

HUMAN PERFORMANCE | Nov 9, 2014

Court Order: David Sammel

in

Twitter

Email

Share

Locker Room Power and Gaining the Psychological Edge

Tennis examines willpower and the solidity of a person's self-belief like almost no other sport and it is not easy to find parallels with the lonely, gladiatorial place a tennis court becomes during a tough match.

The 2012 Australian Open final between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal highlighted the complex range of skills needed to play at the highest level – a six-hour test of brutal physical endurance, mental focus and emotional control that delivered tennis of the highest class even at the very end, when fatigue was almost absolute. We teamed up with David Sammel to explore high performance in elite tennis to examine how tennis champions gain a psychological edge, and talked to two of the sport's top coaches, Marian Vajda, who has coached Novak Djokovic since 2006, and Claudio Pistolese, who has coached five top 10 players over the last 15 years, including Monica Seles and Robin Soderling, about the essential traits of a champion, different forms of concentration, and their approach to imparting advice.

In tennis, you will often hear people say: "It wasn't about forehands and backhands; you could just tell he was going to win; he had that look about him" or "That contest was won before the game began". In their view, the eventual winner had created a psychological competitive edge over the opponent, something that can be termed Locker Room Power (LRP). LRP is a positive aura that surrounds an athlete and can be thought of as the "X-Factor in competition". It's the culmination of practice, intent, and commitment that creates a fear factor which can sap an opponent's desire and self-belief. With effective LRP, many matches are indeed as good as won before a player steps on court. It can cause opponents to lose confidence during a tough match, or allow doubt to creep into their mind in a crisis. It is the ingredient that makes opponents feel nervous and prone to mistakes. Simply put, it is the myth that adds to the reality.



Former British Number 1 Tim Henman spoke of how he became aware of it before a Grand Slam Cup semi-final against Boris Becker. "When I was called to court, I walked out the locker room; Boris however stayed in his and made me wait in the corridor for a good few minutes, in these final moments just before the match I became unsettled. I realised afterwards that he had totally dictated the time – he sent the message that the match would be played according to his terms." The "locker room" extends beyond the physical changing room to include gyms, treatment rooms, practice facilities, press conferences, hotels, restaurants – any place where athletes interact and observe.

In environments surrounding competition, the athletes and the finer details of their lifestyles are magnified and scrutinised, and combine to create a perception of the athlete. This perception then becomes crucial. What other people or fellow competitors hear and see in the locker room affects their perception of the athlete and consequently the athlete's LRP. It encompasses reputation, but it doesn't stop there. It is the perception that a player is better than he actually is, generated by other players talking about his game in a way that creates a positive aura. In essence, LRP takes an athlete's reputation and uses it to control competitive performance and results. An athlete with LRP is discussed positively by other athletes, which creates an impression of invincibility. In sport the talk surrounding a player determines how well his game is perceived.

Countering Locker Room Power

Managing to ignore the reputation of an opponent, to simply compete against the person or team on the day, is one of the hardest aspects in sport. The best way to counter a reputation is for an athlete to build their own. Once they have created an aura, the impact it can have on the locker room and the surrounding environments is vast. The private moments preparing for a contest are crucial to a successful performance, because it is during these times that a competitor will buy into his opponent's LRP, become complacent or overconfident about his own, or do what a true competitor does – psych themselves up to play hard from beginning to end whatever the circumstances. Since athletes are human, the focus required to remain in this zone is always subject to attack and penetration.

Top competitors therefore need tools to deal with a loss of focus to still compete almost as effectively, even when their perfect competitive state is breached. It is important to have weapons that can penetrate the opponent's focus because beating someone who is in the flow is a tough task. LRP takes a reactive mind-set and turns it into a proactive mind-set. In so doing, focus shifts from the opponent and their threats to the player's self and their own weapons.



Cultivating Locker Room Power

Critically, LRP gives athletes control over the statements they make. The statements a player habitually makes should be totally planned and deliberate. The purpose is to send a clear message to the opposition – one of intent. By understanding the power and importance of making a statement, you begin to understand that LRP is critical to success. To cultivate LRP a player needs to create a culture that aids the growth of their identity and adopt the right attitude – they will need desire, self-belief, and commitment. Body language and demeanour must reflect this, projecting confidence and determination over nerves and fear. It can build, for example, during a tournament when a player makes a strong play or wins a match and creates a wave of confidence. This force, however temporary, can become the catalyst for long-term LRP. Building LRP is similar to creating an 'advertising campaign' of abilities.

The key is that this campaign is built on substance, not spin. If you advertise a bad product well, it can work against easily impressed and inexperienced players; but bluffing is not sustainable in the long run. By offering a strong product, the "advertising campaign" of LRP will lead people to exaggerate the strength and authority of that product – sporting weaponry, in this case. This exaggeration, in turn, will unsettle opponents and lead them to feel they are out of their depth in a competition. On any level this is double-edged. Opponents think you are invincible and in turn you begin to feel immensely confident. This combination is very hard to beat.

The Mark of a Champion

Still, no player is perfect. What sets apart players with LRP is that they bring positive energy to the arena, no matter what. There is, of course, no way of avoiding loss. Everyone loses. However, win or lose, it is the quality of attitude and strategies employed during the loss that opponents will remember. Even during a rout, a champion tries to create something to build on. Indeed, losing can become a key facet of consolidating and maintaining LRP. Losing is a great test of discipline, and players who possess long-standing LRP know how to pick themselves up again and regroup. All eyes will be watching to see if a player can manage a bad spell without letting it develop into a crisis of confidence. Respect from other players means that a few bad results will be perceived as a glitch, rather than a crisis.

TAGS: [DAVE SAMMEL](#) [TEAMBATH - MCTA](#) [TENNIS](#)

Sign up to our newsletters

To ensure you're keeping up to date with the latest intelligence, sign up (for free) to receive newsletters. Get exclusive insight from top organisations worldwide on **leadership & culture, human performance, coaching & development** and **data & innovation**.

Subscribe

Become a member

Join our exclusive community of leading global performance organisations to target all aspects of high performance and challenge thinking with access to **game-changing knowledge, connections** and **perspectives** that can't be found anywhere else.

Become a member

Related Intelligence

MEMBERS

HUMAN PERFORMANCE, PERFORMANCE

Deloitte Is Creating a Culture of Wellbeing in Four Stages

Oct 23, 2020

MEMBERS

COACHING & DEVELOPMENT, PERFORMANCE, PERFORMANCE

Leaders Virtual Roundtable: Impacts of the Current Climate on the Modern Athlete

Oct 20, 2020

MEMBERS

HUMAN PERFORMANCE, PERFORMANCE

The Leaders State of Play Series: The Evolving Mindset of the Modern NBA Athlete

Oct 19, 2020

Leaders UK

Tuition House
27-37 St George's Road
Wimbledon
SW19 4EU
London
United Kingdom

Enquiries Line: +44 (0)207 806 9817
Switchboard Number: +44 (0)207 042 8666

About

What we do
Leaders News
Services
Careers
Contact

Sport Business

Intelligence
Podcast: At home with Leaders – UFC's Lawrence Epstein
In conversation with Emile Heskey and Jaydee Dyer
Podcast: At home with Leaders – Paraag Marathe

Upcoming Events
Media Innovators Series

Performance

Intelligence
Five Stories That Helped Build Successful Team Cultures
Deloitte Is Creating a Culture of Wellbeing in Four Stages
Leaders Performance Digest

Upcoming Events
Virtual Leaders Meet: Total High Performance
The Sport Performance Summit, London (Postponed)

Leaders US

120 W Morehead St # 400
Charlotte
NC 28202
United States

Enquiries Line: +1 646 350 0449

in

© 2020 Leaders. All rights reserved. enquiry@leadersinsport.com [Privacy Policy](#)