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You are 30-40 and 3-5 in the deciding set of a crucial tennis match. The sweat on your palms isn't the result of physical exertion alone. The heart is racing and thoughts are flooding your head. The pressure from your parents to win weighs down heavily on your mind.

Not the ideal situation to be in - yet, all sportspersons, in their respective sport, WILL find themselves in such predicaments. Such is the nature of sports.

The effort that goes into preparation is enormous. The myriad sacrifices made by the sportsperson are commendable. That's because this is what they really want to do. But just like with everything else, proper guidance is required.

In our culture, we believe that hard work is the only solution to success. The longer the hours in the playing arena, the better one becomes. After all, "practice makes perfect", right?

Not entirely!

You could swim in a particular way and while the stroke may not be technically sound, it can be perfected. In a way, yes, practice does make perfect. But what an athlete - or for that matter, a student of any field - needs to be guided in is to ensure that *perfect practice makes perfect*.

And for that, one needs a coach. In fact, one needs many coaches – a team

of specialists. A CEO of a corporate organisation has his team of specialists in his VPs and HODs of various verticals like Marketing, Finance, HR, and Operations.. For the smooth running of his company, he has to ensure that he has the best people to aid in accomplishing his goal. A sportsperson needs a team of coaches to ensure that he gets effective guidance to help reach the goal in the same way.

Just having a sports coach isn't enough these days. You see pros travelling with their entire team to every tournament. A sports coach is there to help you with the technicalities and strategies of the chosen sport. But professionals are also required for helping you with your nutrition, fitness and your mind.

My particular area of interest is the entity residing upstairs, which controls every thought and action in our lives – the mind.

Going back to the myth of hard work guaranteeing success, that limited approach towards improvement neglects one of the most critical aspects – our minds. Being unaware of our thought patterns and response mechanisms to anxiety levels, tough drills -even to certain individuals - could delay their progress. And, since today sports is no longer restricted to only being

a hobby but can actually turn into a viable career option, more intensive coaching and direction is sought at the very foundation of one's sports journey.

Doubtless, ability plays a key role in determining performance in any field. But that is the displayed skill set called realised ability. The hidden potential that needs to be tapped into for greater performance is the unrealised ability. This is where Sports Psychology comes in handy.



To better understand the role of Sports Psychology, let's use the analogy of a computer. If our mind is a computer, then, every thought we feed it is the input. Our senses – touch, sight, smell, hearing and taste – are the graphic user interfaces through which information is entered. The response to the input is the output (our emotions and actions). The quality of our input will determine the quality of our output. Strong, positive thoughts and beliefs will lead to strong, positive performance, and vice-versa. We are all extremely cautious by installing an anti-virus in our computers and laptops. We also need an anti-virus for our neck-tops! It's important to keep doing a check-up from the neck up!

Sport is a spiritual experience. In the situation stated at the start of the article, for instance, one has to dig deep within to pull out reserves from our innermost being to supersede our own level of play and then, that of our opponent. Greater self-awareness can be brought about through the right coaching media, allowing athletes to discover more about themselves on a daily basis.

Our minds process around 50,000 thoughts a day. And over 49,900 of them won't be entirely positive. What does this tell you about our mental health? Our internal dialogue with ourselves is probably more damaging than productive, discouraging than encouraging. We wake up to negative news, carry forward stress from the previous day and project worries about the day ahead. Sportspeople have a massive requirement to remain positive, light and focused on their goals. There is no room for negativity. The latter is, however, part and parcel of our existence. But with mind coaching, one can be helped in rewiring the brain and its established patterns. Our thoughts lead to forming our beliefs, which in turn establish our ability, thereby producing commensurate action and

ultimately yielding its result. Therefore thought is our starting point that determines our outcome.

Think about what you think and then think!

We utilise only 5%, if that, of our entire potential. The only way to become more of us is to be led by a coach who can enhance one's behavioural flexibility.

How often have we looked at a task and said: "No, I cannot do it. That's not me."? And then - we actually accomplish it! What stopped us, in the first place? Our limiting beliefs? Past experience? How do we recognise that such thought processes are hampering our movement

to the next level? And how do we overcome it? Sports mind coaching makes you a Mind Captain – the leader of your own mind to create your success story! Only when we do something outside our comfort zone, will we gain improvement. Anything done within the zone is already known to us. To grow, we need to operate outside the comfort zone – in the effort zone.

By the age of around 10 – 12 years, almost 90% of our adult behaviour is established. This goes to show the significance of the role of parenting. As a sports psychologist, I include parent coaching as an important part of the sports mind coaching intervention with the athlete. The parents actually need greater assistance with their role of a sports parent (a bigger responsibility than that of a normal parent). What they say and what they do, as well as what they don't say and what they don't do, will directly impact the child's mind. Parents fall in the direct circle of influence of their child. Their words and deeds will be reflected in the child at some point, in some way, some day.

I remember coaching a junior state cricketer a couple of years ago, who had a series of single digit scores. He is a dynamic opening batsman but just couldn't find his form. On consulting him, it was discovered

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that his father was actually the main culprit. His excessive enthusiasm in his child's sport was becoming overbearing and suffocating. I therefore ended up coaching the parent more than the child, in this particular case. Immediate changes were made. In a fortnight, the same batsman scored a 70, 80 and two centuries - all in a single tournament.

Tiger Woods had many other pro golfers play with him and when observed closely, they realised that his technique wasn't any superior to theirs. But what they did admire was the mental strengthening his Sports Psychologist brought about in his ability to quieten his mind and think clearly, even in tough situations. His moderately aggressive approach enabled him to face competition with toughness and also made him refrain from playing safe. India's own sporting genius Pankaj Advani, seven-time World Champion in billiards and snooker, is considered most dangerous by his opponents, from all over the world, when he is trailing. They say: "When the chips are down, Pankaj is up!" I have had the privilege to work with Pankaj for many years and have seen up close how he has grown mentally tougher by the day.

Roger Federer plays tennis in a state of Zen. His meditative demeanor on court proves how sports can be an amazing way to improve concentration, focus and a platform to achieve overall excellence. Pankaj is known as the 'smiling assassin'. He is calm on the outside but extremely aggressive within, sparing no opponent when it is his turn to play. Sport is character-building and sports psychology with its methodologies can make life-changing improvements to a sportsperson's career.

Sports Psychology consulting involves both on-court/field/table (playing arena) as well as sit-down, conversational formats. While playing, mental strategies and techniques are imparted for better performance, concentration and confidence. And while coaching face-to-face when not playing, deeper issues are addressed and specific psychological and emotional areas are worked on, these being directly or indirectly related to their sport. Whatever goes on in a sportsperson's life will affect their sport and performance. Therefore, all concerns must be overcome.

Handling loss is never easy. Neither for the athlete and nor for the people around the athlete – parents and coaches.. I have seen parents publicly tell the child off about their performance, instead of showing support. There can be no better way to damage the confidence and future performances of the child. The best option for a parent to handle their child's defeat is to keep quiet. Speak only when spoken to. The sportsperson will discuss the match with the coaches. All they seek from parents are comfort and non-judgment. We must understand that a loss is actually essential for the growth of an athlete. As ace cueist Pankaj often says: "Winning takes you one step ahead. Losing takes you ten." No one likes losing but when it does happen, it is an opportunity for growth and learning.

The mind is an incredible being. It can be your best friend or your worst enemy. In sports, a well-trained mind has a higher chance of delivering success. This reminds me of Nelson Mandela's words, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure." And powerful we are!

*Shree Advani has recently submitted his Ph.D thesis on Sports Psychology and is the Chief Mind Coach of Mind Captain Consulting – a coaching firm dealing with sports, corporate, actors, teachers. He has been a sports mind coach to Pankaj Advani, Robin Uthappa, Sheetal Goutham, Sushil Kumar and many budding sportspeople. Shree is also a Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) Practitioner.*