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SCIENTIFIC INSIGHT

CONTENT HIGHLIGHTS

May

Performance Psychology and Mental
Performance



TABLE OF CONTENTS

MESSAGE FROM TOM	02
The first hurdle	
ARTICLE ONE	03
Coaching: egos in an MDT	
BOOK OF THE MONTH	04
The inner game of tennis	
ARTICLE TWO	05
Parenting: pre match preparation	
STUDY OF THE MONTH	06
Psychological pressure and compounded errors during elite- level tennis	
ARTICLE THREE	07
Flow- a coaches aim	
ITEM OF THE MONTH	08
Tennis books - the on court support	
ARTICLE FOUR	09
ARR: building a successful performance	
QUOTE OF THE MONTH	10
Brene Brown	
ARTICLE FIVE	11
Negative contagion - the lense shaper	
FINAL REMARKS	12



MESSAGE FROM TOM

As the floodlights dim and the final whistles echo through emptying stadiums, May marks the end of the road for many winter sports. Football, rugby, hockey—seasons built on sweat, sacrifice, and split-second decisions—begin to wind down. For some, it's the end of a long, grueling campaign. For others, it's the heartbreak of near-misses or the satisfaction of silverware. But for all, this moment offers something rare in elite sport: space.

This end of season period is often overlooked in its value. In a culture that celebrates constant hustle and next challenges, it's easy to rush into pre-season planning or off-season training. But May offers more than just physical rest—it provides an opening for psychological reflection and recalibration. It's a window to step back, zoom out, and ask meaningful questions: What did I learn? Where did I grow? What needs rebuilding—not just in my body, but in my mindset?

Reflection isn't passive—it's performance-enhancing. Athletes who take the time to process the emotional and cognitive load of a season often return more focused, more resilient, and more self-aware. Whether you're a player, coach, psychologist, or parent, this is a powerful opportunity to reconnect with the reasons behind the work. Not every answer has to come now. But the space to ask the right questions is what this moment is for.

In this issue, we explore what happens when the season ends—and the real work begins. From mental recovery strategies to the science of reflective practice, we invite you to slow down, breathe, and look inward. Because next season's edge often begins here—in stillness, not speed.

Tom Seabury

DR TOM SEABURY



COACHING: EGOS IN AN MDT

In sport at the elite level, a multidisciplinary team (MDT) is commonplace. Experts in their fields (coaches, physios, psychologists etc) work together to best support their athletes.

This team is designed to maximise the support, but to achieve this, keeping egos in check is fundamental to achieving optimal performance and maintaining athlete-centred care.

Each professional (whether coach, physiotherapist, psychologist, nutritionist, or strength and conditioning expert), brings specialised knowledge and skills.

However, when ego takes precedence, it can lead to fragmented communication, conflicting messages, and territorial disputes that directly undermine an athlete's trust and confidence in their support network.

An MDT functioning without ego allows for open collaboration, promotes honest dialogue, and ensures every member prioritises the athlete's welfare above personal recognition or authority.

Moreover, an ego-driven environment stifles innovation and adaptability—two vital ingredients in high-performance sport, where marginal gains and quick adaptations often separate success from failure.

When professionals in an MDT are secure enough to acknowledge gaps in their own expertise and comfortably seek assistance from colleagues, the team becomes more agile, responsive, and effective.

This humility fosters a culture of continuous learning and mutual respect, ultimately benefiting the athlete through integrated, cohesive support that accelerates their physical and psychological progress and well-being.



BOOK OF THE MONTH - THE INNER GAME OF TENNIS

In the world of tennis literature, few books have stood the test of time like W. Timothy Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis*. First published in 1974, the book has become a cult classic—passed down between generations of players, quoted by coaches across continents, and referenced in conversations not just about tennis, but about focus, flow, and performance under pressure. And yet, 50 or so years later, some still wonder: Does it still hold up?

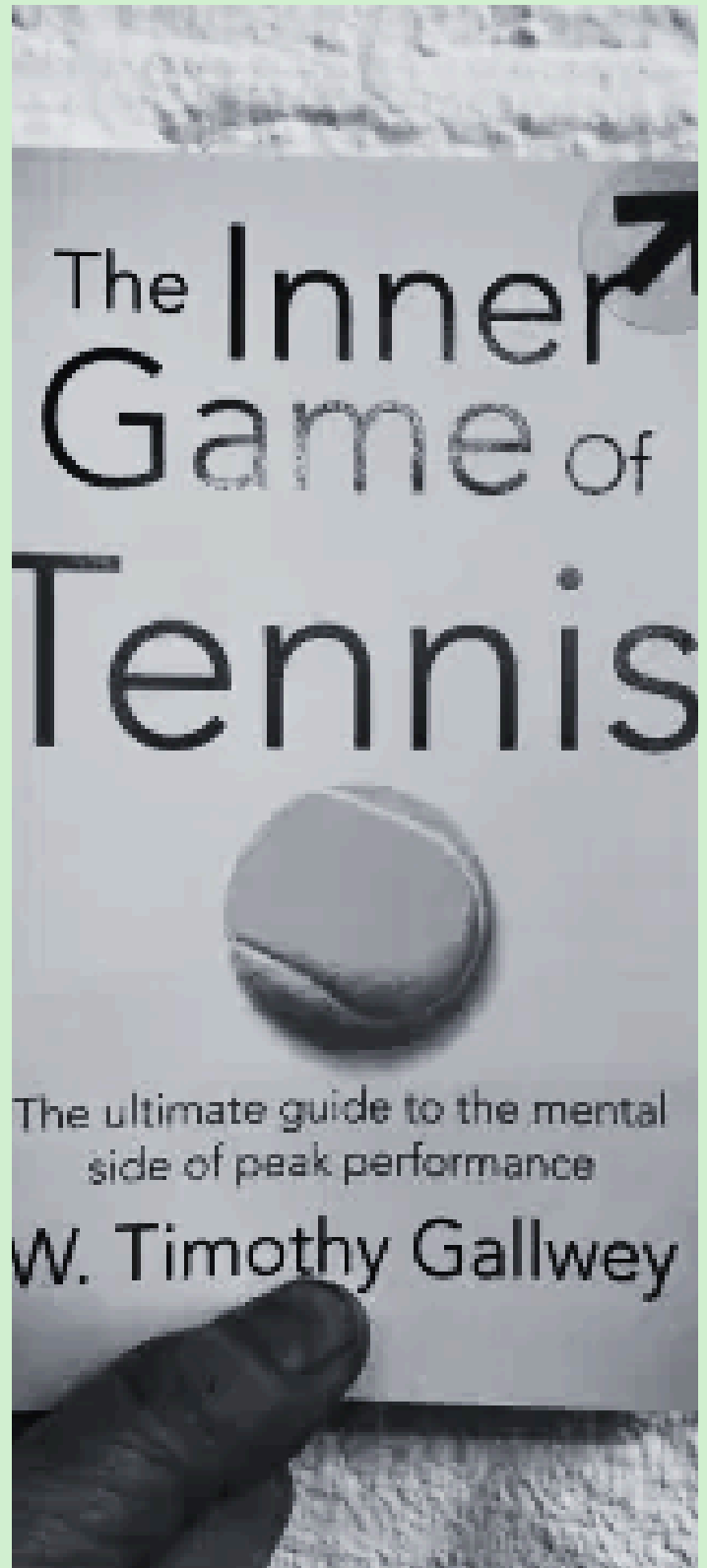
The answer is a resounding yes.

At its core, *The Inner Game* is not about technique, drills, or match strategy. It's about the battle within—the conversation between what Gallwey calls "Self 1" and "Self 2." Self 1 is the analytical voice, the inner critic, the one that tries to control every movement and overthink every decision. Self 2, by contrast, is the body's intuitive performer—the part that knows how to hit the shot when it's not being micromanaged. Gallwey's genius lies in how he identifies the real opponent in performance: not the player across the net, but the interference within our own minds.

Modern sport psychology has since given names to many of Gallwey's observations: attentional control, flow state, implicit learning. But *The Inner Game* remains uniquely accessible. It offers practical strategies—like focusing on the sound of the ball or the feel of the swing—not to change technique, but to quiet the mind. In doing so, players unlock more natural, confident, and efficient performance.

For coaches, the book is a masterclass in non-directive teaching. Rather than overload the athlete with verbal commands, Gallwey encourages awareness, autonomy, and self-discovery. It's a reminder that great coaching isn't about control—it's about creating the conditions for learning. The message is as relevant today as it was in the '70s, perhaps even more so in an era when information overload and constant evaluation can cloud a player's instinct.

The Inner Game of Tennis is not just a tennis book. It's a mindset manual. A blueprint for clarity, composure, and connection. And whether you're a club-level player, a young coach, or a seasoned professional, its lessons will continue to meet you where you are.



BOOK BY W. TIMOTHY GALLWEY



PARENTING: PRE MATCH PREPARATION

Parents play a critical role in shaping their child's mindset before a sporting event, particularly when travelling to matches. The period spent travelling offers a valuable opportunity to create an environment conducive to positive mental preparation.

By modelling calmness and optimism, parents can significantly influence how their child perceives the upcoming competition. Positive dialogue during travel can help reduce anxiety, build confidence, and reinforce the importance of effort and enjoyment over winning or losing. Additionally, discussing manageable goals or specific objectives for the game can give children a constructive focus, helping them enter the competition mentally prepared and motivated.

Moreover, a parent's ability to remain composed and supportive during travel sets a tone that emphasises the child's well-being over competitive outcomes. Parents who understand and respect the athlete's psychological needs can help their child manage pre-game nerves by normalising feelings of excitement or anxiety rather than amplifying them through pressure or unrealistic expectations.

By listening actively and responding empathetically, parents empower their child to express concerns or excitement openly, reinforcing trust and emotional safety. This balanced approach significantly contributes to fostering resilience, self-belief, and enjoyment, essential ingredients for long-term sporting development.

Finally, routines and rituals established during travel, such as playing specific music, visualising performance scenarios together, or maintaining relaxed, casual conversation, can help anchor positive mental states for the child.

Parents who consistently reinforce values of respect, sportsmanship, and personal growth through their behaviour and communication ensure their child approaches the competition with a healthy perspective, focused more on personal progress than external validation.

This supportive role cultivates an internalised sense of confidence and readiness that can profoundly impact both immediate performance and long-term athletic development.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PRESSURE AND COMPOUNDED ERRORS DURING ELITE-LEVEL TENNIS

This large-scale analysis investigated how psychological pressure and prior performance errors interact to affect outcomes in elite tennis. Using point-by-point data from over 650,000 points played in Grand Slam tournaments between 2016 and 2019, the researchers examined whether players were more likely to make unforced errors (including double faults) under pressure—and particularly after making a previous mistake.

The findings were clear:

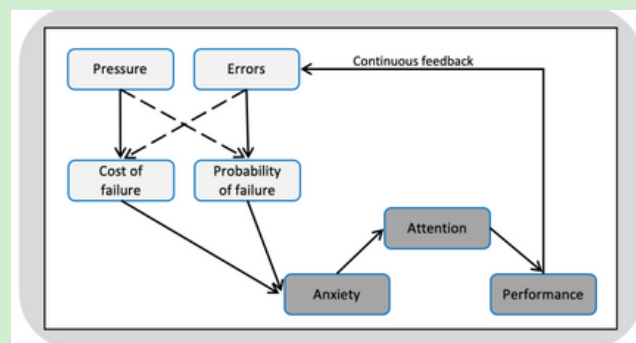
- Pressure increases the likelihood of performance errors. As pressure levels rose (e.g., break points, deciding sets), the chance of an unforced error significantly increased.
- Errors tend to compound. A player who had made an unforced error on the previous point was more likely to make another on the next point—even more so under high-pressure conditions.
- There was no evidence that top players were immune. Winning players also showed increased susceptibility to error under pressure, contradicting the notion that elite athletes routinely “raise their game” in key moments.
- Importantly, the rise in errors under pressure was not due to players adopting a more aggressive or risky playing strategy—indicating that the effect stemmed from skill breakdown and anxiety, not tactical choice.

These results support Attentional Control Theory: Sport (ACTS), which posits that anxiety disrupts the brain’s attentional systems, making athletes more sensitive to perceived threats—like errors or high-stakes moments—and impairing performance as a result.

For players, this research highlights the mental vulnerability that accompanies high-pressure moments, especially following mistakes. It affirms what many athletes intuitively feel: one error can snowball into another, and the psychological cost of failure—real or perceived—can disrupt even well-trained skills.

This insight underscores the importance of mental recovery between points. The ability to “reset” mentally, manage internal dialogue, and stay task-focused after an error can mean the difference between bouncing back and spiraling. It also speaks to the danger of attentional bias—the tendency for anxious athletes to fixate on the consequences of past mistakes rather than staying present.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that mental training should not just target pressure tolerance, but also error recovery. Tools like pre-point routines, self-talk strategies, and emotional regulation techniques become critical not just for avoiding errors, but for breaking the feedback loop between pressure, anxiety, and performance decline. Lastly, the study challenges the myth of the “clutch player” as someone who rises above pressure while others falter. In reality, even elite athletes are susceptible to the same psychological traps—what differentiates them may not be immunity to pressure, but the consistency with which they apply mental skills when it matters most.



FLOW- A COACHES AIM

One of the most powerful contributions a coach can make to an athlete's development is creating an environment where flow—that optimal state of focused immersion—can occur.

Flow is where athletes feel fully absorbed in the task, where actions feel smooth, instinctive, and meaningful. Time may feel distorted, self-consciousness fades, and performance often rises to a level that feels effortless yet extraordinary. While flow can't be forced, coaches can actively design training sessions that increase the likelihood of it emerging.

To facilitate flow, coaches must carefully balance challenge and skill. Tasks that are too easy lead to boredom; tasks that are too difficult create anxiety. Flow sits in the sweet spot—where the athlete is pushed just enough to stay fully engaged, but still feels capable of meeting the demand. This might mean adjusting drill complexity, creating time or space constraints, or introducing scoring elements that keep the athlete mentally sharp without overwhelming them. It's about helping the athlete stretch—not snap.

Another essential ingredient is clear goals and immediate feedback. Flow thrives on clarity. When athletes know exactly what they're working toward—whether it's consistent depth, timing on the return, or quick decision-making at the net—they can focus without distraction.

Coaches can support this by defining intentions clearly at the start of drills and offering concise, timely feedback that keeps athletes anchored in the task. Overcoaching or interrupting too frequently can pull them out of rhythm, while minimal, well-timed cues can keep them in the zone.

Finally, the coach's role in emotional climate is crucial. Flow is more likely when athletes feel psychologically safe, yet internally driven. Encouraging autonomy, reducing fear of failure, and promoting intrinsic motivation all help create a space where athletes can take risks, experiment, and stay deeply connected to the process of performance.

Coaches who build trust, emphasise effort over outcome, and foster curiosity over control open the door to the mental state where peak performance lives.



TENNIS BOOKS - THE ON COURT SUPPORT

Magnesium is a vital mineral involved in over 300 enzymatic processes in the body, many of which are directly relevant to athletic performance and recovery. For athletes, magnesium plays a critical role in muscle function, energy production, nerve conduction, and electrolyte balance. Adequate magnesium levels can help reduce the risk of muscle cramps, improve muscular endurance, and enhance recovery by supporting efficient muscle relaxation and reducing inflammation. During intense training or competition, magnesium is lost through sweat, making supplementation particularly important for athletes engaging in prolonged or high-intensity activity.

Beyond its physical benefits, magnesium also offers significant mental advantages. It helps regulate the body's stress response via its action on the nervous system and HPA axis, promoting a sense of calm and aiding in the management of anxiety and irritability; both of which can impair performance. It also supports quality sleep, which is essential for cognitive recovery, memory consolidation, and overall mental sharpness. Some studies have linked magnesium supplementation to improved focus, working memory, and emotional regulation, making it particularly valuable for athletes in high-pressure, mentally demanding sports like tennis.

Magnesium may also help buffer the effects of mental fatigue, which can accumulate during long matches or tournaments. By stabilising the nervous system and supporting neurotransmitter function, magnesium contributes to improved resilience, allowing athletes to maintain composure and decision-making under stress. This mental edge can be the difference between winning and faltering in a close match.

Disclaimer:

While magnesium supplementation can offer benefits, it's important to note that not all athletes need to supplement, especially if dietary intake is sufficient. High doses of magnesium can cause side effects (such as gastrointestinal discomfort) or interact with medications. Therefore, always consult with a qualified healthcare professional or sports dietitian before beginning any supplementation regimen.





ARR: BUILDING A SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE

As athletes, your capacity to manage moments of pressure, disappointment, or frustration can profoundly influence your performance. One powerful psychological strategy to handle these challenging moments is the ARR method: Accept, Reflect, Reset. By actively practising ARR, you equip yourself with a structured way to maintain emotional control and clarity, ultimately enhancing your performance in critical situations.

Acceptance is your first step. Whether it's a missed opportunity, a mistake, or an unexpected setback, your initial reaction should involve accepting the event without judgment or self-criticism. Acceptance doesn't mean you're satisfied with the outcome; rather, it prevents you from becoming emotionally overwhelmed by what you cannot immediately change. It allows you to stay present, keeping your mental energy available for what lies ahead, rather than draining it on what has already passed.

The next phase, Reflection, involves briefly acknowledging what happened, identifying why it occurred, and learning from it. Reflection should be quick and constructive, never dwelling excessively or negatively on the event. Ask yourself: "What happened here, and what can I adjust?" By reflecting thoughtfully and calmly, you transform setbacks into opportunities for growth, thus improving your future decision-making and strategy.

Finally, resetting is crucial to redirecting your focus back to the present moment and towards your next action. This is where you intentionally let go of past events and channel your attention fully into what's in front of you. It might be a simple physical cue—such as a deep breath, adjusting your equipment, or repeating a positive affirmation—or a mental cue like a brief visualisation of your next successful action. The reset step ensures you re-enter the game mentally refreshed and ready to perform at your best.

Incorporating ARR consistently will strengthen your resilience and elevate your performance. Remember, in sport, the real challenge isn't just the setbacks you face, but how effectively you respond to them.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

“Vulnerability is not weakness. And that myth is profoundly dangerous. Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change.”

Brene Brown

Sport has traditionally been associated with toughness, grit, and an unwavering mental and physical strength. Athletes are often taught that resilience means never showing weakness, pushing through pain without complaint, and concealing emotions to maintain an image of unwavering confidence. However, this perception overlooks the profound power of vulnerability.

Vulnerability is not weakness. And that myth is profoundly dangerous. Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change." This perspective holds immense relevance in the sporting world, where genuine strength can emerge from an athlete's willingness to acknowledge their vulnerability.

When athletes permit themselves to be vulnerable, they allow space for genuine self-reflection, fostering growth both on and off the field. Embracing vulnerability means acknowledging one's limits, fears, and uncertainties. By doing this, athletes create opportunities to learn and evolve, becoming open to constructive feedback, new strategies, and deeper self-awareness. This openness leads to greater creativity in training approaches and performance strategies, fueling innovation that can lead to significant breakthroughs in sport.

Furthermore, vulnerability in sport enables authentic connections between teammates, coaches, and support staff. When athletes admit to struggles or ask openly for help, they foster an environment of trust and psychological safety. Such an environment allows for honest dialogue, encourages cooperation, and strengthens team cohesion, ultimately enhancing team performance and resilience during challenging moments. Athletes who can openly discuss their doubts or struggles with teammates or coaches are better positioned to receive the support and guidance needed to move past mental and emotional hurdles.

Finally, vulnerability enables athletes to develop healthier relationships with competition itself. Rather than seeing failure as something shameful, embracing vulnerability helps athletes view setbacks as opportunities for growth. This mindset shift reduces fear of failure, leading to increased courage and willingness to take risks in pursuit of excellence. Ultimately, sport is not merely about forcing toughness; it is about embracing the full spectrum of human experience (including vulnerability) as an essential component of true strength, sustained growth, and meaningful achievement.



NEGATIVE CONTAGION - THE LENSE SHAPER

Athletes don't perform in a vacuum. They perform in environments full of energy, pressure, expectation—and people. Teammates, opponents, coaches, fans. All of them contribute to a shared emotional atmosphere, whether they realise it or not. In this highly social and emotionally charged setting, athletes are especially vulnerable to something psychologists call emotional contagion—the tendency to "catch" and absorb the emotional states of those around them. When that contagion is negative, it can have a profound effect on performance.

Negative contagion can take many forms. In team sports, it might look like one player's frustration after an error spreading through the squad like a virus—shoulders slump, body language closes off, and suddenly confidence drains from the group. In individual sports, like tennis or golf, it may stem from the opponent's dominant energy, the visible anxiety of a coach, or even the crowd's restlessness. The emotional cues may be subtle—sighs, rushed movements, tense facial expressions—but athletes are often highly attuned to these signals, and they can affect their internal state before they even realise it.

This kind of contagion can shift an athlete's mindset from focused to flustered, from composed to reactive. It often leads to a narrowing of attention, increased muscle tension, and a loss of access to the fluid, automatic skills that define peak performance. In psychological terms, athletes may begin to operate in a more threat-focused state, interpreting neutral events—like a missed shot or a coaching correction—as signs of failure. This downward spiral isn't always loud or obvious, but it's powerful. It can alter decision-making, suppress confidence, and even change the way athletes perceive time, risk, and pressure.

What's crucial is that many athletes don't realise this shift is happening until it's too late. They don't notice that their internal weather has changed—because someone else's storm passed through. Learning to recognise and manage emotional contagion is therefore a core part of mental training.

It involves strengthening emotional awareness, learning to anchor your attention in the present moment, and building psychological separation between your mindset and the mindset of those around you. Great athletes don't just stay physically centred—they stay emotionally sovereign. They learn to lead the emotional climate, rather than be ruled by it.





FINAL THOUGHTS

The period between seasons is often where the deepest growth begins. Not in the gym, not on the pitch, but in the space between performances—in the stillness where athletes can reflect, recalibrate, and reimagine. It's where confidence can be rebuilt, lessons can land, and clarity can quietly rise to the surface. This is not the off-season; this is the inner season (and it's just as vital).

As you step away from competition, I encourage you to carry the central message of this issue with you: performance is not just built through intensity, but through intention. Use this time not to rush ahead, but to look back, pause, and reset—so that when it's time to begin again, you return not just rested, but realigned.

If you have topics you would like included in future issues or sections that would improve the reading experience, please let us know by visiting:

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