

Developing A Sense Of Mastery

How much have you invested in self-knowledge? Do you understand the importance of monitoring your thoughts, feelings, and actions to identify those states coinciding with your best performances. Indeed, this information supplies a target for future performances. Unfortunately, knowledge alone is rarely sufficient. Having an additional sense of mastery, or perceived competence in your ability to perform and improve, greatly enhances your chances for success. In this reading, we explore the ideas of skill level, improvement, and the powerful boost that a sense of mastery will contribute to your quest for optimal performance.

A Thousand Skill Levels

What is your current skill level in volleyball? Don't be shy! Some players rate themselves on a three-level scale (Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced), while others use the 7 point scale. In my view, there are actually a thousand levels in tennis. So, while a beginner might love to climb from level 21 to 22, an olympic caliber player is likely shooting for level 997. A thousand levels puts things in perspective, but even an olympic caliber player would never trick herself into believing she had "arrived." Such an attitude might only sabotage her next performance as a result of overconfidence.

Meaningful Improvement

Real improvement comes from learning new techniques which are adaptive in competition, and then applying them consistently. Progress is noted in many ways, such as winning for the first time against a common opponent, advancing further in tournaments, or moving up from junior varsity to varsity. Remember to focus on performance rather than outcome, as thoughts of winning and losing are irrelevant distractions. Also keep in mind that outcomes are determined by the relative contributions of each player on a team, so don't gloat too long after a win or be upset too long following a loss. Your peak performance might occur during an agonizing loss, and your most hideous production ever could cause you to score the game point. Take a breath, step back, and look at improvement as a never ending and exciting journey.

Perceived Competence

Regardless of your actual performance level or rate of improvement, how competent and effective do you feel as a player? How does this attitude of mastery vary across different situations and against different opponents? There is much research to support the value of a strong sense of mastery in meeting challenges. Seeing oneself as competent and effective in sport might also extend benefits far beyond athletics. A perceived sense of mastery, or feeling of control, has been shown to generalize to many other areas including stress reactions, achievement striving, career pursuits, and even health and survival! How do you increase your sense of mastery? Here are 4 tips to guide you in developing an approach to problems on and off the court:

1. Explain poor performance and negative events as being within rather than outside of your control.
2. Take full responsibility for the changes you desire. Believe that your efforts, work habits, and self-discipline will lead to improvement.
3. Performance accomplishments naturally lead to a higher sense of mastery. To accelerate learning, frequently watch experts, visualize their performances, and solicit feedback from them about your own technique.
4. Interpret increases in arousal as energy for performance rather than as stress, anxiety or fear.

Keep on striving for your personal summit!