.

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Gerd Schönfelder, ski racer and sixteen-time gold medalist in the Paralympics, once summarized it like this: "No matter how bad the initial situation, if you are mentally ready you can make it work for you." Our will is an important driver.

Tennis proves how much this driver can pay off. The scoring system alone provides every reason to want to hang on. Because as long as there is a theoretical chance, there is also hope. And as long as there is hope, we can believe in ourselves. Many seemingly hopeless matches have been turned around.

Let's take the 2022 tournament in Miami as an example: Five match points against you in the semi-final, all saved, and, in the end, winning the tournament. The ability to prevail in critical moments in tennis, as in life, pays off. There is lots of pressure to perform well, and thus also the necessity to process possible errors constructively.

Whether self-caused errors and missed chances in a match, or bitter losses or severe pain like, for instance, my torn anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) in 2017 at the height of my career, if you want to be successful, you have to learn to deal with mistakes and setbacks of all types. I also experienced that in the 2020 French Open. In spite of the miserable conditions, extremely cold temperatures, soaked courts, wind, and physical discomfort, I was able to achieve my best Grand Slam performance in singles. Success is no picnic; it requires a large amount of mental toughness.

... a very good example of less-than-perfect circumstances but a resounding success! Many expect to be perfect, and that becomes their undoing. Physical form alone varies from day to day, matches are rarely straightforward. What matters is to be mentally flexible, to self-optimize wisely instead of stoically perfecting. In tennis and in sports in general.

I tend to be a perfectionist. On the one hand, that is what drove me and brought me very far. On the other hand, I was often my own worst enemy due to excessive ambition and perfectionism. That caused me to not appreciate my developmental process separate from the results. Only when I allowed myself to be more relaxed was I able to really achieve my potential.

Particularly in elite sports, letting go sometimes can be very difficult. A change of perspective is often helpful. We remove ourselves from our personal experiences and instead look at ourselves from the outside, from the view of the coach, the fans, a good friend, or the opponent. We are familiar with this process from systemic therapy.

This outside perspective really helped me. Even as an experienced player, I frequently fall back into the old thought-and-behavior patterns. In those moments, when I make life difficult for myself, a conscious change of perspective helps me.

And that skill cannot be trained. The psyche must be trained and many don't realize that. After 2007, when the top athlete Magdalena Neuner began working with a mental coach, she claimed that people shook their heads in disbelief. Mental training is part of the preparation for competing at the world-class level from the start, meaning it is part of the previously mentioned 10,000-hours rule.

Ten thousand hours is a long time to keep up motivation. That requires a fire that feeds everything, and that can never go out. There was a time when I could no longer feel that fire. I had to think about on my course and correct it. During the Covid-19 pandemic, some players openly talked about having lost their inner fire and decided to end their career.

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Keeping up one's ambition for years and decades really is a major task. Interruptions in physical form and motivation will happen. And that flame can also get smaller. He exists, the star who stands on the stage in front of thousands of spectators and afterwards is oblivious to his good fortune, is unable to feel euphoric, not even satisfied, in spite of his success. Golf legend Bernhard Langer once told me how, after winning his first major tournament and becoming number one in the world rankings, he lay in bed on Sunday night after the celebration and only felt emptiness. You have to learn to cope with such a situation and feeling.

External success isn't automatically internal success and satisfaction. Precisely that is the reason why it is important to shift the focus to one's personal development process while still keeping our eye on the goal. With all that laser focus on the top, we can't forget to put one foot in front of the other and must have the courage and permit ourselves to occasionally take a turn and enjoy the view.

Bringing together all of the experiences in this book, and using that information to develop impulses that help us handle challenging tasks, will be an exciting journey.

That is why the title of our book is *Wild Card*. It stands for getting an opportunity to achieve something awesome and surprising yourself and others. Like me in 2017, when I was able to win the Porsche Tennis Grand Prix in Stuttgart with a wild card, one of the greatest singles successes of my career. A wild card also represents something we don't know yet and that doesn't always follow the usual rules. But at the same time, the card also means responsibility for the one who receives it and whose potential has been recognized.

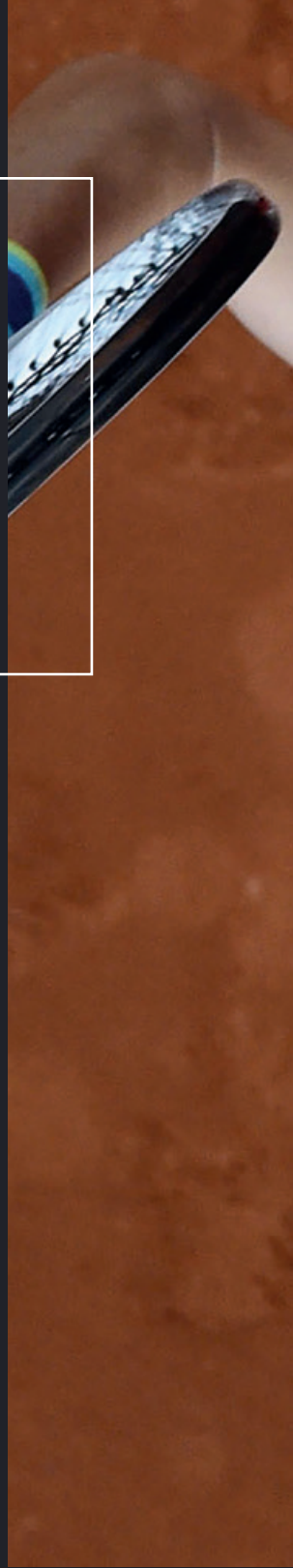
We hope that our readers will recognize their personal wild card in this book and thus take the opportunity and benefit from our symbiosis: combining our vast worlds of experience in sports, coaching and science.

INTERVIEW



1

Starting the match





FIRST SERVE: MASTERING THE START

Erich Kästner, an expert par excellence in sports psychology! Yes? One would expect many different names in this first chapter. But the fact that Erich Kästner takes the very first spot in a mental reference book might raise some eyebrows. At least at first. The creator of *Pünktchen und Anton* advising psychologists and others?

Absolutely, because Kästner proved to have very good instincts for the peculiarities of sports in general: “Skiers fight the clock. Swimmers compete side-by-side. Pole vaulters compete one after the other.” And tennis players in particular: “It is uncertain who will become the winner until the final minute.”¹ Kästner thereby stated a peculiarity of the sport of tennis that is fundamental to the psyche: The rules do not set a time limit. Whoever scores the last point, wins. Players are therefore able to believe in themselves until the very end, even if the current score suggests otherwise.

But how can we sustain that faith in ourselves, develop it, or even just inspire it?

Nowadays, sports psychology draws on decades of experience. Scientific findings combined with the huge amount of experience of elite athletes and other performance-oriented people show promising strategies, as discussed in this book. But no matter how quick and explosive the athlete might normally get off the starting block, it takes some time for the athlete to recognize the power of mental influence.

Here Erich Kästner was quicker. His insights came way back in the last century, which posthumously makes him one of the originators of sports psychology.

It was the 1980s, when the legendary ski racer Frank Würndl also began mental training. He sought advice from the sports psychologist Hans Eberspächer, became World Champion in 1987, and took second place in the 1988 Olympics. Würndl attributed his success in part to

1 Kästner (n. d.).

their collaboration.² His insight was foresight and also uncommon for some time to come.

Team athletes in particular took longer to recognize the expanded opportunities via psychological training. Soccer players in particular struggled. Back in 1998, at the World Cup in France, hardly any national teams sought mental support.³ A soccer player seeking psychological support? He or she would have been viewed as a weak patient rather than a highly professional athlete who simply buckles down and gives it their all.

Mental work was uncommon for a long time, agrees the exceptional biathlete, Magdalena Neuner. When she started to work with a mental coach in 2007, “everyone sneered at me.” But she thought it was important to realize and tap her full potential. Psychology to gain an edge on the others? “I wanted to try it. We worked with the subconscious and I learned a lot about myself.”

The necessity of psychological interventions

When asking a sports-minded crowd, everyone can name a whole list of classic coaches, but hardly anyone knows a sports psychologist. They work in the background, even though their work is very important. Even the media has little interest in this occupational group. Next to head coaches, the most popular interviewees are former athletes and maybe tactical experts. Physiologists, nutritionists, athletic trainers, and sports psychology coaches exist in the periphery of the training staff and are therefore easily overlooked.

Maybe we need a few Erich Kästners who can cast more of a spotlight on all relevant areas of training. After all, in his statements he already emphasized focus, intuition, humor, composure, self-control, and reason as important qualities in an athlete.⁴

2 Brunner (1998).

3 Ibidem.

4 Kästner (n. d.).

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Meanwhile elite sports have gotten very competitive. One time Mikaela Shiffrin wins, the next time it's Vlhová. One time it's Rafael Nadal, then it's Novak Djokovic. One time it's Real Madrid and then Bayern Munich. One-hundredth of a second is enough and a lucky goal during stoppage time is, too. The athletes are well-trained physically. But there is a growing realization that a coach alone is unable to address all of the partial aspects that need to be developed.

This set off the starting gun—by now heard by everyone—for a care team that is broad in scope and in which sports psychology has an important place. However, top-golfer Bernhard Langer contends: “Anyone who claims that 90 percent of golf is mental is wrong.”⁵ But he is convinced that “when two players are equally good, the mentally stronger one will win.”

GETTING INTO THE MATCH

When at the 2014 soccer World Championships, Brazil lost against Germany 1–7, it took only six minutes to score four goals. An historic World Cup record; a negative record for Brazil. A top athlete's attention span just won't tolerate a momentary lapse, not in soccer, not in tennis, and not in many other sports.

The initial phase of a competition is particularly precarious. The working temperature must be spot on, muscle tone must be right, body and mind must be attuned to the competition. “Sleeping” through the start, missing the first few minutes—that could be the beginning of a loss. Winning that special opening game at a soccer World Cup after a point deficit is statistically nearly impossible. So far, it has only happened twice: Chile in 1962 and Brazil in 2014.

That means it's important to function immediately, beginning with the first serve. But how does one do that, in sports and in general? We all know the admonishment of having missed the start and therefore having fallen behind. It has given rise to many well-known sayings, such as *having your back to the wall* or to *have blown it*. There is a lot of room

5 Brunner (2020, pg. 48).

for improvement, and that has to be used. Meeting one's full potential from the first second on is important.



A good start is essential at world-class level. To be all in starting with the very first point, to immediately seize those first opportunities and—even more importantly—to send a message to the opponent from the get-go: Today will be difficult for you! You will be punished for all your mistakes!

The start of a match, those initial points are also extremely important. Sure, I'll get second chances over the course of the game. And the counting system in tennis will theoretically give me a chance until the end to turn the game around. But the higher the playing level, and the more resolute and consistent the opponents, the smaller are my theoretical chances for correcting my own mistakes.

That means I need a good start, I need to quickly implement my planned strategy, and quickly reach my performance limit on that day.

I have to start right at the starting whistle. Performance initially increases in direct proportion to increasing activation. If activation is too high, the performance curve can actually flatten again. Consequently, the goal is to find the individually appropriate activation potential and store it in body and mind where it can be retrieved.

Yuri L. Hanin, long-time professor at the Research Institute for Olympic Sports in Finland, quite appropriately calls it the “individual zones of optimal functioning.”⁶ The model makes it possible to identify a current “biopsychosocial state.” This emotional parameter is closely linked to additional requirements for a human being's general functioning, linked, for instance, to the general, subjective sense of well-being as well as competition-related emotions.

6 Hanin (2000).

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A speaker on a stage must captivate the audience with his first impression. He can be surprising, convincing, and depending on the type, can even be provocative, funny, shocking, or offer solidarity. The possibilities are abundant. The choice depends on many independent variables, especially the situation and the audience. When applied to real-life situations, this means: The speaker who intends to spend an evening with his audience must meet his counterparts, must unite with them. Rhetoric experts advise that he must love his audience.

The athlete who wishes to quickly neutralize his opponent of course follows a different strategy. But what both situations have in common is that the initial moments are important and potentially decisive.



Getting into the optimal pre-start state isn't easy. Sure, over time an athlete develops routines that help him prepare for a task. Ideally, with more experience, the process will become faster and better and can ultimately be applied to different situations. What matters is: there is no right or wrong! Everyone has to find out for him/herself what his optimal activation level feels like and how they can achieve it. Recapping how one has prepared on a day with a particularly good performance can be helpful here.

- *What did it feel like?*
- *What worked particularly well to clear my head during preparation?*
- *Also: what was counterproductive and should definitely not be repeated during preparation?*

I have tried many things: For example, listening to hard rock during the final minutes before a match to really put myself in the zone. In recent years, I have increasingly based my preparation on how I am feeling at that moment. Personally, for an optimal performance, my personal activation level must be pretty high from the start.

I don't have a textbook approach that I go to every time, but rather an arsenal of tools I choose from depending on my mental and physical state. What matters to me is being able to withdraw to a quiet place. A separate room is usually best. There I am also able to build in a brief meditation if I notice that, although necessary, I am just too keyed up.

At the start, activation can be too high but also too low. One can come to a job interview, a meeting, or presentation overly nervous or slightly lethargic. No matter where and when the situation occurs, we must have the appropriate amount of activation to complete the task.

This insight goes back more than 100 years. The American psychologists Robert Yerkes and John Dodson were already testing on rats at the start of the last century what later was transferred to humans: an inverted u-shaped relationship between arousal and performance with respect to learning tasks. It turns out that the best performance implementation occurs at a medium arousal level. In psychology this scientific finding is referred to as the **Yerkes-Dodson law**.⁷

When someone gets overexcited—like the stereo that is turned up so loud that it can only produce a distorted cacophony—they are tensed up in the physical and literal sense. From a sports perspective, competition excitement comes face-to-face with competition apathy.⁸ Mental tension benefits performance until it reaches a certain level, at which point, the benefits taper off again.

For instance, the runner describes it as getting “tight.” When looking at heart rate, the optimal pulse range of a twenty-year-old during a tennis serve lies between 120 and 160 beats per minute.⁹ These numbers alone show that being aware of the optimal activation level isn't easy: it's a wide range, the difference between 120 and 160 heartbeats is significant, regardless of age.

7 Yerkes & Dodson (1908).

8 Puni (1961).

9 Burchard (2015).

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And we're then supposed to find our place in this generous range. It's difficult! It depends on the individual. It depends on the fitness level. And it depends on the challenge. When applied to sports, it means that the 100-meter sprinter requires a different level of activation to the marathon runner, the boxer, the platform diver, or sport shooter.

It's similar to the different situations of major challenges in other areas of life. Pilots and teachers, rock musicians, and radio hosts—they all perform at varying levels of excitement due to their professional challenges.

Regulating tonus up or down—more on that in a minute—is relatively easy. However, finding one's own best tone is a process that requires experience, patience, and sensitivity. One thing is for certain, the right heart beat cannot be looked up in a textbook. We must feel our most effective tonus. W. Timothy Gallwey calls it “relaxed concentration.”¹⁰

At first glance, an oxymoron; at second glance, an interesting idea because it offers a path to body awareness: making it perceptible by noticing the differences between varying degrees of muscular tension.

Tonus as an important indicator

Progressive muscle relaxation, PMR for short, was developed in 1929 by the American physiologist Edmund Jacobson,¹¹ and is a scientifically proven method that allows us this view inside the body. Muscles and muscle groups are successively tightened and relaxed so we can experience the possible tonus as a kind of continuum. The challenge is finding the right setting on this continuum for a particular situation. What is the right amount for me?

¹⁰ Gallwey (2015).

¹¹ Jacobson (2011).

This frequently used question is helpful here:

- When did it feel good?
- Did my perceived state of tension benefit the situation?
- When were my focus, my concentration, my awareness and attentiveness, my **flow**, best when the referee blew the starting whistle?

That is how I am able to overlay the feel of external practice incrementally with the feel of my actual playing until the two perfectly overlap.

Like a piano tuner whose perfect ear can ascertain the smallest acoustic vibrations and eliminate any tonal imbalances. But PMR-originator Jacobson looked at muscular imbalances. He recognized the directly proportional relationship between muscle tension and excitement.

In medical terms, activity triggers the sympathetic nervous system, which then triggers muscle tension. It is fortunate, but also nature's sensible protective mechanism that we don't have to tolerate unlimited amounts of this escalation. As previously mentioned, we are able to lower the tonus and thereby bring the opposite of the sympathetic nervous system—the parasympathetic nervous system—into the game to save us.

There are multiple ways to do so, all of which are considered relaxation methods: the previously mentioned PMR, **breathing exercises** and auto-suggestion methods such as **autogenic training** and guided imagery.

Sport shooter Barbara Engleder struggled for years with the physical effects of a pulse that was too high and raised the front of her weapon, in time with her pulse. With ingenious timing, she was able to pull the

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trigger whenever her pulse allowed. The effective method: “Progressive muscle relaxation helped me. And I worked a lot with breathing exercises.”

There is scientific evidence that not only the muscles relax, but PMR also calms blood pressure, heart rate, breathing, and intestinal activity.¹² Furthermore, this exercise is so easy to implement—even while sitting down—that it has already proven effective during childhood and adolescence and can lead to independent practice.¹³ Autogenic training tends to appeal more to adults. The more vivid guided imagery variation was developed for children.

The power of autosuggestion

Both techniques create a sense of heaviness and warmth, among other things, that facilitates relaxation and helps lower the tonus. Autogenic training is also based on scientific findings.

Easier yet: Breathing techniques are an independent relaxation method, but they are also used in preparation for other methods. As inhalation is automatic, the focus here is primarily on exhalation during which the ribcage relaxes. Even just focusing on exhalation leads to a sense of relaxation.¹⁴

The scientists Anne-Marie Elbe and Jürgen Beckmann point to an additional advantage of breathing exercises: While techniques such as autogenic training generally lower the overall activation level, breathing relaxation interferes less with the competition tonus. It can also simply help us focus on the impending activity or breathe away disruptive thoughts.

12 Gröninger & Stade-Gröninger (1996).

13 Brunner (2002).

14 Beckmann & Elbe (2008, pg. 53).