



Process Oriented Thinking

We live in a society and culture that is very focused on outcomes and results. That focus permeates all aspects of our lives and is often present in our mind as we perform various tasks. In sports, results generally equal wins and losses, or in the case of the Olympics, gold medals. If you listen to the sports media, you'll notice that all of their discussion is based on results and outcomes, and how the athletes must be thinking of those outcomes. But is that true? Do the top athletes think about winning and losing while they are competing? My answer is No.

Result oriented thinking is actually a barrier to being successful in sports. Think about the concept of choking. We define choking as the act of losing after being in a winning position or competing poorly in a big event. The fact of the matter is that we have all choked at one point or another, and the reason that we do is that we start to think about winning and what it will mean to us. For example, a few years ago I was on the verge of winning a match that would have given me an all-time best ranking, and as soon as I started thinking about it, I started playing tentatively and with fear. All of a sudden my shots were landing short in the court with no power, and my opponent was taking advantage of them. I was choking big time and the ranking I thought I had within my grasp was now slipping away.

So how do you combat choking, playing with fear and being tentative in your performance? It's not easy and it requires a substantial mind set shift. The first thing you have to understand is that you don't win by trying to win. Now that may sound strange, but bear with me. You win by focusing on what it takes to perform your best and be your best. You win by doing all of the little things well. To perform your best, you have to understand the process of your sport and being a competitive athlete. For a sport like tennis, here are some high level categories of the process:

Groundstrokes (technical skills)

Fitness

Nutrition

Routines

Strategy

Mental Game

Each of these high level categories can be further broken down to more granular components which help you understand the sport to a deeper level. Once you understand the process, you can examine it to determine areas that you need to improve that would substantially help your performance. It's a good idea to review the



process with your coach as he or she will have some insight on this. Once you identify something in the process that will have an impact on your performances, start to work on it. All your attention should be paid to improving this part of the process. When you practice and compete, your focus should be on your process improvement, not winning or losing.

Let me give you an example from something I had been working on in my process. I have been working on being more aggressive with my forehand and trying to control matches with it. In the past, I was very defensive, but now I'm trying to dictate points more. When I play now, my whole focus is on how successfully I'm hitting my aggressive forehand so that I can become more and more comfortable with it. In one of my first practice matches, I lost 7-6, but I was happy about my performance because I did a good job of staying aggressive with my forehand. If I had played my more normal defensive style, I would have won easily, but the loss didn't matter. What mattered was that I continued to work on my process goal no matter what the score was and that's going to make me a better player. Several weeks later, the new forehand won me a tournament and I couldn't have done it without losing along the way.

To sum it up, my goal in that match was process oriented and not result oriented. If I had been result oriented, I probably would have reverted to my old style in an effort to win the match. But it was only a practice match. That practice match was helping me build up my game for more important tournaments later in the year. I focused on my process improvement, and evaluated my performance that day based on my process goal. If you can change your focus from result oriented to process oriented, you will see a major improvement in your performance in the long term.